

San Francisco tree could get landmark status or the ax

May 3 2016, by By Janie Har

The fate of a tall, slender pine tree that a San Francisco property owner wants to cut down but that neighbors are rallying to save is now in the hands of city leaders.

The Board of Supervisors will decide Tuesday whether to grant landmark status to a Norfolk pine hybrid that stands in the backyard of a small parcel of private property. The tree's age is in dispute, with proponents saying it was planted more than a century ago and others saying it dates to the 1940s.

The tree, which is estimated to be 85 feet to 100 feet tall, is not rare in California but not abundant in San Francisco, according to one tree expert.

Neighbors and others have been trying to save the tree for a year, saying the pine is an important part of the street's landscape. A biology professor submitted testimony that the tall tree probably provides a resting spot for raptors and other birds making their way to Golden Gate Park.

The saga began last year when Dale Rogers, who bought the house in 2012, cut down three trees in his backyard—two palms and one of two pines—as part of a plan to redevelop his property.

Afraid that the owner would cut down the remaining pine, a couple living in the house in the backyard and another couple living nearby got a

restraining order to stop its removal and began the process to get the tree landmarked, over the owner's objections.

The Urban Forestry Council, which recommends landmark status to city leaders, declined to nominate the tree on a tied vote in October. But in March, the council granted landmark status after substantial public testimony.

"I was very moved by the community concern for the tree," vice-chairwoman Carla Short said. "It's a very striking tree; you can see it from lots of different places in the neighborhood."

Eighteen trees or groves of trees have landmark status in San Francisco, prized for their rarity or historic significance. Six are on private property, often in back or side yards.

They include an impressive Moreton Bay fig tree in the city's Mission District and a coast live oak in residential Noe Valley. A giant sequoia near the Castro District received landmark status over the owner's objections, Short said.

Attorney Barri Bonapart, who represents the homeowner, said the tree is an ordinary pine that poses problems for the home's infrastructure. Granting it landmark status would be a severe infringement on private property rights, she said.

"There is no question the ordinance has been misused and misapplied," Bonapart said. "This is the wrong tree in the wrong place."

But Vanessa Ruotolo, a musician and neighbor who has been leading the landmark charge with her husband, said the tree and its visiting songbirds are what give the neighborhood its beauty and music.

"We're thankful that the tree was given its due process," she said.

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