



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 demand moratorium on elm tree's demise

Feds need to rethink visitor centre design in light of climate crisis

OTTAWA March 05, 2019 — Four environmental groups in Ottawa are demanding that federal Ministers and MPs overseeing the Centre Block renovation on Parliament Hill grant a reprieve to a centenary elm tree slated for imminent destruction.

The Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital, Ecology Ottawa, Community Associations for Environmental Sustainability (CAFES), and the Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club have launched a campaign to convince federal MPs and three Ministers in federal departments, along with the Speakers of both the House of Commons and Senate, to rethink the design of an underground visitor centre that would denude Parliament Hill of 25 mature trees and destroy a prominent and heritage elm tree just east of Centre Block.

The Greenspace Alliance and others began fighting to save the elm tree in early February.

- The tree is at least 100 years old and likely planted after the 1916 inferno that destroyed Centre Block. Ironically, the current renovation project for Centre Block has now emerged as a dire threat to the elm's existence.
- The University of Guelph's Elm Recovery Project has listed the centenary elm tree in its registry of large elms and is willing to investigate its unique genetic qualities. Because it has survived Dutch Elm Disease, which decimated thousands of elm trees in the 1970s and 1980s, this tree is special.
- The National Capital Commission has been protecting the centenary elm from Dutch Elm Disease for the last 40 years under a program it launched to save

more than 2,000 elms on “prestige” properties. This elm is one of them. Why would the NCC abandon it now?

Cancel plans to cut the elm tree

“We understand that the project team in charge of the Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) rehabilitation project for Centre Block wants to cut the tree down before the sap begins to rise in March,” said Paul Johanis of the Greenspace Alliance.

“Why? So they can have dry wood to create wooden sculptures to honour the tree’s legacy. Let’s save the tree instead!”

Johanis revealed that a plan for an underground Visitor Welcome Centre just east of Centre Block is an existential threat to the elm and about 25 other mature trees. This small enclave of greenery is the only place where mature trees still grow on Parliament Hill.

“MPs have a carbon sink that they need to protect,” said Johanis.

During a Feb. 26 meeting with Jennifer Garrett, PSPC’s project director for the Centre Block, Johanis heard firsthand details of the Visitor Welcome Centre.

“Nobody would plan, for even a second, to destroy the iconic outline of that heritage building,” he said. “In our view, this includes the Centenary elm.”

“We are demanding a moratorium on destruction of this elm tree. We want the federal government to cancel any plans they might have to cut down it down in the coming months.”

Press “pause” on the bunker plans, too

For Robb Barnes, executive director of Ecology Ottawa, the elm and the triangle of greenspace east of Centre Block are as important to the Hill as its limestone buildings.

“We are committed to seeing the elm tree celebrated in its place of prominence, and as a carbon-sequestering example of green heritage on Parliament Hill,” he said.

“We question the need for a grandiose Visitor Centre to the east of Centre Block. And we are lobbying as hard as we can to convince politicians and Ministers to click the “PAUSE” button on plans for the visitor centre bunker.”

PSPC officials who met with Johanis on Feb. 26 confirmed that plans for the underground visitor centre, which will provide security screening for people wanting to tour Centre Block, are not costed out or fully developed.

“Based on what we know about this concept and where it’s at, we believe it’s possible to make a different plan,” said Barnes. “There seems to be an unnecessary

duplication of the Visitor Centre they built underground at West Block. Does the Hill really need to undergo another massive and expensive earth-moving project?"

Minister of Environment and Climate Change needs to step up

As an Ottawa-wide network of community associations focused on environmental sustainability, CAFES has joined the campaign to save the mature elm on Parliament Hill.

"All across the city, on our main streets and neighbourhoods, mature trees are being clear-cut for condo towers and destroyed by the infill building industry," said Angela Keller-Herzog, co-chair of CAFES. "It's hard to believe that a 100-year-old tree dominating the vista on Parliament Hill is under the same kind of threat as one growing in the Glebe, and that it could be sacrificed to an infrastructure project."

Calling the underground visitor centre "a ghost building," Keller-Herzog said that CAFES is urging federal politicians and officials to change their priorities. "They need to put the climate crisis ahead of the built environment."

Keller-Herzog lives in Ottawa Centre, the federal riding held by Catherine McKenna, Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, who is also responsible for Parks Canada. "I have a really strong desire to see Ms. McKenna step up, along with the Minister responsible for the NCC, to commemorate the elm tree and its neighbours as air cleaners that work for and add natural beauty to a national site."

Minister of Heritage has to be accountable

Speaking on behalf of the Greenspace Alliance, Paul Johanis said he is disappointed that the National Capital Commission ignored his request to share its information on the elm tree's health. Instead, the NCC told Johanis in a Feb. 21 letter that it supports PSPC's plan to destroy the tree so the visitor centre can proceed.

"We're now calling on the Minister Pablo Rodriguez to protect the elm as symbol of Canadian heritage. We also want him to direct the NCC to survey Canadians from across the country on whether they want an underground Visitor Centre as part of Centre Block's 13-year renovation or prefer to protect existing the trees for the next 13 years."

Owen Clarkin, the Chair of the Conservation Committee of the Ottawa Field Naturalists, said that the natural heritage locked up in the genes of the centenary elm are also important. "It has survived decades of onslaught by Dutch Elm Disease, and is now a seed source that could help with recovery of this emblematic species. The University of Guelph's Elm Recovery Project are the people to help make this happen."

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