

**Q. What impact can the County's trimming have on the trees?**

**A.** The trimming that the County does, as explained above, is to provide the height clearance and sight distance for vehicles, pedestrians and bicyclists. The County does not trim all sides of a tree and the tree can have a non-symmetrical appearance. Dead or dying branches may remain in the tree after the County takes action to protect the road easement. If you decide to remove these branches, please contact the County for information about the necessary permits.

**Q. Will the County remove the tree if I have an arborist inspect the tree and they advise me that the tree should be removed?**

**A.** Not necessarily. The decision to remove the tree will depend on the potential danger that the tree poses to the users of the roadway. However, an arborist may advise you, as the owner of the tree, of a potentially dangerous situation, in which case you may bear responsibility for damage that the tree may cause in the future.

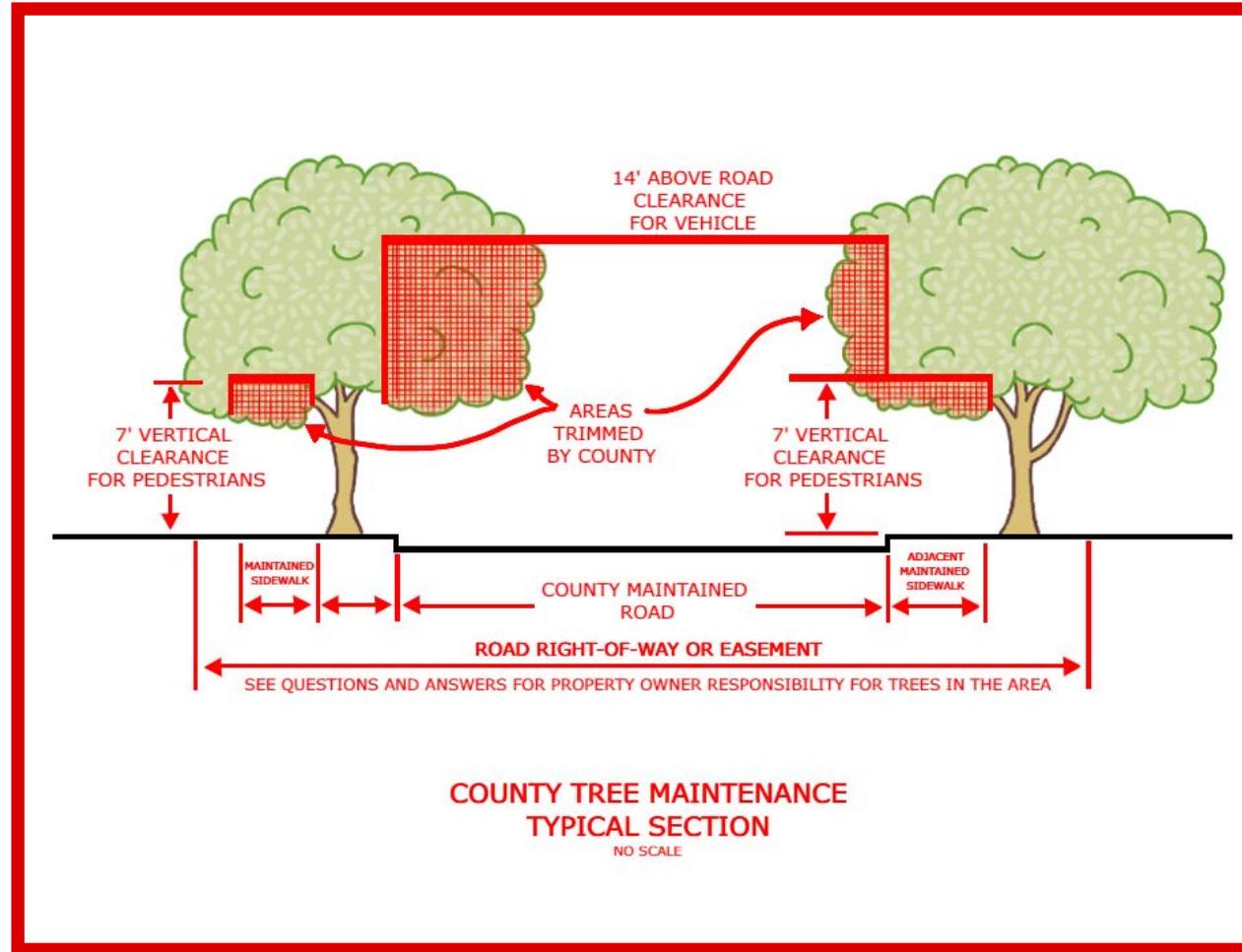
**Q. Do the utility companies have some responsibility for trimming the trees?**

**A.** Utility companies have a right to use the public easements to provide services to the adjoining property. Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), the electric utility provider in the County, has a program to trim trees in the easement areas to provide clearance between its wires and tree foliage to meet safety requirements specified in state law and regulations. PG&E's trimming of trees is usually carried out by PG&E's contractors. Please contact PG&E if you believe a tree presents a danger to utility lines in your neighborhood.

**Q. What if I do not want the County or PG&E to trim my trees for height and sight clearance?**

**A.** You may retain your own landscaping contractor or tree company to trim trees as needed to provide the required height and sight distance per your aesthetic standards. Please contact PG&E at 1-800-743-5000 regarding PG&E's tree trimming practices.

County of San Mateo  
Department of Public Works  
555 County Center, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Redwood City, CA 94063-1665  
650-363-4100 or 650-363-4103  
<https://www.smcgov.org/publicworks>



**NOTE : TREES IN THE MEDIAN ARE WITHIN THE ROAD RIGHT-OF-WAY.**



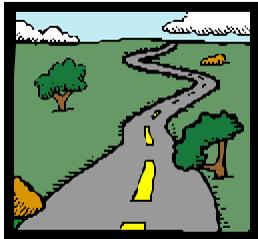
**Tree Maintenance Guide**

Para informacion en Espanol  
telefono  
650-363-4100 or 650-363-4103

**Property Owners &  
County Public Works Responsibility for  
Trimming or Removing Trees Adjacent to County  
Maintained Roads**

Trees, including trees that are adjacent to the public roads or within the medians, are an important asset to residential, business and rural communities. They provide natural beauty and contribute to the economic, environmental, vitality, and aesthetic quality of the County. County Public Works' role in tree maintenance stems from our responsibility to provide for the safe use of the County maintained public roads.

From time to time, property owners approach the County with requests concerning the trimming or removal of "street trees" or trees located outside their fences. These requests are based on the assumption that the County owns and is responsible for the care of the trees alongside the public roads or within the medians. However, although trees may be located in a "right-of-way" that was "dedicated" as part of the subdivision process, the land on which the right-of-way is located remains private property.



Property owners are often surprised when they learn that the trees alongside public roads are not owned by the County.

Some cities, prior to the passage of Proposition

218 by the voters, levied fees or charges on private property to finance the maintenance of street trees; and while state law still allows a local agency to levy fees and charges to pay for street landscaping maintenance, the levying of these fees and charges now requires an election of the property owners who would be assessed to finance this work. Property owners would have to finance the cost of the election with no

guarantee that the election would be successful or that the fees would be allowed and levied.

The information in this brochure is intended to make you aware of the responsibility you may have for street trees adjacent to roads or within the medians that are maintained by the County. It includes information regarding the trimming or removal of these trees that may be done by the County and the permits that may be necessary should you chose to trim or remove these trees. The schematic on the back page is to aid you in understanding the tree trimming that may be done by the County.

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q. What is an "easement" or a "road right-of-way" ?**

**A.** An easement is the right to use real property that belongs to someone else. A road right-of-way is a specific type of easement - it permits the County to improve and maintain the roadway for the public's benefit. If the easements or public right-of-way was dedicated and accepted by the County, then the County has the responsibility to maintain roads within these easements and the responsibility to keep it safe for the traveling public. However, the County does not become the owner of the land on which the road is built or of any land adjacent to the road, unless it has actually acquired the underlying interest in the property.

**Q. Who owns the property under the road?**

**A.** The property underlying the road right-of-way is owned by the property owner whose parcel is adjacent to the roadway. Each adjacent property owner owns the

land adjacent to their parcel to the centerline of the right-of-way. Typically, this is the centerline of the street or center of the median, if one exists. The property owner retains the right to use this area in a manner that is not inconsistent with its dedicated use as a public road.

**Q. Who owns the trees along the road or in the medians?**

**A.** In general, trees are owned by the person who *owns* the land on which the tree trunks are located. Street trees belong to the adjacent property owner, even if they are located within a dedicated road "right-of-way" or in the medians.

**Q. What are my responsibilities for the trees in front of my property?**

**A.** As a property owner, you are responsible for ensuring the safety of the street trees on property adjacent to the roadway in the same way that you are responsible for trees that are located in your front, side or backyard areas.

**Q. What tree maintenance does the County do?**

**A.** Each situation is different depending on the road conditions and the hazards that may be presented. Because the County's tree maintenance is based on its responsibility to conduct road maintenance, the County determines whether plant material alongside County maintained roads impairs the use of the road, or if removal is necessary to protect the road from damage. If so, the County will remove the plant material. For instance, the County might trim trees for height clearance and sight distance, might remove broken branches that could fall and injure a person using the road, or might remove obviously dead or dying

trees that present a reasonably foreseeable risk to the traveling public.

On the other hand, the County does not prune trees for landscape reasons, or trim branches that a property owner believes may jeopardize their property or remove dead or dying trees that do not pose a threat to the public's use of the road.

**Q. Who is responsible for removing branches or trees that have fallen onto my property from the road?**

**A.** The Department of Public Works will continue to remove any branches or trees that fall onto the County maintained roadway. In all other situations, the property owner is responsible for removing trees, branches, etc. on the owner's property, including any part of the road-way that is *not* maintained by the County.

**Q. How does my responsibility fit with other County ordinances and regulations?**

**A.** The County does not dictate a minimum level of maintenance for trees that are the responsibility of private property owners. However, the County has enacted ordinances related to removing significant trees - live woody plants with a circumference of at least 38 inches (about 12 inches in diameter measured 4-1/2 feet above the ground) - and for trimming or removing heritage trees - generally all Santa Cruz Cypress Trees and large diameter Maple, Oak, Douglas Fir and Redwood Trees. Specific information regarding significant or heritage trees can be obtained from the County Planning and Building at 650-363-4161 or online at <https://www.smcgov.org/planning>