

TAKOMA PARK TREE COMMISSION POSITION ON SOLAR PANELS AND THE
TREE ORDINANCE
(September 20, 2010)

Advocates of green energy in Takoma Park have suggested amending the City Tree Ordinance to facilitate removing trees from private property in order to install solar panels. The Takoma Park Tree Commission supports the goal of decreasing the City's carbon footprint and encourages the use of sustainable energy sources wherever possible; however, we oppose modifying the Tree Ordinance to make it easier to remove urban forest trees for 'environmentally friendly' purposes. Like solar panels, trees help mitigate anthropogenic global warming by reducing CO₂ emission; they do this by carbon sequestration and by reducing the need for heating and cooling of buildings through shade, evapotranspiration and protection from wind. However, mature canopy trees do so much more than solar panels: they reduce erosion and control storm water runoff through interception of rainwater, improve air quality by absorbing pollutants such as sulfur dioxide and intercepting smog producing particles, mitigate the urban heat island effect, provide habitat for wild life, increase residential property values, and enhance psychological well-being. (<http://www.coloradotrees.org/benefits.htm>) One study of Modesto, California determined that for every dollar invested in urban forest care, nearly two dollars of benefits were generated.

(<http://www.fs.fed.us/psw/programs/cufr/products/newsletters/UF5.pdf>) A solar panel can be mounted and removed in a day; it takes a hundred years to grow a mature canopy tree.

Criterion 1 of the City Tree Ordinance (12.12.120B(1)) ('The extent to which tree clearing is necessary to achieve proposed development or land use ...') allows

installation of solar panels to be taken into account, without creating a two-tier system of 'more environmentally friendly development and 'less environmentally friendly development', with more weight given to the former. We believe that such a two-tier system would weaken the Tree Ordinance and would create a distinct potential for abuse. Finally, we believe that this issue should be a matter not of 'trees vs. solar panels' but rather 'trees AND solar panels.' A little creative thinking, such as the deployment of narrow solar panels in the sunniest part of shady yards, or on a neighbor's roof, or on public buildings, or judicious branch trimming will allow us both to maintain the City's urban tree canopy and to reduce our collective reliance on rapidly dwindling and polluting energy sources.

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