



Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital
Alliance pour les espaces verts de la capitale du Canada

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Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club
Club des naturalistes d'Ottawa

PRESS RELEASE

Groups deplore Parliament Hill clear-cut

Many mature trees taken down while moratorium on elm in force

OTTAWA March 27, 2019 — Four environmental groups in Ottawa are calling the stripping of all vegetation and the cutting of many mature trees next to and around an historic elm tree on Parliament Hill under-handed and inexcusable.

Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) contractors were at the site with heavy machinery that razed the area just a day after Paul Johanis, chair of the Greenspace Alliance, learned that the Minister would respect a moratorium on cutting the 100-year old elm tree.

"By sparing the elm and a few other mature trees, they can perhaps claim that they are observing the letter of the moratorium requested by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs (PROC), but clearly, in our view, they are not respecting the spirit of it," said Johanis. "I find the actions to be under-handed and inexcusable."

The chair of the Greenspace Alliance says he does not believe the reasons given by PSPC for proceeding right now. "They claim that if the excavation for the planned underground visitor centre is to occur in 2020, then the removal of the trees on the site must occur right now, this week, while the House is not sitting and ahead of the meeting of PROC on April 2. We find that hard to believe, especially as we have been told there is no fixed end date for the project and no set budget either," said Johanis.

The House committee, which is overseeing the Centre Block rehabilitation project, originally planned an emergency meeting for March 21 to discuss the fate of the elm tree. That did not occur due to budget votes that day, so it rescheduled the meeting for April 2. As well, the Committee wrote to Minister Carla Qualtrough urging her to issue a moratorium on destruction of the elm tree until after the April 2 meeting. On Monday, PSPC agreed to the moratorium.

"Greenspace loss happens literally anywhere..."

Owen Clarkin, chair of the conservation committee of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club, said he is shocked that the small enclave of growing shrubs and trees is forever changed.

"It's amazing to me that this kind of greenspace loss happens literally anywhere, even on Parliament Hill," he said.

Clarkin is also concerned about the timing of this action. "This cutting occurred suddenly during a moratorium period and ahead of the April 2 PROC meeting. I understand that twigs of the mature elm were collected for the Elm Recovery Project, which can be interpreted as both good and potentially ominous news."

The Field-Naturalists' Club will "continue to press for fair consideration of all the factors that go into deciding the elm's fate."

April 2 meeting is crucial

"Regardless of what happened today, our position remains the same," said Johanis. "We will appear before the committee and we'll be asking MPs to look seriously at the trade-off between preserving and restoring greenspace on this part of the Hill and building the new underground visitor centre." This meeting has now been scheduled for April 2, from 11:00 A.M to 1:00 P.M., room 125-B, West Block.

Johanis says the devastation around the elm disrespects the organizations that are working to preserve greenspace on the Hill during a time of climate emergency. "And it's not respectful of the Canadian public, which has never in any way been consulted about these plans, about which there is not a shred of public information available. Has the Minister respected the Committee's wishes so far? We'll let the MPs who sit on the Committee decide that."

Since Feb. 28, more than 500 Canadians have signed an online petition asking Minister Qualtrough to preserve the elm tree until a tree assessment can be done later this spring and until there is clarity about the need for a massive underground visitor centre in this location as part of the Centre Block rehabilitation.

<https://www.change.org/p/carla-qualtrough-save-parliament-hill-s-heritage-elm-tree/u/24251759>

Ecology Ottawa wants elm tree celebrated

Robb Barnes of Ecology Ottawa said destruction of a large maple tree that stood beside the centenary elm is a big loss. "The maple helped define the profile of the area just east of Centre Block, and now it's gone."

"Hundreds of Canadians have stepped up in favour of saving the Parliament Hill elm tree. It's vitally important that Minister Qualtrough act now to prevent further destruction on the site." He called the elm tree an historic and cultural icon that demonstrates the value of trees in a world faced with climate crisis.

"We want to see the elm tree celebrated in its place of prominence, and as a carbon-sequestering example of green heritage on Parliament Hill," he said.

Expected better from our federal government

Angela Keller-Herzog, co-chair of CAFES (a network of community associations focused on environmental sustainability) said that plans for the underground visitor centre represents Phase 2 of a 13-year project.

The cutting of trees on March 26 was “a sacrifice that didn’t have to happen.”

In the city of Ottawa, it’s common for builders to apologize for “oops” moments that involve destroying or damaging mature trees during construction.

“It’s unacceptable for the federal government, in one of the most visible sites that it manages, to destroy a large number of trees at a time when all eyes are on this spot.”

In Ottawa, private sector builders would face fines or be forced to regreen an area cleared this way. “Nobody at a local level can hold these officials or the Minister accountable. We expect better from our federal government,” she said.

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