



Standard of
Care

Eleven trees to be felled at the capitol

by Ron Seely, rseely@madison.com, March 16, 2006

In the last year, the 153 trees that shade the lawn of the state capitol had physicals. And not all of them passed.

Now, the Department of Administration is planning to cut down 11 trees that were determined to be too dangerously weakened or diseased to leave standing.

The trees destined for the saw include mostly Norway maples that were planted in the early 1900s at the direction of John Nolen, the famed landscape architect who designed many of the city's parks.

Also scheduled to be cut is a large bur oak on the lawn adjacent to Carroll Street. Four nearly dead trees that were deemed too unsafe to stand have already been removed.

Though it seems like a large number of trees, it is a small percentage of the total, said William Beckman, who oversees the capitol grounds for the Division of State Facilities.

Still, the loss will likely be noticeable because several of the maples are along the sidewalk on Main Street and are large enough to cast considerable shade for people strolling along during the Farmers' Market or enjoying Concerts on the Square.

The trees are being cut down because of concerns about safety, said Rob Kramer, with the Division of State Facilities Administration.

"We're making sure the Capitol Park is a safe place for all the people who come to

use it," Kramer said. "Two years ago we had a branch fall and crush a car at lunchtime. It narrowly missed one of our own employees."

The plan is based on a detailed analysis of the health of the trees conducted last summer by arborist R. Bruce Allison, owner of Allison Tree Care.

Allison used a number of cutting-edge techniques to examine each of the trees. He used instruments, for example, that allowed him to pass sound waves through the trees to measure their density and create computer-generated images of their interiors. Called the Fakopp Microsecond Timer and Picus Sonic Tomography, the techniques are analogous to CAT scans for humans, Allison said.

The use of such tests along with careful visual inspection provides more accurate information about the health of standing trees than has ever before been available, Allison said. In fact, he used the new instruments to examine one of the trees that was later removed and the information from the computer-generated images perfectly reflected what Allison found inside the diseased tree after it was cut down.

All of the trees Allison recommended removing suffered from a combination of maladies ranging from cracks and rot to deteriorating roots. In addition to removing the 11 dead and diseased trees, Allison suggested pruning more than a dozen others and erecting permanent signs

adjacent to them to warn passers-by of possible falling branches.

Beckman said the trees will be cut down in the next couple of weeks. He said the work will probably be done on a Saturday because the trees are near the street and some lanes will have to be closed.

The trees will be replaced. Beckman said the master plan for the capitol grounds calls for planting red maples along the outside edges of the Square where the diseased trees are being removed.

In replacing trees, Beckman said, planners pay close attention to the designs recommended in the early 1900s by Nolen. Nolen, Beckman added, envisioned rows of trees, called allees, lining approaches to the capitol.

Allison, too, said he paid close attention to history as he was doing his work. In researching the history of the trees on the Square, Allison said, he turned up a number of interesting tidbits, such as reports from a prominent Madison businessman about hunting prairie chicken in the woods of the Capitol Park in the mid-1800s.

And if you think of the rise on which the capitol now sits as always having been thick with trees, you're wrong. Ebenezer Brigham, one of the city's earliest European settlers, described the landscape as "an open prairie on which grew a few dwarf trees."