



The Giving Trees

Give a Little ... Get a Library

October 9, 2008 - By Ruth Lundi

They knew how Topangans feel about their trees. And they knew the trees had to come down to make way for a Caltrans-required deceleration lane into the new Topanga Library. In fact, it is a little shocking to drive around the bend on Topanga Canyon Boulevard and see the barren empty space created where four trees were recently removed.

So early on in the planning process for the construction of the new library, County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky's staff discussed potential recycling alternatives. "I remember back then we discussed what could be recycled when taking down those trees," said Susan Nissman, Senior Field Deputy to Zev Yaroslavsky and a 31-year Topanga resident, "but [at the time], there was nothing apparent," she said. "Most Topangans consider their trees sacred. It's a hard part of the process when they sometimes have to be removed."

Fast forward a few years to the Mid-State Fair in Paso Robles. Nissman happened upon the booth of Pacific Coast Lumber, a leader in the industry of Urban Forestry. The company produces eco-friendly products from trees which would otherwise go to waste; salvaging wood from trees which are deemed economically non-viable as a lumber resource and turning them into functional pieces of art or furniture.

Nissman described the library project and the tree dilemma with Pacific Coast lumber founder Don Seawater, who was immediately interested and which ultimately led to Pacific Coast Lumber subcontracting to remove two "gnarly pine trees" and two oak trees. And yes, confirmed Seawater, the wood from the very trees that were removed from the library site on September 29 will be re-cycled into products that will actually be used in the Topanga Library. "Album covers, benches, and Adirondack chairs" are some possibilities said Seawater, in addition to shelving and tables. It's too early to specify which types of products will grace the library because the amount of wood actually available for production has not yet been determined. "It says a lot about the Supervisor, that he realized how important it was and that there were recycling capabilities involved in [removing] these trees," said Seawater, who also teaches Resource Management at Cal Poly.



PHOTO BY ANTHONY VEREBES

On Monday, September 29, The so-called Giving Trees, two oaks and two pines, were taken down to make way for a deceleration lane and access to the new library. The job was subcontracted by Pacific Coast Lumber, a company that recycles wood deemed unusable for commercial purposes, that will transform the trees into products for use in the library, such as shelving and tables. California law requires that for every oak tree removed, ten new oak trees will be planted. The Santa Monica Conservancy will oversee the planting of the 20 trees and monitor them for five years. Although Topangans are sad to see the trees go, the biggest complaint of the day was the traffic delay.

Building “green” was so important to Yaroslavsky’s office that the library project was actually delayed about a year because his office asked the architects to go back to the drawing board and redesign the project so that it would conform to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) silver standard, which the County now requires of all new county facilities. Due to the timing of the project, the County’s order didn’t apply to the Topanga library, but Yaroslavsky “felt ethically and morally responsible for making sure that the Topanga library was held to that standard although it wasn’t a requirement,” said Nissman. While it delayed the project for almost a year, “it was well worth it,” said Nissman, and “absolutely in keeping with the environmental sensitivities of the Topanga community.”

“I’m very pleased that the trees being removed to construct the Topanga Library will be reused and recycled and not discarded into a landfill.” said Supervisor Yaroslavsky. “Turning the trees into green products, such as furniture for the library, is in keeping with our goal to incorporate LEED standards consistent with the greening of the Topanga Library project, and gives these trees a second life in Topanga for future generations to enjoy.”

In addition to recycling the wood from the downed trees, and as a condition of granting the tree-removal permit, the California Coastal Commission requires that 10 new oak trees be planted for every one removed. Therefore, twenty new oak trees will be planted in exchange for the two that were removed, said Nissman. The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has agreed to be the recipient of the trees and monitor them for five years to ensure long-term health and growth.

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