Town of Orange Park
Environmental Quality Board Meeting
Thursday, July 9, 2026
3:00 PM
Agenda

1. Call to Order / Verification of Quorum
2. Election of Chair
3. Election of Vice Chair
4. Approval of the Minutes
    a. Approval of the EQB Minutes for the January 8, 2026 Regular Meeting
5. Chair Comments
6. New Business
7. Old Business
8. Audience Comments
9. Board Member Comments
10. Information
    a. The next regular meeting of the Environmental Quality Board is scheduled for Thursday, August 13, 2026 at 3:00 P.M.
11. Adjournment

Environmental Quality Board Meeting

Thursday, January 8, 2026
3:00 PM
Minutes

The Town of Orange Park Environmental Quality Board meeting was called to order in the Town Council Chambers on January 8, 2026 at 3:03 pm by Ms. Debra Waters, Chairwoman of the Environmental Quality Board. The following board members were present: Mr. John Jordan and Mr. Tim Kirby. Ms. Diane Cook was absent. Others present were: Economic & Community Development Director Stephen Smith, Public Works Director Kyle Croce, Town Manager Joseph Taylor, and Planning and Permitting Coordinator Maddie White.

APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES FOR THE SEPTEMBER 4, 2025 MEETING

Mr. Jordan moved to approve the minutes and Mr. Kirby seconded, which passed 3-0.

CHAIR COMMENTS

Ms. Waters had no comments at this time.

DISCUSSION ON PREVIOUS REQUEST BY PUBLIC WORKS TO REMOVE A HISTORIC TREE ON MORGAN STREET

Ms. Waters opened the discussion regarding a historic live oak located on Morgan Street, noting that this item had first appeared on the EQB agenda in June and that the Town had requested a follow-up to clarify the Board's role in tree removal and replacement projects.

Mr. Smith provided an overview, explaining that the EQB's primary responsibility is to advise on tree removal and replacement on publicly owned lands, particularly in larger projects. He noted that when the Town removes a protected tree, it must be replaced with a tree measuring four to eight inches in diameter at breast height (DBH). He further explained that for major replanting projects, those involving 20 or more trees, the Town Manager determines the location of the new plantings, but the EQB's concurrence is required. Mr. Smith referenced previous participation by the Board in similar projects, including efforts at Bradley Park, as examples of how the Board's advisory role functions in practice. He also cited relevant sections of the Town Code, including Sections 5.14.00 and 5.17. These sections reinforce that no tree may be removed from publicly owned lands, including rights-of-way and easements, without strict compliance with the Code. They also outline replacement requirements and clarify when the Board must be involved. Mr. Smith noted that a UF diagnostic report regarding the Morgan Street live oak had been included in the meeting materials, providing updated information that was not available during the June report. Mr. Smith stated Mr. Taylor and Mr. Croce are also present to provide additional information as well.

Mr. Joseph Taylor, Town Manager, thanked the Board for revisiting the matter and acknowledged the tree's historical and neighborhood significance. He emphasized the Town's

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commitment to maintaining its trees, particularly in public rights-of-way, to ensure they are healthy, viable, and safe for infrastructure, residents, and emergency services. Mr. Taylor highlighted concerns from the Fire Department regarding the tree's size and position, which create navigation hazards for emergency vehicles. The Fire Chief confirmed that the tree could pose risks to expensive equipment, such as ladder trucks valued at nearly $2 million, and to personnel responding to emergencies. This operational risk further supported the recommendation for removal. Mr. Taylor stated there are visible indicators of decay, including mushrooms at the base of the tree. He noted that the Town continues to prioritize tree preservation, having recently allocated an additional $40,000 for Townwide tree planting. However, in this instance, the combination of advanced decay, public safety concerns, and operational risks made removal necessary.

Ms. Waters invited Ms. Kaitlyn Holmes to speak.

Kaitlyn Holmes, 525 Morgan Street, spoke regarding the live oak tree on Morgan Street. She emphasized her daily interaction with the tree, noting that it provides a protective barrier for pedestrians due to the lack of sidewalks, and highlighted her concern for pedestrian safety, especially when walking with her daughter to school. Ms. Holmes raised questions about the University of Florida report, noting that it primarily addressed the presence of fungi and did not provide a comprehensive assessment of the tree's overall health. She suggested obtaining a second opinion from a certified arborist with no financial interest in tree removal, to assess the progression of decay and estimate the tree's remaining lifespan. She also addressed the Town's stated safety concerns, referencing past events and daily traffic observations. Ms. Holmes stated that emergency vehicles, delivery trucks, and parade traffic have navigated the area successfully, and highlighted that alternate routes are available for emergency access. She noted that the tree's trunk, while large, allows sufficient room for vehicles to pass, and she expressed concern that removal of the tree could increase vehicle speeds and create greater hazards for pedestrians. Ms. Holmes requested additional input from both the police and fire departments regarding safety considerations and reiterated her support for preserving the tree.

Travis Waters, 2441 Dogwood Lane, expressed skepticism regarding the Town's safety concerns, questioning the $2 million fire engine replacement scenario and noting that the cited accident occurred over a decade ago and was speed-related rather than tree-related. Mr. Waters noted that the posted speed limit on Morgan Street has increased from 15 to 25 miles per hour, which he believes could increase risk rather than mitigate it. He emphasized his perspective as a lifelong Orange Park resident, stating that while he has no personal preference regarding the tree, he feels the Town may be attempting to influence public opinion. He questioned whether the Town is consistently applying safety protocols, citing that the Environmental Quality Board and Town manager must concur for tree removal, and expressed concern that the city may be selectively prioritizing certain projects. Mr. Waters also referenced natural resilience, observing that the tree has survived major storms and hurricanes, and mentioned liability considerations, noting that insurance often invokes "act of God" clauses for fallen trees. Overall, he voiced disappointment in the Town's approach to public input and oversight, expressing doubt about whether local and county authorities would fairly audit the Town's compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

Denise Torrefranca, 657 San Robar Drive, a resident of over 25 years and U.S. Navy retiree, spoke in support of preserving the live oak on Morgan Street. She noted her familiarity with the tree and neighborhood, referencing an incident approximately 11 years ago when a vehicle struck the tree. Ms. Torrefranca stated that Morgan Street and San Robar provide accessible routes for emergency vehicles, suggesting that emergency services could navigate around the tree without difficulty. While she acknowledged she is not a certified arborist and cannot speak to the tree's health or fungus, she emphasized the tree's longevity and resilience through many storms. She agreed with prior commenters that the tree naturally slows traffic, preventing vehicles from turning too quickly, and expressed concern for pedestrian and neighborhood safety. Overall, she advocated retaining the tree and noted that alternative routes exist for emergency access that would not endanger the tree.

Ms. Holmes, 525 Morgan Street, suggested that the Town consider petitioning residents on Morgan Street, San Robar Drive, and Morgan Circle to provide input on the live oak tree, noting that many residents may be at work during meetings and may not have the opportunity to attend.

Ms. Waters invited Mr. Kyle Croce, Town of Orange Park's Public Works Director to speak.

Kyle Croce, Public Works Director, explained that the Town has received numerous calls over the years about the decaying tree and its branches, which have posed occasional hazards. He noted that the arborist report indicated internal decay and recommended treatment if the tree is to remain, which would be a substantial cost. Mr. Croce emphasized that public safety, along with tree health, is the primary concern, given evolving traffic standards and recent accidents. He highlighted that the Town is committed to planting replacement trees and maintaining a balance between tree preservation and public safety.

The board members discussed potential solutions to address both safety concerns and resident preferences, including widening the roadway, installing raised medians, and planting new trees along the sides to slow traffic. Mr. Croce confirmed that the Town is open to working with residents on tree replacement options, including live oaks, pines, magnolias, and crepe myrtles, and implementing landscaping measures to maintain safety while preserving the neighborhood's character.

Mr. Travis Waters, 2441 Dogwood Lane, referenced a previous accident in the area and noted that smaller trees in other parts of Town have successfully functioned as traffic-calming measures. He suggested that rather than removing the tree and reconfiguring the road, the town consider alternative approaches such as raised medians, speed dips, or a replacement tree that can thrive in the existing space. Mr. Waters also proposed a temporary solution to support the tree's weakened areas using steel reinforcement or similar measures, allowing time for community discussion and consensus. He emphasized the importance of transparency and community trust in the decision-making process and recommended that the Town consider these collaborative options before taking permanent action.

Ms. Waters raised concerns regarding the treatment of protected trees in Orange Park, citing past instances such as tree removals at Bradley Park where replacements were not consistent with the

Town's designation as a tree and bird sanctuary. They emphasized the importance of live oaks and expressed concern that palm trees and other non-native species do not reflect the town's identity. She questioned the absence of a certified arborist report, noting that previous reports focused on fungi rather than the tree's overall health. They inquired about potential interventions, such as pruning, pest control, or other treatments, to preserve the tree. Additionally, Ms. Waters questioned traffic safety claims, noting the presence of reflectors, stop signs, and alternate routes for emergency vehicles, and asked why residents and neighbors were not more formally consulted on the proposed removal. They recommended broader community input through petitions or written feedback, particularly for residents who may not have access to the Town's online resources. She stressed the tree's historical and aesthetic value, suggested that all measures to preserve it should be exhausted before removal, and emphasized the importance of considering both safety and the Town's environmental priorities.

Ms. Kaitlyn Holmes, 525 Morgan Street, suggested the Town consult nearby municipalities, such as Green Cove Springs, to evaluate similar situations with large trees in the middle of roadways, noting that Magnolia Point has comparable examples. She emphasized the importance of careful consideration before removing the tree and the potential value of consulting other municipalities for guidance.

Mr. Jordan spoke from personal experience and long-term knowledge of the neighborhood, shared historical context about the tree and emphasized its cultural and aesthetic value. They noted that while some may see a tree in the middle of a road as undesirable, its removal should not be automatic. They highlighted that the board values the tree as a historical and protected asset and suggested that the tree's condition has not been clearly demonstrated as a safety hazard sufficient to warrant removal. He stressed that while the tree may not be ideally placed, it has existed for many decades without significant incidents. Mr. Jordan suggested that removal should only occur if there is clear, imminent danger or evidence that the tree is failing. He also noted that the Environmental Quality Board's role is advisory, not directive, emphasizing that final authority rests with the Town Council.

Ms. Waters noted for the record that many of the points raised during the meeting reflected concerns from residents who were unable to attend due to work obligations. She shared that her phone had been receiving numerous messages from neighbors opposed to removing the tree. Ms. Waters also observed firsthand that large emergency vehicles, including trucks with oversized tires, were able to navigate past the tree without issue, suggesting that there is sufficient clearance for such vehicles. They further mentioned that if safety concerns persist, adjustments, such as relocating the 25 miles per hour speed limit sign, could be considered to improve navigation around the tree. She acknowledged the community's input and expressed appreciation for the facts and perspectives provided during the discussion.

Mr. Jordan moved to deny the formal request to remove the tree in the middle of the road across the street from 530 Morgan Street and Mr. Kirby seconded, which passed 3-0.

REQUEST TO REMOVE A HISTORIC LIVE OAK TREE AT 1217 PARK AVENUE

Mr. Smith provided the report for the property at 1217 Park Avenue. The owner of the apartments seeks to remove a historic live oak from the side yard, located between two buildings, due to potential hazards from falling branches and the tree's root system impacting the building foundations. The tree is a live oak, 81 inches in diameter at breast height (DBH), approximately 60 feet tall, with a 46-foot spread. The health of the tree is rated as fair, with a moderate risk level according to the arborist report. Section 5.12.00 requires prior EQB approval for removal of non-exempt historic trees in commercial districts, and Section 3.12.00 outlines mitigation options: either replacement at a one-to-two-inch ratio or payment of mitigation fees ($165 per inch of DBH, totaling approximately $13,365).

Frank Ramizi, representing the property owner, stated that the tree had caused branches to fall on the building roofs. The property is being cleaned up, including removal of overgrown palms and bushes. He explained that they hired a contractor who initially trimmed the tree without a permit; code compliance intervened and halted work. An arborist was subsequently engaged to assess the tree. The arborist identified that the primary concerns are a branch overhanging the doctor's office and root encroachment on the building foundations. Frank stated that trimming would not sufficiently address the foundation and safety concerns. He indicated willingness to replace the tree with multiple trees, possibly palms, due to limited space between properties.

Kaitlyn Holmes, 525 Morgan Street, commented that live oaks share root systems and nutrients with nearby trees, and their removal may impact surrounding vegetation. While she expressed concern for the preservation of live oaks, she acknowledged that if the tree is affecting the building foundation, removal may be warranted. She emphasized that replacement with palms does not provide the same environmental or ecological benefits as a live oak.

Board members questioned whether the arborist's assessment of fair health was made before or after recent trimming. Staff clarified that the report was conducted after the latest trimming. The arborist noted decay indicators, including flaking bark, discoloration, and mushroom conks at the root flare and main stem. The applicant confirmed that two large branches had fallen previously and could pose safety risks to tenants and neighboring businesses. The board noted that the tree's proximity to the buildings and its root system posed moderate risk to property and public safety. While recognizing the tree's historic and environmental value, the practical concerns regarding potential damage and safety were acknowledged. The EQB acknowledged the applicant's concerns regarding safety, structural impact, and property maintenance. Board members recognized the value of the live oak but noted that, given the moderate risk and proximity to structures, removal with appropriate mitigation may be justified. Replacement options and mitigation fees were discussed as part of compliance with the Town's tree preservation policies.

The discussion continued regarding the live oak located between two buildings on the property. Concerns were raised about large heading cuts, cavities, decay indicators, and rot inside the tree, which could pose a risk to the building foundations and tenants. Mr. Ramizi and property representatives explained prior trimming, falling branches, and root encroachment on the building foundation. They noted that the tree is large, overhanging multiple areas, and poses a

potential hazard in high winds or storms. They expressed willingness to comply with mitigation requirements and to replace the tree with multiple trees if necessary, though noted that space limitations might prevent planting a replacement live oak directly in the same location. Public commenters acknowledged the tree's historic and environmental value but noted that the location between buildings and its health concerns create safety and liability issues. Discussion included alternatives for landscaping, such as hedge bushes, rather than planting a replacement tree in the narrow space between the buildings. The board recognized that this situation differs from prior discussions regarding street trees, as this tree is on private property with direct structural and safety concerns. After discussion, a motion was made to approve the removal of the tree at 1217 Park Avenue.

Mr. Kirby moved to approve Application TR-1-2026 to remove the historic live oak tree at 1217 Park Avenue and Mr. Jordan seconded, which passed 3-0.

The board emphasized that while replanting is not mandated, they requested in good faith that the property owner replace the tree with a suitable landscape option, excluding palm trees. The property representatives confirmed their commitment to comply, noting that the removal will require coordination with a contractor, stump grinding, grading, and utility adjustments. The timeline for completion was estimated to be up to August 2026, pending selection of replacement trees or landscaping. The Town staff and Mr. Smith will coordinate on suitable tree species compatible with the site conditions.

OLD BUSINESS

For future tree discussions, particularly regarding Morgan Street, Ms. Waters suggested preparing a neighborhood petition, coordinating fire and emergency vehicle assessments, and obtaining updated arborist reports.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

There were no further public comments at this time.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS

There were no further board member comments at this time.

INFORMATION

The next regular meeting of the Environmental Quality Board is scheduled for Thursday, February 12, 2026 at 3:00 p.m. Arbor Day is January 16, 2026, and the board hopes to be invited by the Town Manager to participate.

ADJOURNMENT

Ms. Waters adjourned the meeting at 4:38 p.m.