

SEMINARY RIDGE CIVIC ASSOCIATION

October 4, 2020

Dear Mayor Wilson and Members of City Council,

A September 14, 2020, “monthly update” by the Division Chief of RPCA’s Park Operations to the Park and Recreation Commission members informed the Commission it was “**preparing for fall implementation of phased, proactive removal and replacement of Callery Pear (Bradford....)**.” Our happening upon this “staff report” under the Commission’s September 17 agenda on the City’s website was fortunate, as this “proactive removal” is a **surprise to the Seminary Ridge Civic Association (SRCA)**. Previous contact with **City staff said that a final plan would be provided to and discussed with SRCA and the community before any action** would be taken since this action would greatly impact our neighborhood.

Over the past year the City shared its desire to remove all of the SRCA’s 376 Bradford Pears – 53% of our neighborhood tree canopy – with 58 to 62 trees being removed the first year and the remainder the following four to five years. The City representatives said they only had a draft proposal; that the impact of COVID-19 made it unlikely that it would begin this year; and that if the City were to choose to proceed, it would return with a final concept in order to have community discussion and input on it.

We **ask that you immediately stop any such plan for implementation this fall, particularly in view of the above statements by City officials.** The City has not informed the SRCA community of its official final plan to remove half of its tree canopy – including which trees might suddenly be found to be uprooted in the coming weeks; nor has either the Board or the neighborhood had the promised opportunity for discussions and input once the City had arrived at a final proposal so that we may have an informed dialog. We **look forward to having both a SRCA Board meeting and a public SRCA community gathering with the City – as promised** – if it has arrived at its final proposal. Without that promised opportunity, we would not be able to present the questions we feel need to be addressed by the City – which also involves our elected officials. They are described below:

- **Background.** The 2009 Urban Forestry Master Plan stated that the City “does not have a formal citywide management plan ... to effectively manage Alexandria’s urban forest.” This has caused tree care, pruning, and safety to take a “reactive approach (to storms, citizen requests, public repair, and development ... at higher cost.)” As a result, the City approved the Master Plan’s proposed establishment of a “five-year pruning cycle ... through block-to-block pruning” of the city’s ~17,000 street trees. This rotational “tree

- maintenance plan” would provide for better and safer care of public trees at less cost – similar to what other major cities have done.
- **Result.** It took a decade before the 2009 Forestry Plan recommendation was funded last year so that the five-year “block by block” rotational pruning cycle could begin. The Capital Improvement Program (CAP) for the new FY2021 funding specifically stated its purpose was to institute: “Recommendation #39 of the Urban Forestry Master Plan approved by the City Council, call[ing] for the implementation of a rotational cycle for the maintenance of all established trees planted along City Streets...” as well as to support the “Citywide Tree Inventory program.” However, a line was added that was not in the Master Plan’s original recommendation: “The project will allow staff to address a larger number of issues in a pro-active manner before they become problematic, rather than waiting until a limb or tree fails.”
- **The Consequence.** The CAP funding originally intended to finally begin the approved cost-efficient, five-year rotational pruning program to save trees is now being diverted to “proactively” uproot 376 Bradford trees, all in one neighborhood, under language inserted by the staff. This diversion apparently of all funding specifically authorized to begin a city-wide pruning program and to support a City-wide tree inventory is evidently justified by a City representative’s statement that the City – lacking funding for an approved pruning program – had to respond 16 times last year for fallen Bradford limbs. **The consequence is that every Bradford tree will now be removed instead of pruning them as originally planned to prevent such breakage.** Additionally, it delays the cost-effective Urban Forestry pruning program at least another half decade during which the funds will be used for removal of one neighborhood’s trees. Notably, the same funding was also to have been used for a concurrent City-wide Tree Inventory program. Not using funds to support this program may have apparently caused an arbitrary profiling of our neighborhood’s trees for removal rather than pruning since the Master Plan had warned that due to the lack of updates and work order coordination, “the [very small] street tree inventory [it has] cannot be used to make accurate management decisions.”
- **Neighborhood effect.** Almost any similar Alexandria neighborhood with hundreds of flowering trees would question a proposal to de-landscape half of it, given the ambiance and attraction such mature trees provide to living in such a community. This ambiance will be completely absent if the Bradfords are replaced over a few years by small saplings, similar to a new home development. Of concern, it is the choice of each individual household whether to even have replacement trees. Additionally – as an arborist wrote in the *New York Times* to support pruning maintenance rather than the uprooting of Bradford Pears – neighborhoods should be wary of cities’ replacement trees. Unlike the remarkably disease resistant Bradford, many proposed replacements are much less resistant to diseases. Trees on

Alexandria's replacement list includes the American Elm, which will almost inevitably acquire Dutch Elm disease if it lives long enough, and it is also in constant need of pruning and replacement. The incidence and severity of Maple decline have increased markedly in recent years, particularly for both the Sugar and Red Maples the City offers. And the White and Red Oaks are also increasingly susceptible to the severe Oak Wilt killer, while the Horse chestnut and Flowering Dogwood are similarly threatened.

- **The Environment.** Alexandria has made conscious decisions in transportation and other areas to advance Climate Change-friendly policies. The opposite occurs by removing all of the nearly 400 mature Bradfords. Each soaks up ~40 pounds of CO₂ a year – and some have been in the neighborhood for nearly 50 years (these include Bradfords rooted in front of households that have asked – absent a City-administered tree maintenance program – for theirs to be pruned roughly every five years.) After removal, City trees are turned quickly into mulch and firewood upon which nearly 100% of their stored CO₂ is immediately released by decomposition or burning. It will take up to a half century for the Bradford replacements to grow to enough maturity to again soak up the ~2000 CO₂ pounds many of their “uprooted” predecessors now will have released early into the atmosphere.
- **History of planned prevention.** The Bradford has a history as renowned as the Cherry trees' that bloom in the Tidal Basin of Washington, D.C. While the Cherry arrived from Japan in 1912, with First Lady Helen Taft planting it in the city, the Pear had arrived earlier from China in 1908, also under the auspices of the U.S. Agriculture Department. And Lady Bird Johnson planted it in Washington DC for the specific purpose of promoting the tree's unique landscaping and flowering beauty. But before the nursery trade was allowed to use the tree, the Agriculture Department trialed it during the 1950s in nearby University Park, Maryland. They had a pruning maintenance program and, as a result, some of the original Bradfords are still there today, 65 years later. They are healthy and safe, while the average life expectancy of un-pruned Bradford trees is only about 22 years.

This letter is detailed in length, but the City's decision to implement a plan this fall for the removal of half of SRCA's tree canopy was only discovered by a random search of the City's website. And, as one can see from the information provided above, **SRCA and the Seminary Ridge community should be afforded the promised opportunity to question the City staff's actions and apparent decision.**

Please let us know immediately that no action will be taken against our neighborhood's 376 Bradford Pears until the proper discussions and inputs – as were promised and have been expected – are conducted. The SRCA Board's government liaison is Joe Sestak (joe@joesestak.com, (m) 610 757 5051) and a response to the SRCA Board may be made through Joe.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Seminary Ridge community and SRCA Board,

Jeanne G. Jacob

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President
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Copy to:

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