

To: Chair and members of the Procedure and House Affairs Committee, House of Commons
Speaker of the House of Commons
Speaker of the Senate
Director, Board of Internal Economy, House of Commons

Dear Parliamentarians and Speakers of the House of Commons and Senate

I am writing to you as Chair of the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital, and on behalf of Ecology Ottawa; Community Associations for Environmental Sustainability (CAFES); and the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club. We want to make you aware of an aspect of the rehabilitation of Centre Block that is emblematic of the climate crisis facing the City of Ottawa and all Canadians.

A stately elm tree currently shades a statue of Sir John A. MacDonald, just east of Centre Block. This 100-year old elm is in danger of being destroyed, along with 25 other mature trees, unless you, as the main tenants and users of the Parliamentary Precinct, take immediate action.

We are asking you to halt plans to remove the centenary elm tree that has heritage, genetic, social and climate change mitigation value. Public Services and Procurement Canada's (PSPC) planned removal of the centenary elm tree and greenery surrounding it is imminent. They want to destroy the elm tree before its sap rises in the coming weeks so they can build furniture or create sculptures from its wood. We strongly believe there is no need to destroy the tree anytime in the near future, and that sober second thought on your part can result in a better solution.

PSPC's current plans for an underground Visitor Welcome Centre (similar to the 4-storey underground visitor centre now operating at West Block) involve massive excavation just east of Centre Block where the elm tree enclave currently exists. As part of this plan, all greenery will be removed or relocated. The elm tree is too large to be relocated, so it is slated for destruction. If it is cut down, the only natural and the most prominent feature of the Hill's landscape will no longer exist.

Since early February, the Greenspace Alliance and other groups have been calling upon PSPC and the National Capital Commission to save the tree. In a meeting with the PSPC project manager, Jennifer Garrett, on Feb. 26, we learned that plans for the underground Visitor Welcome Centre east of Centre Block are in a very preliminary stage. This means that it's possible to press the pause button on those plans. We urge you to do just that.

Our reasons for advocating on behalf of this tree and the last enclave of greenery on Parliament Hill are threefold. 1) We are now facing a climate emergency, which we believe changes the terms of the trade-off between preserving and enhancing existing greenspace versus destroying it to make way for a new visitor centre. We are well aware that the plan calls for replanting and greening the area after construction is completed in a decade or more. But really, we only have this same decade to act on climate change. It will be too late by then. Renovations during a time of climate crisis need to work with nature, not against it. 2) On main streets across Canada, and in Ottawa's residential neighbourhoods and commercial thoroughfares, mature trees are being clear-cut. It's shocking to see that a 100-year-old tree dominating the vista on Parliament Hill is under the same kind of threat, and that it could be sacrificed to an infrastructure project. 3) The elm tree has heritage and genetic value. Since 1979, the NCC has protected this tree from Dutch Elm Disease as one of 2,000 elm trees identified then as in need of protection on federal lands. The Elm Recovery Project at the University of Guelph has listed the elm as a large tree whose genetic resources need to be determined and possibly harvested.

We believe our request to spare the elm tree this spring is a reasonable one that you are capable of responding to. Should you require me or my colleagues listed above to provide more background on this issue, we are available to do so.

Sincerely,

Paul Johanis, Chair, Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital
Website: www.greenspace-alliance.ca