

## **Issue growing about trees and billboards**

By Brent Begin  
Examiner Staff Writer 3/15/09

Profit over nature? Some are claiming that illegal tree trimming is happening in front of billboards. AP File Photo  
SAN FRANCISCO – Trees blocking billboards have had their tops lopped off, and that is prompting an investigation into how the purportedly illegal trimmings are occurring.

San Francisco has a public-works ordinance protecting street trees from being trimmed excessively or taken down entirely. The California Supreme Court even weighed in on the issue in 2006, ruling that owners of billboards do not have a right to cut down trees.

As Mayor Gavin Newsom completed his ambitious Arbor Day goal to plant more than 25,000 trees this last week, many are complaining that an illegal practice to make it easier for drivers to see advertisements is undercutting that effort.

Friends of the Urban Forest, an organization dedicated to maintaining trees and planting new ones, has been cataloguing dozens of sites where trees are alleged to have been illegally trimmed. Program Director Doug Wildman said the topping of trees, such as palm trees along Van Ness Avenue, is akin to killing them outright.

"They're coming in the middle of the night and topping off these trees," said Wildman, an arborist and landscape architect. "Palm trees are not supposed to be topped off."

But Ryan Brooks, vice president at CBS Outdoor in San Francisco, said that when trees need to be trimmed in front of one of the hundreds of billboards CBS Outdoor operates, his company goes by the book.

"For every tree in The City, we get a permit to trim," Brooks said. "And the trees are trimmed by certified arborists that are used to doing business in San Francisco."

But conflicts may sometimes arise. Private property owners, which share profits with billboard advertisers for signs on their property, are also responsible for getting permits to trim trees.

San Francisco Beautiful, an organization that campaigned to outlaw new billboards in The City, is also weighing in on the conflict between trees and advertising. Executive Director Leigh Ann Baughman says there needs to be a plan in place.

"Whoever's cutting the trees down – that's a city asset," Baughman said. "They don't have a right to kill nature for their own profit."

Officials from the Planning Department and Department of Public Works plan to meet with organizations on March 23 about cracking down on the tree clippings. At issue is the way both departments work together. The Department of Public Works handles tree permitting while all billboard issues go before the Planning Commission.

#### **Billboards vs. trees**

1,509 Billboards across city, as counted by the Planning Department as of November

40,000 Trees that are maintained by the Department of Public Works

60,000 Trees that are maintained by private property owners