



## Stand of Trees at Silver Spring Intersection Faces Uncertain Fate

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A stand of more than one hundred trees close to downtown Silver Spring was nearly razed by the Maryland State Highways Administration (SHA) this fall, with no replanting plan in place. After protests from the community, including Conservation Montgomery, SHA reduced the scope of the work and promised to replant in spring. However the work they went on to do hollowed out and opened up the stand and caused damage to existing trees. Meanwhile, the replanting plan is so far only a verbal promise, with no firm guarantee that it will take place.

The trees in question fill a large un-built wedge of land in the SHA right-of-way where the north- and south-bound lanes of 16<sup>th</sup> St split as 16<sup>th</sup> meets Georgia Avenue. They are the last of the patches of second-growth woods which as recently as a few years ago dotted Georgia Ave between Wheaton and central Silver Spring. Tree species include Locust, Tulip Poplar, Oak and Maple, all volunteers. There is also small wetland on the parcel.



Although this small woodland had been badly degraded by invasive vines, mostly English Ivy, as well as invasive brush, satellite views show that it nevertheless provided a large patch of unbroken tree canopy in summer. This was particularly valuable as the land abuts the Montgomery Hills Business District, which is almost entirely paved and has the lowest tree canopy in all of Montgomery County at only 8%, instead of the recommended 25%. The trees and thicket-like undergrowth also served as a visual, noise and pollution barrier for homes on either side of 16<sup>th</sup> St in the adjacent neighborhoods of Woodside and North Woodside. Fallen trees and snags, hard to find in the suburbs, provided homes for those wildlife species that depend on them.

In October, without any notice to the community, a tree contractor working for SHA started removing and chipping trees at the southern tip of the wedge of land. Concerned neighbors discovered that SHA's Fairland Shop was planning to clear the land completely due to complaints that it was an unsightly introduction to downtown Silver Spring and possibly also because of a small homeless camp hidden in the brush. There was no replanting plan. In fact the Forest Service of the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) had issued a work permit to SHA without requiring replanting as a condition, although they have the right to impose this requirement when they deem appropriate. There was also no notification to the three homeless men that their long-term camp was about to be disrupted.

Neighbors and Conservation Montgomery protested vigorously to SHA and neighbors also contacted state senator Richard Madaleno's Chief of Staff. (County officials could not help as the trees are on state land.) In response, Mr. Patel, Resident Maintenance Engineer of the SHA Fairland Shop, told the contractor to switch to taking only dead and fallen trees and brush. However the dead and fallen trees were numerous, and live trees had to be cut to get access to them. Other live trees were damaged in the course of the work. The result is shocking. Misshapen volunteer trees which before blended into the thicket now look ugly surrounded by open space. Large areas are unplanted. Land that was dry and shaded is now muddy. Habitat is gone. The ability of the land to act

as a visual, sound and pollution barrier functions is much reduced. There has been tree canopy loss but the extent will not be known until spring.

Adding insult to injury, many of the remaining trees now have gashes in their bark where the work-crew hacked at thick ivy vines. This well-intentioned effort to kill vines choking the trees has backfired, as the damage will increase the trees' susceptibility to disease and shorten their lifespan.

It remains a mystery why SHA's initial solution to complaints the woodland was unsightly was to raze it to the ground. This is especially so as SHA employees say that open ground also generates complaints from the public due to the visibility of trash. SHA's second solution, to remove dead and fallen trees without replanting, also did not address the problem of unsightliness but in fact made it worse. Also mysterious is the fact that the Forest Service of DNR, which is supposed to care for Maryland's urban and rural forests, issued a permit for partial or total clearing of the land without requiring replanting.

Fortunately after further dialogue with the community, Mr. Patel has given verbal assurances that he will work with SHA's Landscape Division in the spring of 2015 to replant the wedge with a mixture of major and minor native trees. Although neighbors are not convinced that the resulting mixture of misshapen volunteers and specimen trees will be a better "introduction" to Silver Spring than what we had before, it will certainly be better than what is there now. We hope that SHA will follow through on this oral commitment and we remain concerned about the health of the recently wounded trees.

Mr. Jeffrey Thames of Hope Restored has reached out to the homeless men and is trying to find them shelter, but with no luck as of the date of this writing.

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