

Brighton-Pittsford Post – “From the Supervisor” column – June 9, 2016 issue
Submitted by Pittsford Town Supervisor Bill Smith

Impending loss of local icon has a silver lining

A dear old friend is very sick.

The stately European copper beech tree on State Street in the Village of Pittsford, for which we named Copper Beech Park, is dying.

Inspection in 2011 by a professional arborist and tree pathologist disclosed that the tree is infected by the fungus *Kretzschmaria deusta*. This is a soft-rot fungus that spreads throughout a tree, weakening it as the fungus progresses. As the tree decays internally it progressively loses the strength to support itself. Ultimately it collapses.

As you can imagine, because of the safety concern arising from a large tree that one day could collapse amidst heavy pedestrian and motor traffic, the Town has proceeded with great care, inspecting the tree closely.

To look inside a living tree, arborists employ a technique called stress-wave, or sonic, tomography. Think of it as an MRI for a tree and you have the idea. I’ve just received the most recent tomogram and the arborist’s report that accompanies it. Most areas in the trunk of the copper beech at its base are decayed, either slightly or extensively. Two outer areas, on opposite sides of the tree, appear intact and bear most of the tree’s weight. Our arborist advises that the copper beech has lost about 30% of the load-bearing capacity of a healthy tree.

Arborists we’ve consulted have no treatment for this particular disease. Since the initial diagnosis our Parks Department has treated the tree with an anti-fungal agent effective in managing another kind of fungus that affects trees similarly. It hasn’t worked. The crown of the tree remains healthy and so far has defied the extent of decay in the trunk and roots that comprise structural support for the tree. Yet in time the fungus will spread to the crown. The prognosis is terminal.

Last year a large section of the tree, weakened by the fungus, broke off. Based on the amount of decay in the tree and the extent of its spread since the previous inspection, our arborist recommends that “the tree should be removed by 2020.” We can’t responsibly ignore this advice. Out of concern for public safety, as we track progress of the disease it may become necessary or desirable to act well before then.

The age of the copper beech once was estimated at more than 200 years. Well into the twentieth century it stood in the front yard of a farm house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Roy Battams. When the old house was razed, the tree remained, contributing ever since a lovely and regal aspect to the area of our Four Corners. For many years its image appeared on Town signage. In a coincidence of timing, in the months and years ahead you will see the image of the copper beech reintroduced as the Town gradually needs to replace signs, trucks, letterhead and the like.

Anticipating the tree’s fate, our Parks Department has worked with a local nursery to cultivate cuttings from healthy branches of the copper beech. Called “scions,” these cuttings are grafted onto living rootstock. They are clones of the original tree. The scions of our venerable old copper beech are

swelling with buds and several have burst into leaf. Once the old tree goes, we'll plant one of them at Copper Beech Park, carrying on a happy tradition into the years to come.