

EFFORTS TO PRESERVE LEXINGTON TREES

Lexington is losing trees at a rate of 2 to 1. Can we keep ourselves in shade?

By Jeri Zeder

Public-minded celebrities often work to raise awareness for causes they hold dear. Can a tree be a celebrity? I don't know, but the Battle Green sugar maple, which bit the sawdust during May's Nor'easters, comes mighty close. And if it could, I think that old maple would take on as its cause the plight of Lexington's trees.

Alas, trees can't talk, not even in Lexington, but they have a fine spokesperson in John Frey, chair of the Lexington Tree Committee. Established with the adoption of the of the Tree By-law in 2001, the Lexington Tree Committee has its roots in the Lexington Field & Garden Club going back to 1990. It began as an informal ad hoc group concerned that the Town needed to pay more attention to its trees, according to Frey, and started a journey that culminated in the adoption of the Tree By-Law. A key provision prevents builders, developers, and landowners from simply clearing private lots of trees prior to construction, and requires mitigation in the form of replanting or payment to a town fund for replacing lost trees.

The Committee has published a Tree Management Manual (<http://ci.lexington.ma.us/dpw/Documents/treemanual.pdf>; also available at Cary Memorial Library and other town locations), which includes a list of native species recommended for planting. The Committee is now undertaking a most ambitious project: inventorying and cataloguing all of Lexington's public and street trees. It will take years to complete, Frey says. The effort relies on volunteers who receive training in identifying species, measuring trees, and assessing their overall health. (The Committee was able to procure through grants a hand-held computer for the job, but more computers would speed up the effort. A hand-held computer plus software license costs about \$1,000.) Tree Warden David Pinsonneault says the inventory will enable preventive maintenance, allowing him to anticipate when a tree needs attention, when it should be pruned or removed, and where to plant new trees.

Speaking of new trees, Frey warns that Lexington has been losing on average two public trees for every one that's planted. "If this keeps going on for a long time, the Town is going to look a little nude as far as trees go," he says. This is more than an issue of aesthetics. Trees provide shade and, more critically, absorb pollutants, especially carbon dioxide from fossil fuel emissions that contribute to global climate change. "The more trees you have, the better," Frey says.

The twin causes of Lexington's net tree loss are nature and humans. Disease claimed the Dutch elms years ago and today is hitting certain ash and maples hard. Many old trees are insect-infested or critter-ridden and must come down for safety reasons. Construction destroyed a number of mature trees as well. Public funds for planting trees have dried up to nothing in some years, no more than a trickle in others. This year's budget provides \$5,000 for planting, enough to pay for only ten to twenty new trees, according to Pinsonneault. Tight budgets have also led to personnel losses in the Department of Public Works' Tree Division, which retards preservation and maintenance efforts.

The Tree Committee has been scraping together what it can for planting. For example, trees planted along the bikeway embankment in Lexington Center in June are the product of a \$5,000 Mass ReLeaf grant the Committee secured in January.

With Lexington's public budget so tight and with so many competing good causes, an annual \$15,000 that many wish would be appropriated for the purchase and planting of trees simply isn't to be. Town Meeting reluctantly turned down a bid to insert that amount into the FY06 budget, and several Town Meeting Members engaged in their own form of mitigation by contributing privately to the Lexington Tree Fund. Selectman Hank Manz set an example by making public his own birthday present to himself: a \$100 donation to the fund, derived from cashed-in gift cards.

"We like the idea of shade trees," Manz says, "but more than that, they say we care about how the town looks, we care about preservation of the town. We want to preserve why we all moved here: that small-town feel. Trees just help that immeasurably. This is not something we can do overnight. The trees will outlive us; we're making decisions for future generations." Manz recalls the Battle Green's downed celebrity sugar

maple. “Somebody 120 years ago planted that thing. That’s kind of awesome,” he marvels.

Jeri Zeder and her husband Joe Pato have been nursing the grand old maple in their front yard slowly back to health— so far successfully, knock on wood.

To support tree planting in Lexington—

- Make out a check to the Town of Lexington, write “Tree Fund” in the memo line, and mail to:

Selectman’s Office
 Lexington Tree Fund
 Town Office Building
 1625 Massachusetts Avenue
 Lexington, MA 02420

- Make a check out to the Lexington Field & Garden Club, write “for tree planting only” in the memo line, and mail to:

Conservation Committee
 Lexington Field & Garden Club
 P.O. Box 133
 Lexington, MA 02420-0002

To plant a commemorative tree—

- You can have a tree planted in memory of a loved one, to commemorate a notable occasion, or to honor someone special. The Town will guarantee and maintain the tree in perpetuity. Here’s how to do it:

1. Call Tree Warden David Pinsonneault at 781-861-2757 x26 to discuss placement and species of tree. He can answer any questions and make suggestions about where trees are needed.
2. Prepare a check in the amount of \$1,500 payable to the Lexington Tree Fund. Mark “Commemorative Tree Fund” in the memo line.

3. Mail the check to

Selectman's Office

Lexington Tree Fund

Town Office Building

1625 Massachusetts Avenue

Lexington, MA 02420