



## ***Stumped in Montgomery***

### **County budget cuts leave almost 10,000 stumps as barriers to tree replacement**

By Agnes Blum

*Writer for Conservation Montgomery*

Peer down any stretch of road in Montgomery County -- whether it's the suburbs of Bethesda, the busy streets of downtown Silver Spring or bucolic country roads in the upper county -- and you're bound to find a tree stump.

And that is a problem, according to some Montgomery County environmentalists. Remaining stumps are not just eye-sores and reminders of a dwindling tree canopy; they are also impediments to planting new trees. Old stumps die hard, and without grinding them down, they will remain for years, taking up valuable real estate on often quite narrow stretches of land.

Almost 10,000 tree stumps dot the roadsides of Montgomery County, according to the Montgomery County Department of Transportation. In newer subdivisions, or on wide country roads, planting a tree next to an existing stump may be less problematic because there is enough room. But in older, denser parts of the county, competition for good land is fierce. Between sidewalks, roads and street signs, a remaining stump means a new tree won't get planted.

"You can't underestimate the problem," said Brett Linkletter, the county's Chief of Street Tree Maintenance. "The backlog is so big, we can't replant until the stumps are gone."

Stumps were not always the problem they are today. In the past, when a tree was cut down -- whether by Pepco or by the county -- the county would remove the stump. A contractor would come in and grind the stump, as well as any surface roots, haul away the wood chips, back fill the area with topsoil and then cover it with grass seed and straw. The whole process runs from a few hundred dollars to about \$1000 depending on the size of the stump. Since fiscal year 2009 the county has provided no money for stump removal.

"We still have plans to do that, we just don't have the funds," Linkletter said.

Today it would cost about \$4 million to remove all the stumps in the county's backlog.



Stump at the corner of Newport Avenue and Allan Road in Bethesda

Photo by Agnes Blum

But not grinding stumps is penny-wise and pound-foolish, local environmentalists say. According to a study done by the Environmental Protection Agency, every dollar invested in trees results in \$1.50-\$3.00 of benefits.

But instead of adding trees, the county is losing them. Out of about 200,000 trees on the rights-of-way, Linkletter said, 3,000 trees are cut down each year. And this year only 650 trees have been planted, resulting in a substantial net loss.

Without new trees, we risk destroying much more than just our canopy and our shade, said Arlene Bruhn, a longtime advocate for walkable shaded communities and founding board member of Conservation Montgomery.

“Trees are the workhorses of the environment. They keep us cool in the summer, they provide wind barriers in the winter, they clean the water, they provide privacy and buffer direct noise, they catch dirt in the air and trap pollution,” Bruhn said. Both Pepco and the county are taking down more trees than ever before, she said, but that’s where they stop doing the work. “Nobody wants to take responsibility for grinding the stumps.”

Some residents feel forced into taking action.

Judith Graef’s front yard was once graced by two enormous, old oaks. Once they were cut down, and she heard neither the county nor Pepco would grind them, she hired a contractor.

“The stumps were immense,” Graef wrote in an e-mail. “In order to re-plant shade trees which are badly needed, we had to pay for removal of these stumps. This was very costly and will cut into our budget for new trees. All of this is problematic given that we also have to pay for permits to plant and the county will have a say in what we plant.”

Conservation Montgomery Advisory Council member Mark Buscaino, who is executive director of Casey Trees, a nonprofit dedicated to restoring, enhancing and protecting the tree canopy of the nation's capital, agreed the onus should not be on citizens.

“If the county really believes trees are important -- they'll pitch in,” Buscaino said.

This November, Casey Trees will be working in Montgomery County for the first time, on a stretch of Seminary Road in Silver Spring. The D.C.-based non-profit will team up with Conservation Montgomery to plant young native trees. But even in that area they will have to contend with a stump. On the opposite side of the street from Armand’s Pizza is a dead tree that needs to be taken down. The Chief of Street Tree Maintenance has committed to removing the tree before the planting date, but the stump will remain, leaving a stump where a tree could otherwise be replanted.

Tree-lined streets are hard work, Buscaino said, because they need to be maintained and dying trees should be removed and replaced. It is not a one-shot deal but an ongoing process.

“Trees do not last forever,” Buscaino said.

In general, urban trees typically have shorter life-spans due to the harsh condition in an urban environment. To maintain tree canopy, new trees must be planted constantly, according to Casey Trees. And that means stumps must be removed constantly.

“There are social and psychological benefits to trees,” Buscaino said. “We’re starting to realize we need trees.”

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