

SOS Elms News



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The 20th Birthday of SOS Elms is coming in June next year! We invite your ideas and participation in how we will celebrate.

President's Report

by Doug Mitchell
President, SOS Elms Coalition Inc.

Hello again to all our loyal members. **You** and your support are vitally important in sustaining our reputation as a leading proponent for Saskatchewan's urban forests. I am delighted to advise that we acquired two new Directors this year. Welcome and thank you to Dr. Jim Wood and Sean Mitchell.

We continue to lobby the Province to restore DED funding to the Rural Municipalities (RMs). The cuts to RM programs have caused real concerns for many community and RM administrators (see p. 3).

The current "boom" in Saskatoon's economy and growth has had a negative effect on trees. As only "Development" can do, suburban fringe areas are first completely denuded of existing trees, big or small, then scarified prior to building streets and houses. In older parts of the city beautiful mature elms and other trees are being lost or damaged because of poor planning and careless construction methods. This year we published two major articles in the StarPhoenix to voice our concerns (see p. 6 and 7).

In 2011 SOS Elms was at Saskatoon's Gardenscape, Seedy Saturday, the Prairie Master Gardeners Program, City of Saskatoon Students' Forestry Expo and the U of S Department of Sustainability Graduates Open House. Thanks to the Saskatoon Community Foundation, we again contributed to the SPLIT Program (see p. 4).

As always, I invite you to contact me or any of our Directors with your questions, concerns or suggestions. If you notice public trees being damaged or destroyed please contact us ASAP. We need to document and establish proof of any such situations. Your Directors are working hard to make SOS Elms a truly proactive force in the care and protection of our urban forests. Be ever diligent for the trees – and all the best to you this Christmas Season!



Photo: Cliff Speer – showing part of the doomed grove of elms, UofS Campus, Nov.2011

American Elms at Risk on Campus

By Rae Hearne

As an employee and student at the University of Saskatchewan campus over the last 25 years, I have always appreciated the beautiful landscaping and magnificent trees that are present. I was happy to see how they protected the American elms in the Bowl during the Place Riel expansion. However, like elsewhere in Saskatoon, mature trees on campus are at risk of damage or removal due to “development” projects. Sadly, next spring will bring significant destruction of a particularly beautiful grove of American elms located between the Murray Library and the Arts Building. This will be the site of the new Gordon Oakes-Red Bear Centre which is to be the new home for the Aboriginal Students Centre, long awaited, badly needed and eagerly anticipated. My concern is the choice of location. It is

extremely central, filling up one of the decreasing green spaces in the center of campus, but home of one of the last standing groves of elms trees in the city.

I have spoken to the Project Manager for the University of Saskatchewan Facilities Management Division, Chris Bergen, Facilities Managements Grounds Supervisor, Darren Crilly and Kathleen Makela, the Director of the Aboriginal Students Association and they were all very receptive to the plight of the trees. They are hopeful that some of them may be spared, perhaps moving some might be an option, although likely a costly one, and if all else fails perhaps the wood could be properly handled to facilitate use in either the interior of the building or furniture, such as benches on the grounds.

This will be a wonderful building, designed by First Nations architect

Douglas Cardinal who among other projects designed the Museum of Man in Ottawa. It would be wonderful to see this centre in a place where you could stand back and admire it such as between the Diefenbaker Centre and the Education Building with an outstanding view of the riverbank; unfortunately it will be tucked into a tight spot right up against Campus Drive, a busy thoroughfare. In addition two sculptures will have to be moved to other locations, a beautiful reflective spot lost for good.

I do want to see this centre reach fruition; the Aboriginal Students have been very patiently waiting for almost a decade. Nor do I not want to see these students in a location where they feel pushed to the sidelines. I just wish that they could reconsider this choice for the sake of those trees. If this project goes ahead, it will once again show that trees are determined to be less important than buildings; development wins again. The SOS Elms board is trying to work with City and University officials for stronger recognition and protection of trees throughout the city, including the campus.

Provincial DED 2011 Report

By Doug Mitchell

In the following I am grateful to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment for providing data and related information. DED being a primary focus of SOS Elms, we have been very concerned about the severe reduction in provincial funding to RMs and communities for prevention of DED. We continue to actively lobby for its full reinstatement. In 2010 the Province

attempted to cancel its entire DED control program (\$500K). After a formal submission from the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities the government agreed to provide \$100K, as a one-time offer for removal and disposal of infected elms identified in the Buffer Zones of Regina, Estevan, Fort Qu'Appelle, Moose Jaw, Indian Head and Tisdale; and to complete a DED survey of Katepwa Point and Echo Valley provincial parks. Funding was granted at the same level for 2011 and may continue into the future.

Saskatchewan Environment also tested samples of elms suspected to have DED submitted by RMs. In 2010 and 2011 respectively, 53 and 64 DED infected elms were detected. The RMs are now responsible for surveys, removal and disposal of infected elms. We do not know if the RMs would have found more infected elms if their provincial DED funding had not been cut.

In the pre-2010 DED management arrangement, provincial funds matched those of the RMs. This fall SOS Elms did an informal survey of the 42 RMs which lost those funds. The Ministry provided a list of the contacts from the prior program, and we phoned each of them to ascertain if the lack of provincial funding affected their ability to maintain due diligence in regard to their elms. A predominant response was "any funding is better than none" but some were angry and resentful. Regina and Saskatoon, and some other larger towns had been able to re-arrange budgets to accomplish what was needed. Some communities and RMs advised they are simply not doing what they had done in the past.

The demise of provincial DED funding to RMs has jeopardized the future of mature American elms in the smaller communities of Saskatchewan. Meanwhile, in Manitoba, the provincial budget for DED control is many times greater than that of Saskatchewan, mostly due to the massive die-offs to DED in Manitoba, and the cost of removal and disposal. Will Saskatchewan soon see a similar magnitude of loss to DED, with a huge increase in costs to deal with dead elms, thanks to the unwise cost-cutting since 2010? If you share our concern for American elms in the communities of our province, please let your MLA know: the full DED control program must be reinstated immediately.



SPLIT Report for 2011

By Terri Smith
Urban Forestry Department
City of Saskatoon

In 2011, Holliston School was the 9th school to participate in the forestry education program and tree planting initiative – Schools Plant Legacy in Trees (SPLIT). Since 2004, the City of Saskatoon, in partnership with Riversdale Kiwanis Club, has introduced the program to at least one elementary school a year. While the program is designed to educate students about the importance of trees, our urban forest, and the environment, the program's benefits are far-reaching.

On June 9th, the entire student body, Urban Forestry staff, parents, and community members worked together to

plant 12 trees and numerous shrubs on Holliston's schoolyard. Colorado spruce, Northern Blaze white ash, and a sugar maple were strategically planted to provide shade and shelter to the skating rink and playground. An alder, linden, Purple Spire crabapple and larch were planted to add aesthetic appeal. An apple tree, haskaps, currants and Saskatoons were planted in a shrub bed.

The planting had an enormous impact on the schoolyard; the students' participation in the design and planting left them with a sense of competency, accomplishment, and ownership. Mayor Don Atchison opened the planting ceremony with a congratulatory speech and a turning of the soil. Also in attendance was Councillor Charlie Clark, Parks Branch managers, members of the Holliston Community Association, parents, and SPLIT contributors. The SPLIT program fostered community spirit and pride, elements essential to a healthy environment.

Thanks to the following SPLIT contributors: The Saskatoon Community Foundation, SOS Elms, TD Green Streets/Tree Canada, Sask Energy, Saskatchewan Outdoor Environmental Education Association, Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority, Wilco Landscape Contractors Ltd., Boryski's Butcher Block, Lakeshore Garden Centre and Dutch Growers Nursery and Garden Center.

Gary Bortolotti (1954-2011)

Gary was a valued early and long-time board member of SOS Elms, serving for many years as membership coordinator.

The following is taken from a moving tribute to him written by his sister and brother-in-law, in the Oct. 25, 2011 *Lives Lived* section of the Globe and Mail.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/lives-lived/gary-bortolotti/article2213324/>

“Man of many passions – for nature, ornithology, teaching, photography, but especially family and friendship. Born Aug. 17, 1954, in Smiths Falls, Ont. Died July 3, 2011, in Saskatoon of acute leukemia, aged 56. How Gary Bortolotti became a field biologist of international renown is a minor miracle. Born into an Italian-Canadian family whose basic approach to nature was avoidance, he surprisingly found his true calling in the natural world.

He had spent his teen years jamming on the guitar in his suburban Toronto basement with Gary Brown, his friend since the age of 12, and haunting the blues clubs of Toronto. By the time he graduated from the University of Toronto with a degree in forestry, however, he had learned two things. One was the dark secret at the heart of forestry: They cut down trees. The other was that the creatures sitting in the trees were more interesting. The beauty of a hawk circling and soaring over a local golf course inspired his graduate work in biology, concentrating on birds of prey, especially bald eagles.

Gary and his wife, Heather Trueman, moved to Saskatoon in 1987 when Gary took up a position at the University of Saskatchewan teaching ornithology and biology. He conducted his first scientific research on Besnard Lake in northern Saskatchewan. Later, with the aid of friends and family, he built a cabin there

that became his treasured place, his real home, where he would pass on his love of nature to his children...”

A Backyard Project

By Doug Mitchell

Two and a half years ago, after consulting with our friendly tree specialist, my wife and I had to accept that the exceptionally large Siberian Elm in our back yard was not long for this world. It had to be removed, both for safety and esthetic reasons.

We decided to use the stump, the trunk, and large branches to produce a table and benches for our backyard patio. Complying with the DED regulations, we had the tree cut down, saving the wood we needed. The stump was stripped completely, right into ground, and all the unused wood and bark were taken to the elm disposal site at the City Landfill.

Luckily we have a good friend with a small wood mill just outside of town and were able to transport three ten foot sections of the main trunk to his site. Three foot diameter ten foot long logs are not easy to manipulate. It took three men, a tripod lift, a one ton flatbed truck and three trips, but we did it! These three pieces now needed to be left to dry for a year, as were the remaining twelve eight to ten inch diameter and two foot long sections which were stored in my heated shop/garage. After the year, we milled the large pieces into two inch thick slabs and cut the smaller sections into equal lengths for the bases of benches. Everything was left for another year and this fall I completed the project.

We lost a large mature tree and all that it had given us, the pleasure of shade, shelter, and bird habitat, but gained a wonderful seating area for at least twelve around a beautiful and unique table on a new patio. Every possible useful piece of the tree was incorporated into the project. This has been one of the most satisfying and meaningful endeavors my family has ever taken, and one of which we are most proud.



***The following was Published in the
Saskatoon StarPhoenix, 15 Dec. 2011
as an Opinion Editorial***

Protect Trees in Booming Saskatoon

By Doug Mitchell, *president of SOS Elms
Coalition Inc.*

This fall, we who value the urban forest were very pleased to see in the news that the first phase of the City Centre Plan includes trees, with a total of 6,400 trees counted in downtown areas (SP, Nov.16). Also, a timely Remembrance Day article in The Saskatoon Sun (Nov. 6) pointed out that 1,200 mature

American elms in Woodlawn Cemetery are a living memorial to war casualties.

This fall (SP, Sept. 10), as part of the series “52 Reasons to Love Saskatoon” there was an excellent tribute to our urban forest, pointing out its importance in adding to the beauty and quality of life here. The article gave some excellent examples, such as the “American elms that close over Spadina Crescent between Queen and Duchess streets [that] cast a calming charm in summer and dazzle with hoar frost on sunny winter mornings”.

It reviewed the history of our urban forest, recognizing the dedicated work of city employees and private citizens who believe in trees. We benefit from the dedication of those who have planted and cared for trees in the past. Future generations will also benefit, but only if our City government and administration, with support of city residents, place higher priority on trees. Saskatoon’s Urban Forestry Department is doing an excellent job in planting and caring for our city’s trees. However, pressures for development often trump the protection of those trees.

We at SOS Elms fear that Saskatoon’s current economic boom has become a major threat to our beautiful American elms and other large mature trees. This year has been particularly bad for mature trees in the march of “progress”.

The single greatest loss of mature trees occurred last January at River Landing on the Gathercole site. The developer of a “showcase” project there removed nine large 80-year old American elms, intending to begin construction in the spring. But what actually was built? Just

like in the Joni Mitchell song – they cut down the trees and put up a parking lot!

Recent zoning changes (SP, Nov.22) are the latest in six years of concessions and extensions that City Council has given for that development project. However, those changes, to build “higher and better” are not likely to lead to anything more than a new parking lot anytime soon. Contrary to the accolades for this project recently given to the developer, the City, and the MVA by civic affairs columnist Gerry Klein (SP, Nov. 26), they have not done a stellar job. The recent zoning change included approval to enlarge the project’s public plaza. The beautiful elms that could have been part of such a public place are gone forever.

We are aware of at least six other locations in older neighborhoods of Saskatoon where construction this year has caused significant damage, or outright removal, of mature trees. In most of those cases trees could have been saved if developers had put more thought into designing their projects, and taken care in protecting trees from breakage by contact, and from soil compaction from trucks and heavy machinery. Saskatoon’s urban forest is a great asset, both aesthetically and economically. It must be respected and protected. Our mayor and councillors must wake up to the ongoing loss of mature trees and rein in the destructive “developers”.

The following was published in Saskatoon StarPhoenix, 3 March 2011 as an Opinion Editorial

The Gathercole elms heritage loss

By Doug Mitchell, president of SOS Elms Coalition Inc.

In his op-ed, *City Hall secrecy still clouds debate on River Landing*, (SP, Feb. 25), Joe Kuchta raises concerns about the financial transparency surrounding the proposed high profile hotel and condo development. A related concern resulting from this project, noted in an article, (SP Jan. 24) and by recent letters to the editor, was the removal of nine stately mature American Elms last month. For some 80 years those trees, known as the Gathercole elms, had stood near the downtown end of the condemned Traffic Bridge, with the potential to live for another 200 years. A living heritage, they were sacrificed to make way for a development project of concrete and glass, whose longevity and esthetics can hardly compare with the destroyed elms.

SOS Elms Coalition is a non-profit organization dedicated to the care and appreciation of urban forests in the communities of Saskatchewan. We took part in the citizens’ unsuccessful campaign to save the Gathercole building and its trees. The building was torn down in 2004, but we continued to lobby City Council to preserve the Gathercole elms.

Those trees outlived the building, but their fate was sealed when Council decided to sell them and the land they occupied, known as “Parcel Y”. The City asked for proposals for a multi-million dollar project on that land, with no

stipulation to keep the elms as part of the project. The elms continued to stand tall and healthy while prospective developers failed to prove they had the money to get the City's approval to proceed with the project.

Last year, after being given numerous extensions, developers still had not raised the necessary capital. We thought the elms might yet have a chance to survive for posterity. We argued for a re-thinking of the whole project, to set aside and protect at least the stately row of six mature elms nearest to the Traffic Bridge. Councillor Clark moved to open the project for revision, but the Mayor and the other nine Councilors voted to "stick to the

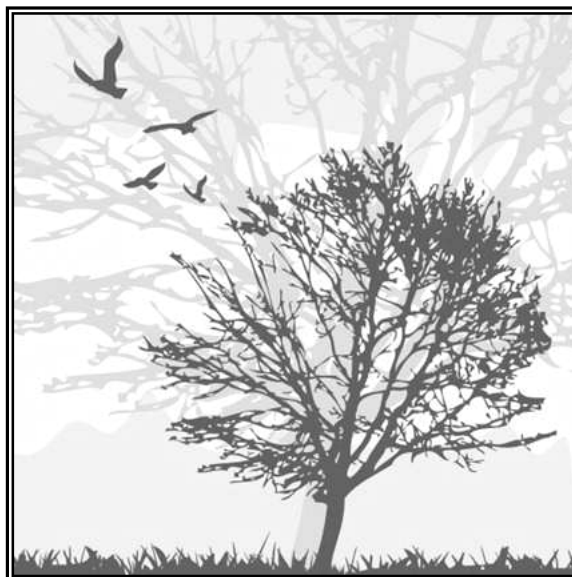
plan". A death knell for the elms sounded when a local corporation delivered the balance owing to the City for purchase of Parcel Y (SP, Dec. 3, 2010). For a total of \$5.24 million it purchased this property, which was appraised at \$11 million last year. Construction is *supposed* to begin this spring.

Loss of the Gathercole elms has strengthened the resolve of SOS Elms Coalition to focus on convincing the public, city administrators and City Council to establish an effective legal framework to protect Saskatoon's mature trees.

**SOS Elms Coalition Inc.
Board of Directors**

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This newsletter edited by Richard Kerbes and Kathy Meeres



SEASON'S GREETINGS

For membership information, please see our website www.soselms.org or contact us at P.O. Box 1313, Saskatoon, SK, S7K 3N9