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Broward cracks down on tree abuse

Trimming companies would face fines

By David Fleshler, Sun Sentinel

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Fewer trees in Broward are likely to be mutilated with clippers and chain saws after county commissioners on Tuesday approved tougher enforcement of tree trimming.

Tree trimmers will now be subject to fines and the loss of their licenses when they commit what's called "tree abuse" in the 21 or so Broward cities with their own tree-protection laws. Tree abuse involves such practices as "hat-racking" – trimming branches back too far – and "lion-tailing" – removing the lower branches and leaves.

"In the past, licensed tree trimmers have not been getting cited so they didn't face any consequences," said Peter Burke, manager of Broward County's tree preservation program.

Under previous rules, only the property owner could be cited, and the citation would be issued by the city. Now, the county can step in and cite the tree-trimmer as well. The county can already cite tree trimmers in the 10 cities without their own tree ordinances.

The tree trimming restrictions are intended to prevent trees from becoming dangerous in storms, Burke said. A hat-racked tree will grow thicker, denser, but with weaker branches, making it more vulnerable to being toppled by high winds.

"Not only does it not look good, but it can lead to trees become hazardous in the future," he said.

Phil Simeone, owner of Phil's Expert Tree Service of Coconut Creek, said customers still ask for improper trimming, even though they could face thousands of dollars in fines and costs to replace damaged trees.

"We get asked that all the time," he said. "A shopping center might want you to cut down all the branches so you can see its sign and we explain that we can't do it. I can't jeopardize my license."

Jimmy Smith, co-owner of [Tree Works Management Inc.](#) of Davie, said some customers want trees trimmed illegally so they can avoid the costs of trimming them frequently. He supports the county's tighter standards.

"It will probably help our industry," he said. "We're passionate about trees. When people trim them incorrectly, they damage the structure of the tree."

Fines vary widely, depending on the type of tree, its size and the extent of the violation. The maximum fine is \$15,000, an amount that would be levied in exceptional situations, such as the destruction of a unique and historic tree, he said. More commonly, a fine of \$1,600 or so is not unusual, he said.

Tree trimmers who received two citations in a three-year period would face the loss their licenses.

Burke said the county usually learns of violations through spot inspections and complaints from the public and other tree trimmers.

Palm Beach County does not issue a specific tree-trimming license. The county enforces its ordinance only in unincorporated areas.

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