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Comment on Park Avenue Trees

Editor,

Thanks to Stephanie Lamore for her excellent Local Commentary “The City’s Urban Forest Needs You!” about the challenges of preserving mature trees on private land. While the City has limited jurisdiction over private tree loss, it can control what happens to trees during public projects.

Unfortunately, the \$11 million “Great Streets” project the City’s contractor has planned for the downtown blocks of Park Avenue promises to be a prolific tree killer. The current “60 percent design” for the project—which was only recently made public, after the City submitted it to VDOT for approval—predicts construction harm to dozens of trees. The plan says 21 trees will be “moderately impacted” (Category B), 15 trees will “require further protective measures” to survive (Category C), and four will be removed outright (Category X).

The threatened trees are mature and important. In Category C (further protective measures needed”) alone, there are a dozen maples and oaks with diameters at breast height (DBH) of 34, 30, 27, 28, 24, 36, 28, 26, 21, 34, 39, and 28 inches. (The data is from the City’s own “Treekeeper” database.) A DBH over 20 inches indicates a large tree that is decades old; a tree over 30 inches DBH is exceptional.

A mature tree provides social and environmental benefits far greater than small trees, especially the replacement trees that the 60 percent design envisions for Park Avenue: 2-inch caliper saplings in engineered planter beds. According to the Treekeeper database, the environmental value of the threatened Park Avenue trees is—annually—tens of thousands of dollars, taking into account shade and property benefits, stormwater benefits, carbon emissions avoided, and carbon captured.

Park Avenue needs better sidewalks with fewer obstructions. But with proper planning, the sidewalks can be improved without sacrificing the mature tree that give shade, character, and beauty to this important part of our City. The 60 percent design plans were submitted to VDOT without opportunity for public review and comment and without even City Council’s knowledge. The Council should direct the City staff to retract the 60 percent plan submission and start an adequate public review and revision process to save the trees.

Charlie Lord and Erin Flynn