

Fire safety group lends helping hand

Hazardous tree removed from disabled woman's home free of charge

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Donna Vellutato watches as a tree is removed from her property in Skyland on Tuesday.  
Dan Thrift /  
Tahoe Daily  
Tribune



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With the help of Skyland Fire Safe Chapter, long-term Tahoe resident Donna Vellutato still is able to go to and from her home.

The chapter brought in Cody Tree Service to remove a tree that was a fire hazard and could possibly have wrecked the chair lift at Vellutato's house.

"I appreciate this so much," Vellutato said. She has trouble walking, and the chair lift, which she calls the Taj Mahal, is the only way for her to leave the house on Tahoe Drive in the Skyland neighborhood.

Five years ago, Vellutato had a heart attack that caused her feet to swell. She went to a podiatrist to fix the problem, but to this day, she said her feet always are numb.

"It feels like I'm stepping on two poles," Vellutato said. She said the disability is frustrating at times because she was such an active person. For 18 years, she traveled around the United States as a musician and raised four kids while performing with her husband, Joe.

The tree-removal services, which included the use of a crane, were provided to Vellutato for free because of her situation, said Ann Grant, Skyland Fire Safe Chapter leader.



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Ryan Farr, foreground, with Cody's Tree Service limbs a log Tuesday after it gets brought down by a crane at the home of Donna Vellutato.  
Dan Thrift / Tahoe Daily  
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For others, Grant said homeowners are charged 25 percent of the brush and tree-removal costs. Individuals also pay another 25 percent through in-kind, which is helping through their own labor of maintaining the property and removing brush later on.

The average cost per home is around \$1,500, Grant said.

After the year is done, Grant said the chapter will have cleared brush and trees from 102 homes.

The chapter is able to offer the discounted rate because of grants they've received. They received \$40,000 in February and \$72,000 in September. The most recent grant will pay for the rest of the year and for the spring pine-needle and pine-cone cleanup. Grant said she is continuing to find more grants to help the area.

Grant saw the need for a Fire Safe chapter in the Skyland area and helped get one started. The chapter didn't get off the ground until 2005, and the first year of work started in 2006.

Others involved with the chapter are Cody Tree Service, JB Landscaping and the Tahoe-Douglas Fire Department. The landscape company clears brush, while the fire department provides free chipping for the cause.

Neighbors in the area appreciate the services. Phyllis Berkson has known Vellutato for 40 years and said the project is great for Vellutato and the community. The neighborhood contains a lot of old homes along with overgrown brush. Preventing forest fires is important because of the number of homes and people in the area.

Since Vellutato has a hard time leaving the house, she said it scared her to think about a fire next to her, because she wouldn't be able to get out if she had to. Now, because of all the clearing in her neighborhood and on her property, she feels relieved.

"I felt a lot safer," Vellutato said.

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