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## Forest health a top priority of RSF Association committee

By Karen Billing

The Rancho Santa Fe Association's Forest Health and Preservation Committee continues its work to protect and maintain what they believe to be the most valuable part of Rancho Santa Fe's history and identity: its trees.

At the March 4 Association board meeting Bill Beckman, chair of the committee, said this coming year they are planning an update of the Forest Health Study as well as the creation of a Forest Master Plan, to ensure Rancho Santa Fe is always moving toward a balance between a vibrant forest and a community that is fire safe.

"Our extraordinary forest was created by former residents of our community and we enjoy it because they did what they needed to do to create and maintain it," said Beckman. "Now we need to do this for future generations of residents of Rancho Santa Fe. It's up to us whether we have a healthy forest years from now."

Beckman, a former president of the Association board, has been chair of the Forest Health and Preservation Committee since 2012. Previously an ad-hoc group known as the Committee on the Natural Environment or CONE, it became a standing Association committee in 2016.

Beckman said the forest is healthy overall although it is declining in certain areas due to drought, insect infestations and changes in climate. What will make a difference is planting resilient trees in the right places, he said.

To help pick those right trees, the Association established an arboretum to provide a living display of the types of trees that grow best in the Ranch. Early last year, about 50 different types of trees were planted along the golf course from Via De Fortuna and Via De Cumbre, on both sides of the trail. A March 2020 grand opening for the arboretum was postponed due to rain and then indefinitely due to the pandemic but residents are always encouraged to check out the growing oaks, acacias and willows and see how they might enhance their landscapes.

According to the 2018 Covenant Forest Health Study, produced by the environmental consulting firm Dudek and Tree San Diego, there are an estimated 266,000 trees in Rancho Santa Fe's forest.

The 300-page study looked at forest composition and health, the best practices to maintain a healthy forest and the many benefits it provides to the community. As Beckman noted, a healthy and substantial forest has a huge impact on the value and the perception of the properties in the Covenant, increasing property values by 10-20%.

Beckman said the Forest Health Study needs to be updated every three to five years.

"Our forest is not static, it's constantly changing and we need to track its evolving condition so we can take timely actions to assure its continued health," he said.

As 95% of the forest is located on private property that is outside of the Association and the fire

district's authority, it is up to residents to clear dead and dying trees that pose significant wildfire risk. Beckman applauded the work of the Association's Fire Preparedness Administrator Caitlin Kreutz that he said is making a huge difference in the fire safety of the Ranch.

Kreutz has worked to get grant money to help clear out flammable invasive species in main fire corridors into the Ranch and helped establish the Association's partnership with FireWatch, a service that helps communities identify high-risk zones through aerial imaging. Last October, the Association committed additional funding toward the next phase, creating defensible space maps for every homeowner in the Covenant.

Active and dedicated volunteers on the Forest Health and Preservation Committee have continued to meet virtually every month throughout the pandemic, Beckman said, adding that they are always in need of more volunteers.

In the fall the committee worked with the Rancho Santa Fe Golf Club due to concerns about the removal of about 12 trees along the course in 2020 and reviewed the scope of the tree removals proposed in the upcoming \$5.9 million course renovation that is anticipated to begin next month.

The golf club's plan calls for the removal of six trees and the replanting of 16 trees. The selected replacement trees are cork oak and live oaks, low-water and drought-resistant species.

In addition to a new forest master plan, Beckman said the committee would also like to develop a eucalyptus management plan to ensure the continued health of the eucalyptus trees. Nearly one-fifth of the community is planted with about 56,000 eucalyptus trees.

"They are iconic and in many ways the foundation of what became Rancho Santa Fe," Beckman said.

