

THE GLEN RIDGE SHADE TREE COMMISSION YEAR-END REPORT FOR 2020

Respectfully submitted to the Mayor and Council by:

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We Commissioners had expected 2020 to be a banner year – one in which we celebrated a decade of achievements, while forging ahead on ambitious goals for the immediate future. But, as with all aspects of life, the pandemic – aided by tropical storm Isaias – curtailed many of our aspirations. Perhaps the setback with the most far-reaching consequences was the shortcircuiting of our negotiations with the County for the crucial replanting of Ridgewood Avenue, from Bay to Watchung. We will argue later in this report that that replanting must be a priority goal, not only for the STC, but the mayor and council as well. Its implications are enormous.

This was, however, not a year without accomplishments. Two in particular bear highlighting before other aspects of the year are discussed.

Foremost was the completion of a browser-based inventory, comprehensively cataloguing the species, size, and condition of all our public trees, while at the same time mapping each with precise GPS tracking. Eventually, information as to when the tree was planted, inspected, treated, or pruned will be added to the database, thereby making tree oversight and management far more insightful and efficient. We invite you to explore this exciting technology at <https://pg-cloud.com/GlenRidgeBoroughNJ/>.

Another accomplishment occurred in the summer, when we saw our Glen arboretum project go from a paper proposal to a shovel-ready project. Funding was secured for the planting of 21 native trees in the Upper Glen. These trees will be planted under the auspices of Sam Zichelli as part of his ambitious Eagle Scout project. In addition, he plans to fundraise and build two little libraries along with establishing a wildflower garden. While we are doing this project in stages, we hope to have the fundamentals in place this spring. When finished, we intend to create an outdoor, interactive learning space, dedicated to the memory of Charles Roberts.

The Shade Tree Commission Year in Review

Management Cost

The total tree management cost for 2020 was \$20,224.31.

Removals (In Whole or in Part):

The total cost of contractor takedowns was \$52,980.

The STC was formed a decade ago to deal with a two-pronged tree crisis. From the time of the Nolan Report in 1905 to the 1940s, the original STC assiduously lined each residential street with trees. After mid-century, it became the practice to replace almost every dead tree with a maple, until maples constituted fully 62% of the town's public trees. By 2010, therefore, the borough was hemorrhaging trees due to both maple decline and the natural aging-out process. In other words, we were losing not only our oldest trees but our mid-aged maples as well. Sadly, despite all our planting efforts, the crisis has not abated. Despite having planted close to 1,200 trees since the 2011 inventory, there are only 228 additional trees today. Essentially, a third of the town's mature trees have been replaced with saplings, constituting a significant environmental cost.

In 2020 alone, the town lost a total of 84 trees. There were 57 contractor takedowns, 38 of which were maples. In addition, the DPW removed 27 smaller trees, almost all of which were mid-aged maples. Several of the latter involved costly overtime emergency calls for trees blocking roadways. Of course, much of our tree devastation was caused by the erratic winds of tropical storm Isais in early August. It toppled 11 large trees. But even worse was the welter of fallen branches. The cost of that storm alone was \$100,000.

Planting:

The total cost of planting was \$25,197.50.

As in 2019, budgetary constraints precluded our planting in fall. The fact that we planted in spring 2020, however, was due entirely to fortuitous timing. Before the drastic shutdown occurred mid March, we had already purchased 91 trees, at a cost of \$18,237.50, forcing an improvised planting. Again, it was the DPW that initially came through for us. Despite operating with skeleton crews, it planted the first 31 trees. The remainder were then planted by Hillcrest, at a cost of \$6,960. Despite these rather scrambled circumstances, the STC takes particular pride in this planting. In prior years, the fundamental goal had been to fill in the bare spots along our streets on an ad hoc basis. But last spring's planting focused on the future: spacing carefully chosen species with an eye to creating a uniform and ideal streetscape 40 to 60 years hence. And we paid particular attention to Ridgewood Avenue from Belleville to Linden. The next time you travel down this stretch of road, we encourage you to notice all the lovely new trees, and imagine how denuded the road would be without them.

Pruning:

The total cost for pruning was \$46,075.

Regular maintenance pruning is essential to the proper management of an urban forest. It substantially reduces risk and prolongs the lives of trees. But, because this is only the third year of our “zone” maintenance pruning program, we are still playing catchup. The section chosen for 2020 contained some of the borough’s oldest and most neglected trees. A total of 521 trees were systematically inspected and pruned. The success of this initiative is suggested by the fact that no tree in the pruned section was lost in Isaias and storm damage was otherwise minimal.

Proactive Treatments:

The total cost of treatments was \$1,747.93.

In 2020, we continued to treat our ash trees for emerald ash borer. Without treatment, these trees would die. So, obviously, this is a small sum to pay for the preservation of 25 large trees, especially when the potential cost of their removal is taken into account.

Community Outreach:

Our usual springtime community outreach activities were entirely curtailed this year due to the pandemic. However, our online “Tree Request Service” email form continues to be an important tool for communicating with residents about tree concerns.

Looking Forward:

We sincerely believe that the “tree” situation on the section of Ridgewood Avenue between Bay and Watchung poses not only an aesthetic threat to Glen Ridge, but an economic one as well. Unfortunately, the solution is not ours alone. It relies on the County.

In 1912, when the original STC planted this entire stretch of then an unpaved and undeveloped roadway with majestic pin oaks, the avowed goal was to make Ridgewood Avenue “one of the finest avenues in the state.” Unquestionably, that goal was accomplished. The tunnel of green those pin oaks became remains the town’s most iconic image. Indeed, how many of us at the south end have directed our out-of-town guests to get off the Parkway at Watchung rather than Belleville because of it?



One-hundred-and-eight years later, however, the gigantic remnants of that original allee merely obscure an unfolding catastrophe. A substantial number of these trees has already been removed and the rest are soon to follow. The picture above is several years old. Already, the absence of trees was evident, and at least 3 of the trees pictured are no longer standing. When the inevitable occurs, imagine the impact on the borough. It has been suggested that trees add as much as 20 percent to real-estate values. In this case, who would doubt it? Moreover, it can



be argued that the loss of these trees will not only decrease the property values on Ridgewood Avenue, but also those throughout the borough.

Consequently, this devastating loss of long-term value to the community must be balanced against the cost of replanting. We estimate the total cost of planting the 70 trees necessary to be \$25,000 (\$15,000 for the trees and \$10,000 for the planting). Considering that the County's budget for 2020 was \$769.9 million, this sum should be manageable, even given current constraints. But, during this budget-busting pandemic, perhaps the most expedient way to get the County to move more quickly would be to arrange for it to pay for the tree stock, and then assume the cost and burden of the planting ourselves. Clearly, the earliest this could be done is next fall, but the wheels should be set in motion now.

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In closing, we wish to thank the Mayor and Council for their ongoing support. But we also want to express our profound and heartfelt appreciation to Mike Zichelli. Never, during what can only be described as a horror-show inaugural year as town administrator, did he seem to put the STC on the back burner. His unflagging commitment to our goals and aspirations brings out the best in all of us. So here's to an even better year in 2021.

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