

Loss of so many mature trees in Smyrna is devastating

By Carol Child
Smyrna

Is there nothing that can be done about the chronic deforestation of Smyrna, particularly in the historic district?

I awoke Monday morning, May 18, to the cacophony of tree cutters' chainsaws chopping down and grinding up four 75-100 year old Norway spruce trees lining the side of St. Peter's Episcopal Church empty lot across West Mount Vernon Street from our house. I'd rather awaken to our choir of full-throated songbirds, as usual. I stood in tears amid this alien landscape. Is no resident or organization owning property in the historic district required to get permission to fell these trees?

Joyce Kilmer's poem says it all:
I think that I shall never see

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Smyrna / Clayton
SUNTIMES

(302) 653-2083

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A division of the Dover Post Company, with business offices and composition at 609 E. Division Street and printing at 1196 S. Little Creek Road, Dover. Dover Post mailing address: P.O. Box 664, Dover, DE 19903. Telephone: (302) 678-3616. Fax: 653-8821.

Subscription: \$18.95 per year in state, \$29.95 per year out of county. Periodicals postage paid at Smyrna Post Office, Smyrna, DE. Postage rate pending at Smyrna Post Office.

The Smyrna Times was founded July 15, 1854 by Robert D. Hoffecker, who was editor and proprietor until February 10, 1907. Owned and published by Robert D. Hoffecker Jr. from Feb-

*A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

A person in the church office told me the trees interfered with their fence, and that it was the vestry's idea to chop them down. A neighbor said the church chopped down the trees to eliminate the squirrels.

Further, St. Peter's Church resides in the same Episcopal diocese as St. Andrew's School, deeply committed to environmental stewardship, conscientiously working to build a sustainable campus and surrounding Appoquinimink watershed, thereby continuing to plant hundreds of trees, protecting the water and the habitat and wildlife.

The Odessa Trees Commission carefully steward that town's historic trees and have planted young lindens to replace historic ones lost. Springfield Township, Delaware County, Pa., requires that citizens plant two trees for every one chopped down. If you look at downtown Smyrna from Google Earth, it looks like a parking lot. Joni Mitchell would have a field day.

The lush, graceful Norway spruce mature up to 80 feet tall under urban conditions, are healthy, one of the few narrow-leaf evergreens with virtually no disease, pest or physiological problems, adapt to many adverse soil and climate conditions, and tolerate pollution. The Norway spruce serve as a landscape accent, screen or windbreak. Owls and hawks roost in the Norway spruce; songbirds nest, lay eggs and shelter their young there. Why would you cut down this venerable tree? Where will the birds live now? Imagine returning and finding your home gone. What about their eggs felled and shattered with their nests? What about their babies who cannot yet fly?

How many seasons does a pair of birds return to the same tree? The Town misidentified Mrs. Faries' historic, century old sugar maple, a historic tree, on South Main Street and against her wishes and the wishes of neighbors, cut it down on May 28. And then there were the large pines out on the highway felled in the last two weeks....

It seems the Town of Smyrna, in general, is dedicated to deforestation, and in their view, the quicker the better, some residents have observed. What can we do to stop this devastation? On West Mount Vernon Street we chose to buy our home mainly for the lovely green-space view of grass and trees across the street. Now we look across cracked, barren earth at the back side of a church flanked by four piles of woodchips. Our property value fell with those four trees; drooping even lower than when the bottom fell out of the economy. Property owners need to care enough to assert their property rights to stop this destruction. It is a real shame because it diminishes the aesthetic (and property values) of the entire town, said one resident.

Town officials need to preserve what little urban forest is left. Residents tell me that the Town on numerous occasions agreed to plantings only to later remove them without forewarning and when they got complaints would advise the angry person to call the Shade Tree Committee.

Trees clean the air; improve water quality - that of Lake Como included; save energy winter and summer; are good for business, attracting tourism and inducing shoppers to spend more for goods and services; help stop inner city violence and reduce stress and the effects of chronic mental fatigue. Trees raise real estate values as much as twenty percent. Lost trees alter the character of a neighborhood. Loss of historic trees can result in the loss of historic district rehabilitation and restoration funding grants.

Trees absorb greenhouse gasses. The first groups to suffer greatly from global warming are the poorest of the poor, in Africa, the people who are helpless to do anything about it. When you raise your ax, is your decision a moral choice with which you are comfortable? Are you considering your fellow human, your great-great grandchildren or are you simply hauling off and worshipping the Almighty Dollar? Is there a better way?

On blustery winter afternoons I have reveled with the spirit of the wind rushing through the tops of those tall conifers. In tender summer nights, neighbors and I are enchanted by the hooting of a pair of owls deep in those branches. Will we hear them ever again? Or, in the words of poet John Keats in "Ode to a Nightingale," will we "sit and hear each other groan"?

My heart aches.

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