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Policy Brief

Safeguarding Los Angeles' Urban Forest: Policy Pathways for Billboard Reform and Canopy Equity

A policy framework for equitable enforcement, climate resilience, and community trust.

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Growing shade, equity, and community in South Los Angeles.

Policy Brief: Safeguarding L.A.'s Urban Canopy from Billboard-Related Tree Damage

Executive Summary

Los Angeles' public street trees are essential infrastructure, offering shade, improving air quality, reducing urban heat, and promoting public health and biodiversity. Yet, illegal street tree pruning and removal around commercial corridors and high-visibility intersections - particularly by billboard companies—continues with little accountability. These actions compromise the city's climate goals, damage public trust, and disproportionately affect low-income communities where tree canopy cover is already sparse.

Recent incidents, including a documented case involving Lamar Advertising, highlight the urgent need for enforcement reform. Despite existing municipal codes requiring permits for Right-of-Way (ROW) tree pruning and removal, enforcement is rare and penalties are minimal. The City's current sign regulations focus on billboard placement and digital conversion but lack explicit tree protection standards tied to billboard permitting. Without stronger policy protections, Los Angeles risks ongoing loss of canopy and public trust. Stronger, enforceable ordinances are needed to safeguard our urban canopy while ensuring billboard companies operate responsibly. This white paper outlines the scope of the problem, its environmental and social impacts, and provides actionable recommendations to safeguard Los Angeles' urban forest. This policy brief proposes enforceable reforms that link billboard regulation, revenue generation, and tree protection under a unified framework.

Background & Scope of the Problem

The Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC Sec. 62.169) requires anyone wishing to prune or remove a street tree to obtain a permit from the Bureau of Street Services (BSS), Urban Forestry Division (UFD). Despite this, unauthorized pruning is widespread and often tied to the interests of outdoor advertising companies seeking unobstructed visibility for billboards.

A notable case occurred on September 18, 2024, [Lamar Advertising Illegally Pruning Street Tree](#), when Lamar Advertising contractors in a bucket truck were caught on video aggressively pruning a mature street tree along Washington Boulevard - **without a permit**. UFD later confirmed that no such authorization had been issued. As UFD Supervisor Bryan Ramirez noted: *"This is very disconcerting... it shows me this could be a common practice."*

This is not an isolated incident. Similar violations by other companies (including Outfront and Clear Channel) suggest a systemic problem, exacerbated by weak interdepartmental communication and limited public access to enforcement information. While residents may report violations, responses are delayed, and perpetrators rarely face consequences. Public trees - especially mature, shade-providing trees - are not easily replaced and play a critical role in cooling communities, filtering air, and supporting biodiversity. Their removal undermines years of investment in climate resilience and tree equity.

The Context: An Outdated System

Los Angeles' current billboard oversight system reflects decades of inconsistent policy and fragmented enforcement. Many structures still operate under permits issued in the 1970s and 1980s. Others have been altered without new permits, and some have no valid permit record at all. Meanwhile, the City's tree canopy - particularly in historically underserved neighborhoods - continues to suffer from unregulated trimming, removing vital shade in the very communities most vulnerable to urban heat.

Residents and neighborhood groups have documented instances of trees being pruned beyond recovery with little to no penalty for offenders. This lack of accountability erodes faith in city governance and exposes systemic inequities in how enforcement resources are allocated.

Evidence of the Issue

Los Angeles has more than 5,400 billboard structures and 8,000 billboard faces, according to City data compiled through the LA Department of Building & Safety (LADBS) Off-Site Sign Periodic Inspection Program (OSSPIP). The majority are owned or operated by a small group of companies, including Lamar Advertising, Clear Channel Outdoor, and Outfront Media.

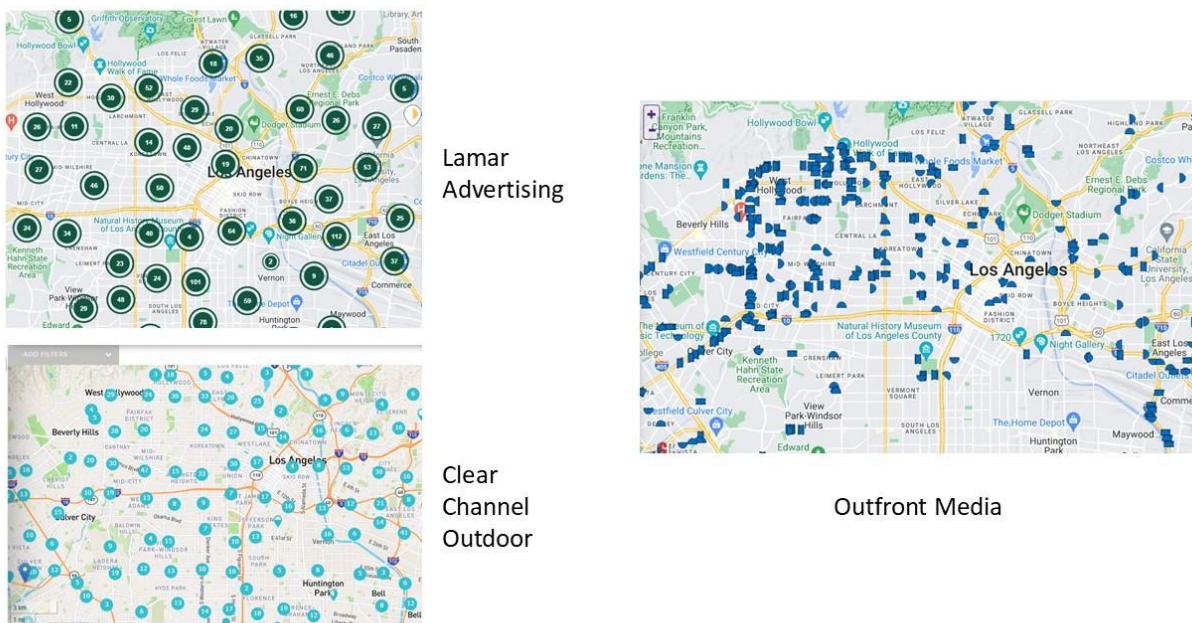


Figure 1. Approximate distribution of billboard ownership across Los Angeles. Source: Publicly available mapping data, compiled from online sources (2024)

- Los Angeles has approximately 5,400 billboard structures and more than 8,000 billboard faces citywide. ([LADBS billboard-survey-information.pdf](#).)
- The majority are controlled by 8–10 companies including Clear Channel, Lamar, OutFront, and Regency.
- Lack of a unified citywide registry and monitoring system for both billboards and associated tree canopy impacts.

Legal Framework & Historical Context for Billboard-Related Tree Damage

Los Angeles has long asserted its authority to regulate both billboards and the public right-of-way, including the maintenance and protection of street trees. This authority has been repeatedly upheld by California courts, most notably in *Regency Outdoor Advertising, Inc. v. City of Los Angeles* (2001). In that case, Regency sued the City, claiming that newly planted City trees impaired visibility of its billboards and infringed upon its First Amendment rights. The court rejected these arguments outright.

Key legal findings from Regency include:

- Billboard operators have no legal right to an unobstructed view of their signs.
- Tree planting, growth, or presence does not constitute a compensable harm.
- Visibility obstructions do not violate the First Amendment.
- The City may plant, maintain, or preserve trees without any obligation to billboard visibility or commercial interests.

This case remains the strongest legal precedent governing the intersection of billboard visibility and urban forestry. It establishes that street trees are public assets whose protection supersedes any commercial claim to sightlines.

How Regency shaped industry behavior

Regency's loss created a structural shift in the outdoor advertising industry. Once the courts foreclosed the possibility of asserting a legal "right to visibility," billboard companies faced a clear financial incentive to preserve sightlines by other means. As documented in recent years—including verified video evidence from 2024—some operators and contractors instead turned to unauthorized or illegal tree pruning to maintain visibility.

The pattern is consistent:

- **Legal pathway closed** → companies cannot compel the City to trim trees.
- **Economic incentive persists** → billboards lose value when trees grow.
- **Illegal trimming emerges** as the de facto workaround.

The persistence of unauthorized pruning, even after the Regency ruling, underscores a fundamental conflict of interest: billboard visibility generates substantial private profit, while street trees generate substantial public benefit. Without structural safeguards, the incentive to illegally trim trees remains stronger than the risk of minimal penalties.

Implications for policy reform

The Regency precedent strengthens Los Angeles' position to:

- Restrict all ROW pruning authority to City crews (Option 1).
- Establish dedicated fees and enforcement mechanisms funded by billboard operators.
- Tie billboard operating permits and renewals to compliance with tree protection laws.
- Impose meaningful penalties and restoration requirements for unauthorized pruning.

By grounding reform efforts in established case law, the City can adopt robust tree protection measures with confidence. Clear legal authority, coupled with the documented pattern of illegal trimming, demonstrates the need for stronger, more proactive enforcement and a restructuring of how tree protection is integrated into billboard regulation.

Policy Gaps

- **No Interagency Coordination:** Billboard permitting via LADBS operates in silos with no notification to UFD about nearby tree impacts.
- **No tree impact assessment:** Tree valuation and documentation is not required before granting or renewing billboard permits.
- **Lack of Transparency:** Residents cannot easily verify whether a tree pruning or removal is permitted or report violations tied to billboard activity.
- **Reactive Enforcement:** Penalties, when issued, often come after significant damage has occurred, with no clear path to restoration or restitution.
- **Limited deterrence:** Current fines are too low to dissuade illegal cutting.

Environmental and Social Impacts

- **Urban Canopy Loss:** Mature trees offer the most environmental benefits. Unauthorized pruning weakens trees or kills them outright, leading to canopy loss.
- **Public Health Risks:** Reduced canopy increases exposure to extreme heat and airborne pollutants particularly harmful in already overburdened neighborhoods.
- **Precedent of Impunity:** A lack of consequences enables repeat offenses and discourages community engagement in tree stewardship.

Timing and Urgency

This issue is not just local—Los Angeles is at a pivotal moment where climate goals, public perception, and global visibility converge.

- **Global Visibility and Accountability:** While the strongest reasons for action - climate resilience, equity, and accountability - are local, the upcoming World Cup, Super Bowl, and Olympic Games amplify the urgency. Collectively, these events will bring millions of visitors and billions of viewers, placing Los Angeles' streetscapes under sustained international scrutiny. If

illegal tree pruning and removals continue unchecked, the city's stark inequities will be visible to the world at precisely the moment it aims to showcase progress.

- **Climate and Sustainability Impacts:** The loss of shade trees worsens the urban heat island effect, heightens climate vulnerability, and undermines investments made through Los Angeles' broader sustainability and greening initiatives.
- **Alignment with City Goals:** Los Angeles is already advancing tree equity and climate adaptation through the **Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP)**. Stronger protections against billboard-related tree damage will ensure these public investments achieve lasting impact.
- **Regional Precedent:** Neighboring municipalities - including West Hollywood, Santa Monica, and Beverly Hills - maintain stricter billboard and tree protection standards, demonstrating that stronger enforcement is both feasible and effective.
- **Revenue Opportunity:** Los Angeles leaves millions of dollars on the table each year by failing to implement annual billboard renewal fees or revenue-sharing mechanisms that are standard in other cities.

Equity and Accountability

True reform requires centering equity. Low-income and majority-Black and Latino neighborhoods continue to bear the brunt of illegal billboard practices and tree loss. By integrating billboard revenue into community forestry programs, the City can reinvest in these same communities - replacing what has been lost and creating local green jobs.

This approach not only restores trees but also public trust. Accountability and transparency must guide every policy decision, ensuring that Los Angeles' visual landscape serves residents first, not corporations.

Recommendations

To prevent further harm and ensure accountability, we recommend the following actions:

1. **Strengthen Interdepartmental Notification:** Require LADBS to notify UFD when issuing billboard permits near ROW trees.
2. **Require Tree Impact Assessment:** Billboard applications must include a certified arborist report on potential impact to nearby trees for all billboard permits and renewals.
3. **Create a Billboard Impact Review Protocol:** Require that any proposed billboard installations and renovations undergo a review for potential impacts on street trees.
4. Integrate tree protection conditions into any signage or construction-related approvals.
5. **Strengthen Permit Enforcement:** Require photographic documentation before and after any pruning or removal by private contractors. Mandate clear signage at worksites displaying permit numbers and scope of work. Increase on-the-ground inspections, particularly around billboard corridors.
6. **Prepare a Citywide Billboard Registry:** Linked to LADBS and BSS with permit status and tree clearance data for any proposed tree maintenance or removals near billboards.

7. **Mandate Certificates of Insurance for all billboard operators:** Require billboard companies to carry a certificate of insurance to cover tree canopy damage.
8. **Permits:** Tie billboard operating permits to ongoing compliance with tree protection laws.
9. **Renewal Permits:** Require annual *Renewal and Compliance Certification* for all billboards, linking fees to a dedicated Urban Forestry fund for enforcement and maintenance.
10. **Launch a Public Education Effort with Neighborhood Councils:** Promote a campaign to inform residents and business owners that street trees are protected and cannot be pruned or removed without city permits. Encourage community monitoring and stewardship by providing a separate field on MyLA311 for illegal tree activity near billboards.
11. **Maintain a public violation database for transparency.**
12. **Increase Fines and Penalties:** Amend the City's existing urban forestry codes to allow for stronger punitive actions, including per-tree fines, and suspension of business licenses for repeat offenders. Institute a tiered fine system for unpermitted pruning and empower UFD to suspend billboard permits.

Tiered Penalty Framework (Draft Concept)

By Size (Diameter at Breast Height – DBH)

This is the most common and administratively feasible metric.

- Small trees (<12" DBH): \$2,500 per violation
- Medium trees (12"-24" DBH): \$5,000 per violation
- Large trees (24"-36" DBH): \$10,000 per violation
- Heritage/landmark trees (>36" DBH or designated heritage species): \$25,000+ per violation

(DBH = trunk diameter measured 4.5 feet above ground; arborists already use this standard in permits and impact assessments.)

13. Alternatively, prohibit any trimming/removal of trees within billboard sight lines, with pruning and maintenance only performed by UFD.

Revenue & Renewal Fees - Supporting Urban Forestry Maintenance and Enforcement

The Bureau of Street Services has identified a significant and longstanding funding gap in Los Angeles' urban forestry system. In its 2025 budget analysis, BSS estimated that fully implementing a City-managed five-year tree trimming cycle through expanded UFD staffing, heavy-duty vehicle procurement, and enhanced inspection and enforcement capacity would require approximately **\$67.67** million annually under a City-crews-only model.

To begin addressing this gap while ensuring political feasibility and administrative clarity, the South LA Tree Coalition (SLATC) recommends a phased annual fee structure for billboard operators, tied directly to the documented costs of tree protection, inspection, and enforcement associated with billboard activity.

Establishing an annual **Urban Forestry Maintenance Fee** on billboard operators would provide a dedicated and sustainable funding stream to support preventive tree care, inspection, and enforcement activities associated with billboard operations. SLATC recommends incorporating this fee into the Citywide Sign Ordinance through a phased approach, beginning with a modest initial fee to launch enforcement and capacity-building efforts, followed by a tiered structure aligned with billboard size and revenue potential. (See *City Planning, Citywide Sign Ordinance Fact Sheet, CPC-2015-3059-CA, December 2020.*)

Phase 1: Flat Annual Fee (Program Launch – Year One)

During the initial year of implementation, all billboard faces operating within the City of Los Angeles would be subject to a uniform annual Urban Forestry Maintenance Fee of \$2,500 per face.

With approximately 8,040 billboard faces citywide, this fee would generate an estimated \$20.1 million in Year One, providing immediate funding to:

- Expand UFD staffing and inspection capacity
- Purchase heavy-duty vehicles and equipment
- Establish a dedicated billboard-tree enforcement program
- Improve interdepartmental coordination and compliance monitoring

A flat fee during the first year minimizes administrative complexity, allows for rapid program deployment, and avoids abrupt financial impacts on operators while the City finalizes inventory verification and implementation protocols.

Funding Phase	Annual Fee per Face	Estimated Annual Revenue	Program Purpose
Phase 1 – Program Launch (Year One)	\$2,500	≈ \$20.1 million	Initial expansion of UFD staffing, vehicle procurement, inspection and enforcement capacity.

Table 1. Phase 1 estimated revenues from flat annual billboard fee to support Urban Forestry program launch.

Source: *South LA Tree Coalition analysis, 2025.*

Phase 2: Tiered Fee Structure (Year Two and Beyond)

Beginning in Year Two, the City would transition to a tiered annual fee structure that aligns fees with billboard size, format, and revenue potential. Larger and digital billboards generate significantly greater advertising revenue and exert greater pressure on surrounding tree canopy, particularly in high-visibility corridors.

A tiered structure ensures long-term equity, proportionality, and fiscal sustainability while maintaining a predictable revenue stream for UFD operations. Fee tiers would be codified through ordinance and refined using verified LADBS and BSS inventory data. *(Example tier ranges may include lower fees for small static signs and higher fees for large-format and digital billboards.)*

To promote equity among operators and align fees with revenue potential, the City may adopt a size- and technology-based tier once LADBS finalizes billboard inventory data.

Fee ranges shown below are illustrative and intended to demonstrate proportionality across billboard types; final fee levels would be established through ordinance following Year One implementation.

Billboard Type	Typical Size (ft ²)	Illustrative Annual Fee Range	Policy Rationale
Small poster panel	≤ 300 ft ²	\$1,500 – \$2,000	Lower revenue potential; local visibility only
Standard static bulletin	301 – 672 ft ²	\$3,000 – \$4,000	Average market value installation
Large static / supergraphic	673 – 1,200 ft ²	\$5,000 – \$6,000	Premium locations with high traffic exposure
Digital billboard (any size)	varies	\$10,000 – \$15,000	Substantially higher gross revenue potential

Table 2. Illustrative graduated fee structure.

Source: South LA Tree Coalition analysis, 2025

A graduated schedule ensures fairness while preserving administrative simplicity. It also allows the City to phase in adjustments over time, aligning billboard revenues with the ongoing cost of urban-forest maintenance and climate-resilience objectives.

Given that a single static billboard generates between \$20,000 and \$50,000 per month in advertising revenue, the proposed fee represents less than one percent of annual gross revenue per sign. This modest contribution would secure stable funding for urban forestry operations while aligning billboard profits with the protection of public assets and canopy equity goals.

Incorporating this fee structure into the Citywide Sign Ordinance would ensure that billboard operators directly support the maintenance of Los Angeles' 700,000 parkway trees - an essential public investment in heat mitigation, safety, and livability.

Use of Funds and Fiscal Safeguards

All revenues generated through the Urban Forestry Maintenance Fee should be deposited into a **restricted Urban Forestry Fund**, dedicated exclusively to:

- Tree trimming and preventive maintenance
- Inspection and enforcement related to billboard activity
- Fleet acquisition and replacement
- Restoration and mitigation following illegal pruning

Restricting these funds ensures transparency, accountability, and alignment between billboard regulation and urban forest protection.

Addendum: Convention Center Digital Signage (AB 770)

This state-level development highlights the City's growing reliance on sign revenue - and the corresponding responsibility to align these projects with tree protection standards.

On August 20, 2025, the Los Angeles City Council adopted Resolution 25-0002-S78 to support **AB 770 (Gonzalez)**, a bill that would exempt the Los Angeles Convention Center from the state Outdoor Advertising Act to allow creation of a digital sign district as part of the Center's expansion project. The project is expected to generate significant revenues from digital signage.

This development underscores the urgency of embedding tree protection and enforcement standards directly into the Citywide Sign Ordinance. As Los Angeles pursues new revenue streams through digital billboards, safeguards are essential to ensure these projects do not further erode the urban canopy, particularly in vulnerable communities. Aligning sign district expansion with clear tree preservation requirements will allow the City to capture needed revenues while meeting its climate resilience and equity commitments.

Conclusion

Billboards are a part of Los Angeles' identity, but they should not come at the cost of the city's tree canopy or community integrity. Los Angeles cannot afford to lose its urban forest to unpermitted pruning and removals driven by advertising profits. Mature street trees are shared public assets: a living infrastructure vital to the health, beauty and climate resilience of our neighborhoods. By integrating strong tree protection standards into sign regulations, strengthening enforcement, improving interdepartmental coordination, and holding violators accountable, the City can lead the nation in balancing commercial visibility with environmental justice. Protecting our trees means protecting our neighborhoods, our health, and our collective future. By enacting these reforms, Los Angeles can ensure billboard profits no longer come at the expense of public shade and climate resilience. We urge the City to act swiftly.

APPENDIX A

Prior Funding Scenarios Considered

Earlier drafts of this policy brief evaluated alternative flat-fee funding scenarios tied to a hybrid citywide trimming model. These scenarios were shared for initial discussion purposes and reflected preliminary cost assumptions available at the time. Following further review of the Bureau of Street Services' Option 1 (City-crews-only) cost analysis and stakeholder implementation considerations, SLATC refined its recommendation to a phased fee approach beginning with a modest Year One launch fee.

Funding Target	Annual Fee per Face	Annual City Revenue	Share of Total Cost Covered
Full funding	\$3,625	≈ \$29 million	100%
50 % City match	\$1,812	≈ \$14.5 million	50%
25 % City match	\$906	≈ \$7.25 million	25%

Table A-1. Illustrative flat-fee funding scenarios (superseded)

About the South LA Tree Coalition

The South LA Tree Coalition (SLATC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 2022 in response to the removal of a grove of Protected Sycamores in South Los Angeles for a development project. SLATC leads grassroots efforts to prioritize the protection and expansion of the local urban forest and tree canopy in South LA - a region designated by the City of Los Angeles as tree-poor. The Coalition works to build community awareness and agency, advancing the role of trees as essential to environmental justice, climate resilience, biodiversity, and community wellness.