

February 10, 2019

Dear Mr Nussbaum,

First, please accept my congratulations on your appointment as Chief Executive Officer of the National Capital Commission. We are very glad to see you in this vitally important position for greenspace in the National Capital region.

I am writing to you today to bring up a greenspace issue, perhaps the first that you will be called upon to deal with. It concerns the centenary elm on Parliament Hill, which, as was reported last week, is recommended for removal by Public Services and Procurement Canada as part of the Centre Block rehabilitation project. We fervently hope that a way can be found to preserve and protect it instead.

As far as we can tell, this majestic elm has stood next to the Centre Block ever since the current structure was erected in 1920. In the plan submitted to the NCC for review and approval, the PSPC states that this tree, along with many others, will need to be removed to facilitate the renovation project. I know that you are very familiar from your experience as a City Councillor with builders who insist that mature trees need to be removed rather than adjust their infill and renovation plans to take mature trees into account. I trust that you will exercise due diligence in the exercise of your capital realm planning authority to ensure that no alternatives are truly available to preserve and protect this tree rather than to remove it.

To buttress their argument that the centenary elm must be removed, PSPC also claims that the tree is in poor condition. This is based on an arborist's report from September 2018. The arborist quoted in the news article goes so far as to state that the tree is unlikely to survive another five years. We truly question this assessment.

We believe it is unconscionable to make a decision to destroy such a historic tree on the basis of a single observation, the opinion of a single consultant. Now that PSPC has made this information public, any other information held by the federal government on the health of this tree should also be made public. As the NCC has been responsible for the maintenance of trees on Parliament Hill for decades, it must have additional information on the health of the centenary elm. I would urge you to seek out and release any information the NCC holds on the health of this tree, whether gathered through its regular maintenance program or from any assessments that were commissioned during 2018 on the condition of this tree.

There are also many questions outstanding on the heritage and scientific value of this centenary elm. Whether through the NCC's past efforts or natural genetic resistance, this tree survived the Dutch elm disease that ravaged Ottawa's elm population 40 years ago. If this elm possesses disease tolerance, its genetic material can help to seed a new generation of native elms that are resistant to Dutch elm disease. These questions about the true health of the tree and its heritage and scientific value need to be answered prior to making a decision on the fate of this prominent heritage tree.

In the end, mature trees play a vital a role in combating climate change and every single one of them warrants our best efforts to protect and preserve them. I call on you to set a positive tone for your tenure as CEO of the NCC and to do the right thing by this tree.

Sincerely,

Paul Johanis
Chair, Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital