



Saving a Historic White Oak from Development: a progress report from Belleville

This account is abstracted from a case study being prepared by Tom Mikel for the Ontario Heritage Tree Alliance publication, *Heritage Tree Protection: A Toolkit for Communities*, forthcoming in Spring 2006. For more information contact tmikel79@hotmail.com

The City of Belleville has a large white oak (*Quercus alba* -- see photo, right) measuring 156.4 cm dbh on abandoned farmland on the east end of town. It fits the category of a Heritage Tree but was scheduled for removal to construct a new subdivision that developers were planning to build where the oak has stood for approximately 250 years.

The Bell Creek runs through the land supplying water drainage to the Bay of Quinte. The land has been vacant for many years and a number of the tree's seeds have generated offspring surrounding the parent tree. The area is regularly used as a nature recreation area for nearby residents. The residents have tried to protect the land for many years from development as it is a floodplain area and could be considered environmentally sensitive.

In an attempt to stop the senseless loss of this massive heritage tree and its offspring, and set an example of respect for our environment and natural spaces we wanted to convince the developers to change their drafting plans to include the tree into the subdivision plans. Belleville does not have a tree protection by-law but because the City had not yet signed off on this development, we were able to negotiate.

I contacted the Bell Creek Environmental Association, which put pressure on city council through meetings and media coverage. The story was in the newspaper, letters to the editors were written, news articles following the outcomes of the meetings with developers were published. The local radio station covered the news as well as reports from council meetings that entailed discussion of the tree's preservation.

With the support of concerned residents, the Ontario Heritage Tree Alliance (OHTA), the Municipal Arborist and Urban Forest (MAUF) group, and Tree Canada Foundation a plan was developed to take to the developers: the land preserved around the oak tree will be on city park property and the Parks Department will maintain the oak tree and all other trees on the grounds. The Bell Creek Environmental Association would like the whole area to be preserved as a conservation area, and stop development all together. A chain link fence is to be erected surrounding the border of the park property to ensure no heavy equipment, trenching, compaction, etc. will encroach the drip line and area. A plaque shall be erected in honour of the tree after work is complete. In late

November in a meeting between the Parks Department and the developers, the revised plan incorporating the tree and using a “greener” approach to the subdivision was received with interest by the developers.

Attention quickly dropped as Christmas holidays drew nearer. City council knew the plans were modified to preserve the tree and therefore just assumed the tree is saved and no further action is required. It has been difficult to have all parties agree with me about the actions required to preserve the tree during construction. It seems all parties want to work with me to save the tree but not to the extent of providing extra funding for special tools such as air spading, etc .

The developers were very co-operative about changing the development draft. I think they have received so much bad press on behalf of media coverage due to the Bell Creek Environmental Association that they were really looking for some ‘green coverage’ to boost their image within the community. There is still a lot of work to be done. The plans have not even been approved yet so there will be a lot more to discuss once construction begins.