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Save our healthy old trees

Should take priority over street, sidewalk improvements; consider alternatives to removal

BY DAVID GIACALONE For The Sunday Gazette

David Giacalone is a Schenectady resident.

Arbor Day is celebrated this week, with much praise for planting new trees. However, just as society discounts the value of its senior citizens, Schenectady City Hall has been taking our grand old street trees for granted and, worse, euthanizing them in the name of "streetscape improvement."

Six years ago, a Gazette editorial ("Schenectady should spare trees, spoil sidewalks," April 17, 2010) spoke of the ticklish dilemma of liking trees and wanting smooth sidewalks.

When the city engineer announced a plan to "remove any tree along Washington Avenue whose roots are considered likely threats to the new sidewalk project there," Stockade residents and the late Councilwoman Barbara Blanchard loudly opposed it, and The Gazette helped inform the public and block the mayor's deforestation plan.

The editorial correctly pointed out that, "As important as good sidewalks are to an urban streetscape, trees are more so," noting:

"The trees, which are not only aesthetically pleasing but provide shade and oxygen while removing carbon, are as much a part of the Stockade's charm, and attraction to residents and tourists, as the neighborhood's centuries-old architecture."

The same can be said, of course, for the old shade trees in many fine Schenectady neighborhoods.

Sadly, however, City Hall has not taken a serious look at alternatives to tree removal that are being employed by smart(er) cities: rerouting around the tree, using ramping or more pliable materials, monitoring trees whose roots have been trimmed, or simply choosing not to repair each sidewalk.

Instead, the city engineer is singing the same tree-removal tune six years later, telling the Stockade Association that the engineer's office prefers the North Ferry Street process, where all mature trees were removed in 2008, to the Washington Avenue process, where street paving was done in 2014 without touching the sidewalks or trees.

A month ago, for example, an assistant city engineer wrote me that (1) "My job with the city is to limit liability. ... Until I am advised otherwise by corporation counsel, any tree that I feel has been impacted negatively by any construction will be removed," to avoid a lawsuit should it topple over in a decade or two.

And, (2) "[Y]ou say that the little trees ruin the historic feel, but if you give them 5-10 years they will be mature and give the same feel as the larger trees with minimal burden of damage."

That second point is belied by taking a look at North Ferry Street, eight years after the new planting.

This focus on potential liability for fallen trees and faith in comparable aesthetic results seem misguided, missing the benefits forest for the (allegedly) problematic trees.

As we await casino tourism, for example, the city should remember this finding at AmericanForests.org:

Trees ... help to attract tourists and businesses. Studies have shown that people walking or driving down a street lined with trees are more inclined to slow down and linger at store windows and ... spend a longer time shopping.

Likewise, the International Society of Arboriculture advises that:

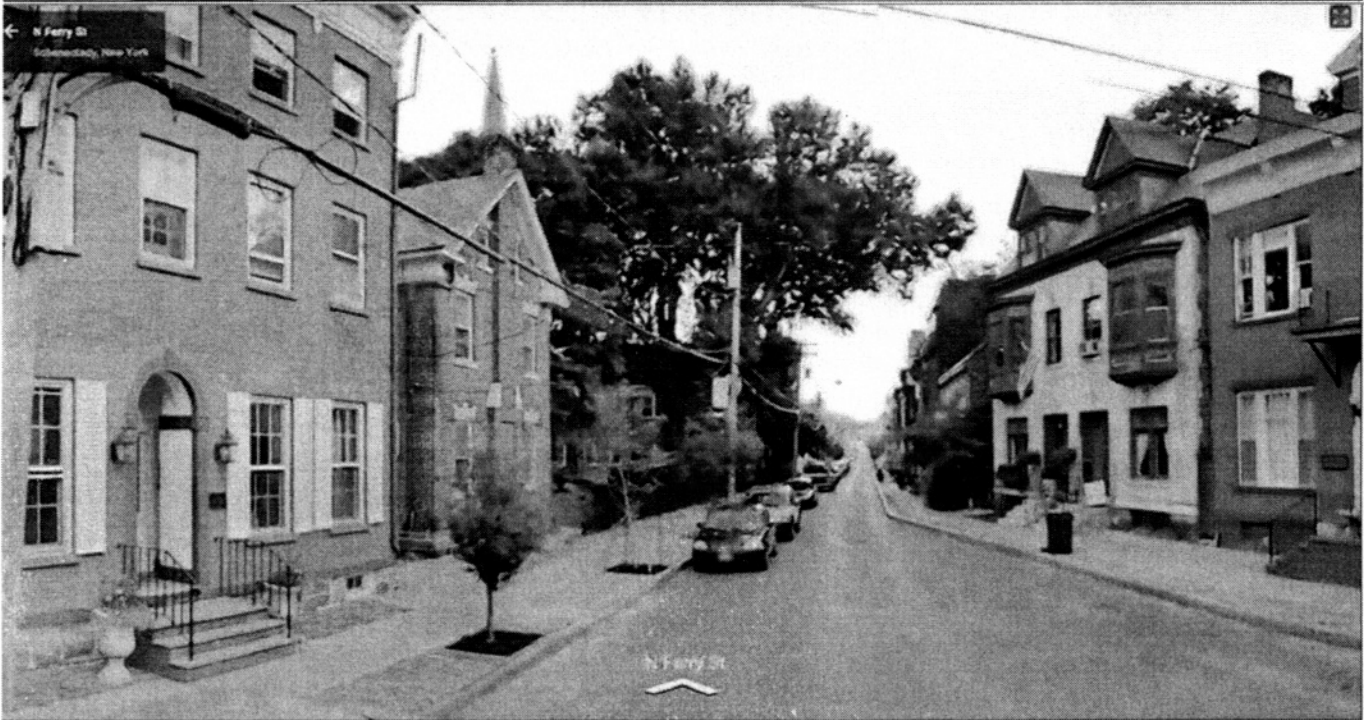
"The benefits derived from the urban forest generally increase as tree size and canopy cover increase. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the community to protect its existing tree resources from loss or depletion [and from] indiscriminate removal."

ISA also recommends that city ordinances make clear the “priority of trees over street improvements (hardscape)” and that “the responsibility for correcting conflicts between trees and street improvements should not be assigned to the property owner.”

The “costs” — aesthetic, social, economic and environmental — in removing large street trees are so great, and the impact of replanted trees so underwhelming, that making tree removal the default plan of action when a tree is not dead, dying or dangerous, seems foolhardy.

If you agree that Schenectady instead needs a Tree Preservation Policy, please support Save Our Schenectady Trees, and join us at Arthur’s Market at noon Saturday, April 30.

For information and photos, visit: tinyurl.com/SOSTrees.



COURTESY: SAVE OUR SCHENECTADY TREES WEBSITE

At top, North Ferry Street in Schenectady is seen from Lawrence Circle in 2007, before sidewalk renovations resulted in the removal of older trees, and above, in 2011, three years after new, smaller trees were planted in their place.