

Grand Prix to plant more trees than it cuts

by Timothy B. Wheeler, *The Baltimore Sun*. Aug. 3, 2011

Baltimoreans — at least some of them — care passionately about their trees. One thousand of them signed onto an online petition by late Wednesday calling on City Hall to "halt the clear-cutting" of trees downtown so race fans could get a better view of the Baltimore Grand Prix. The petition drive's organizer said he planned to go to court to block any further tree removal for the three-day street race.

City officials and race organizers, meanwhile, scrambled to quell the anger by explaining that far fewer trees were being removed for spectator grandstands than previously reported, and that the Grand Prix had agreed to plant nearly four times as many trees as it was cutting down — increasing rather than whacking the downtown's meager tree canopy.

"I don't like taking down any trees, for sure," said William H. Cole IV, the City Council member who represents downtown, "but I will tell you that there's a net gain. ... I think at the end of the day it's going to look nicer."

The uproar began Monday when a Baltimore Sun photographer captured chain saws cutting down lush-looking mature trees on West Pratt Street by the federal courthouse. The race's assistant manager was quoted saying that 136 trees were to be taken out before the Grand Prix, which runs Sept. 2-4, and 139 would be planted afterward.

But city officials say that in fact fewer than half that many have been or will be removed. No more than 50 trees are being cut or transplanted along the race course on West Pratt and Light streets, according to Beth Strommen, director of the city's Office of Sustainability. That's less than half the number Grand Prix officials originally wanted, she said.

Neither Strommen nor Jay Davidson, general manager for the Grand Prix, could say why the higher figure was released Monday. But Strommen said that under terms of a deal she had negotiated over the past nine months, race organizers have pledged to plant 59 new trees along the race corridor, plus another 135 elsewhere around downtown.

The new numbers failed to mollify critics, who accused city and race officials of being less than forthcoming about the tree removal. And they said they questioned whether the tree cutting followed the city's forest conservation code, which requires a notice be posted five days in advance on each tree slated for removal.

"The law is there for a reason," said David Troy, a software entrepreneur who spearheaded the tree petition. "If there is a violation, Grand Prix and City Hall should be held accountable for that."

Davidson said all the trees removed to date had been pinpointed in a plan hammered out with city officials, which, though agreed to informally months ago, has yet to be officially accepted under a legally binding memorandum of understanding. The plan is being reviewed by city lawyers, according to Ryan O'Doherty, spokesman for Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

Strommen said the race's tree-removal contractor did not post notices in advance, and citations would be issued. Davidson said the contractor "jumped the gun" Monday. He apologized and pledged to do better: "Obviously we want to make sure going forward we're following the mandate of the code and tree plan."

It's not clear how many more trees are to come down — Cole said he thought only a handful near the Convention Center remained.

Beyond the formalities of the city's tree code, critics complained that new trees would not provide the shade or other benefits of the mature trees felled, and they questioned how this fits with the city's TreeBaltimore initiative, which calls for doubling the amount of urban land shaded by trees from 20 percent to 40 percent by 2037.

But city officials said the trees to be planted by the Grand Prix over the next year would triple the leafy coverage of downtown.

Strommen said the city agreed to allow the removal of some trees that would block views of the street action from temporary grandstands to be erected along the race course. But she said the city exacted a price in additional trees to be planted elsewhere.

"They had their needs to sell tickets," she said. "We had our needs to preserve the beauty of downtown and make Pratt Street continue to be a main street in a great downtown area."

Strommen acknowledged that some of the trees cut bordering the federal courthouse were "big and healthy," as critics have complained. But she said others, particularly those near the convention center, were in decline because they did not have adequate space to grow and their roots were constantly trampled by pedestrians.

Most of the trees removed were targeted for replacement long before the Grand Prix came along, said Steve Kelly, an associate principal with the landscape architecture firm Mahan Rykiel, which prepared the race's tree plan. The Downtown Partnership, a business group, had gotten city approval to remove earthen berms along Pratt Street, he said, replacing the trees in the process.

The race will be planting red maples and sycamores around downtown, plus smaller groups of crape myrtles and flowering Sargent cherries, Kelly said. Most of the trees will be larger than saplings, standing 18 to 20 feet high, he said, and organizers have pledged to water and maintain the trees for the duration of the race, which the city has agreed to sponsor for up to five years. Fourteen trees are in oversize concrete planters to be placed

by the federal courthouse, he said, where they are to complement the building's security while also being movable for the races.

Davidson estimated that the Grand Prix would spend around \$100,000 on tree plantings and relocations. Though no funds were specifically set aside to guarantee the work, Davidson pointed out the race had already posted a \$750,000 performance bond with the city to back up expenses it had pledged to cover.

Cheryl Casciani, chair of the city's Sustainability Commission, said the panel took no position on the race-related tree removal after the city's sustainability director explained it would increase rather than reduce the city's forest canopy.

Still, Casciani said, she was not surprised by the outcry, because few details of the tree removal and replacement had been publicly shared until now.

"Not having anybody say anything to the public about that, I'm just stunned," said Casciani, who works for the Baltimore Community Foundation. "I'm not surprised by the uproar. ... Trees do get people freaked."

Others, though, saw political considerations in the tree tempest. Troy, 39, said he supports one of Rawlings-Blake's challengers in the mayoral primary election, former city planning director Otis Rolley. But he said he's not part of Rolley's campaign, and he pointed out that he has a family reason to care about trees — his wife's father is an arborist, he said.

The furor comes as the Maryland League of Conservation Voters released its endorsements Wednesday in city elections. Among those the environmental group backed was Rawlings-Blake.