

100 more Stern Grove trees called hazardous

Marisa Lagos, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Three months after a large branch snapped off a Stern Grove tree and killed a woman, San Francisco officials said Thursday that there are still more than 100 hazardous trees that need to be removed there - and probably thousands of others throughout the city that need to be pruned or cut down.

Work to trim or remove the trees at Stern Grove and elsewhere is under way, but it has been slow because the city doesn't have enough forestry staff, said Dennis Kern, director of operations for the Recreation and Park Department.

There are 100,000 trees spread among the department's 3,500 acres of parkland, Kern said, and only three tree crews. Each crew is made up of two or three tree climbers and one laborer. One of the crews is now working fulltime on Stern Grove's 2,600 trees.

The agency isn't likely to hire more tree trimmers anytime soon because the city faces a \$338 million budget deficit for the 2008-09 fiscal year. However, the department may get some help with equipment and planning through a recently passed park bond: \$4 million of the \$185 million issue is earmarked for the urban forestry program.

At the hearing before a Board of Supervisors committee, which was called in response to the death of Kathleen Bolton in Stern Grove on April 14, Kern said decades of neglect have made the problem more severe.

The department doesn't really know how many trees in the city would be considered hazardous by arborists because only three areas - Stern Grove, Park Presidio and Washington Square - have undergone recent assessments, he said.

"Over the decades, had there been a larger or more regular effort dedicated to tree management, it could have put the entire city in better position," Kern said.

Storms and other unforeseen events also strain resources. A January windstorm felled more than 350 trees on city parkland and took months to clean up.

Some speakers at the public hearing, however, decried trees' health at many parks, including Stern Grove, SoMa's South Park and Buena Vista Park in the Haight-Ashbury.

To completely catch up at Stern Grove will take years, said Kern. But he insisted that the dangerous trees are not located near the park's most popular spots, including the meadow where free concerts are held every Sunday in the summer.

Marilyn McAllister, a friend of Bolton's, said the department is overstating Stern Grove's safety. She said 30 trees located along the main walkway to the concert meadow were deemed dangerous in a 2003 report by a Bay Area horticultural consulting company, HortScience Inc.

McAllister argued there are probably more dangerous trees by now - and thousands more throughout the city.

"A tree that was dead in 2003 is still dead in 2008, and a tree that was nearly dead in 2003 is probably even more dead today," she said. "The only thing unique about Stern Grove is that they paid for an expensive, comprehensive study and know exactly what needs to be done."

District Four Supervisor Carmen Chu, who called the hearing, asked the department to take another look at the location of dangerous trees in Stern Grove and to report back to the committee on the citywide urban forestry program and the bond.

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