

August 25, 2026

Whittier City Council
13230 Penn St.
Whittier, CA. 90602

SUBJECT: Leaked Audio Exposes Intent of Urban Forest Management Plan; Conflict of Interest Revealed re Contract with Michael Baker, Inc.

Dear Mayor and City Council Members:

A leaked audio recording of Whittier's City Manager speaking at an invitation-only meeting last week reveals that the intent to adopt an Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP) is to make it easy to cut down **healthy** trees to accommodate development.

That evidence emerged during presentations by the City Manager and consultant Michael Baker, Inc. (MBI) when launching the UFMP solely to leaders of Whittier's business associations identified as the Stakeholders. Just like the Greenleaf Promenade debacle, business associations were considered the only Stakeholders when they supported the Council's vote in 2023 to cut down ALL of the trees in the heart of Uptown. That resulted in resident outrage, including 8,274+ people signing a petition to prevent it. Audio recording from an anonymous source (available on www.saveourtreeswhittier.com) captured City Manager Conal McNamara saying this to business association leaders on Aug 17:

"...This WHOLE DOCUMENT (UFMP) is going to come down to one word, and that is HEALTHY...So if we can all agree that a hazardous tree can be a healthy tree, we could have saved \$800,000 and a year and a half on this whole exercise, but we can't... because they are going to sue us on that. That's the reason we are here...that one word HEALTHY is what this whole thing is going to be about."

Background: in Nov. 2025, the previous City Council suspended Whittier's Tree Protection Ordinance and Parkway Tree Manual giving the City Manager sole authority to remove **healthy** trees with no public notice or appeal process. (Whittier's Tree Protection Ordinance & Parkway Tree Manual always allowed immediate removal of any unhealthy, diseased or dying trees. Like other cities, it permitted a citizen Appeal process only regarding planned removal of healthy trees.) That Council action provoked a lawsuit by the Whittier Conservancy regarding violation of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). One month prior to then-incumbent mayor and two city council members' landslide defeat at the April 14, 2026 City Election, the former City Council amended the NO BID contract with MBI - totaling \$564,133 - to replace Whittier's Parkway Tree Manual with an UFMP that aims to codify the ability to remove HEALTHY trees without public recourse.

Proof has come to light exposing a conflict of interest that should prevent Whittier from proceeding with the MBI consulting contract to develop an UFMP. In Nov. 2025, the City hired MBI to write a memorandum (attached), filed with the State, claiming that suspending Whittier's Parkway Tree Manual was exempt from CEQA. That resulted in the ongoing Conservancy lawsuit. Several months later, MBI was rewarded with a No Bid contract for \$564,133.

MBI has no experience developing an UFMP for any city. Other California cities chose companies with expertise to prepare their UFMPS, funded by CalFire state grants, not an expensive no bid contract. MBI

was selected to justify removal of HEALTHY trees with NO appeal process. MBI's contract contains language (p7) proposing to manipulate Whittier's community survey: *"Carefully framed survey questions, developed in coordination with the City, would focus on public safety, risk management and the necessity of tree removal rather than aesthetics or personal preferences."* This completely compromises MBI. Other cities clearly state their goal for an Urban Forest Management Plan is to protect, preserve and grow their urban forests.

MBI's contract must be canceled. The City has the authority to cancel the contract at any time without penalty, with or without cause, with 15-day notice. Response to my Public Records Request revealed that MBI invoiced only 11% of the \$564,133 contract through June 30. After paying incurred expenses from July and August, almost \$1/2 million of taxpayers' money would be recouped by canceling this contract.

The same cancellation terms apply to the two related contracts approved by the previous City Council when they voted to throw out Whittier's tree protections: a \$200,000 contract for another law firm to attempt to defend against the Conservancy lawsuit to reinstate the Parkway Tree Manual, and a \$50,000 contract for a Public Relations firm to try to "sell" the UFMP to the Community. City Manager Conal McNamara has revealed that the City is spending \$800,000 for ONE word! The Whittier Community will not tolerate it. Reinstate the Parkway Tree Manual.

Sincerely,



Conny McCormack
Founder & Leader, www.saveourtreeswhittier.com
City of Whittier resident for 30 years
Former L.A. Co. Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk (Ret.)

cc: Conal McNamara, City Manager
Rigo Garcia, City Clerk

Attachment: MBI memorandum