

Embellishing Embassy Row

Concerned neighbors work with the diplomatic corps to restore Massachusetts Avenue to its glory days

BY ANN GERACIMOS



Left: The Embassy of Finland added to Massachusetts Avenue's historic row of linden trees with a planting and reception for Restore Mass Ave in June 2008. Participants included (left to right): Steve Callcott, D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board; Roger Cortesi, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Restore Massachusetts Avenue President Deborah Shapley; Jack Werner, D.C. Department of Environment; Finnish Amb. Pekka Lintu. (Photo courtesy of Restore Mass Ave)

Trees and greenery are both a political and an emotional issue in Washington — and for good reason.

"Washington is one of a few cities that has committed to expanding the acreage of tree canopy," says Deborah Shapley, founder and president of the small nonprofit group, Restore Mass Ave (RMA), dedicated to furthering best practices in the field. She calls District officials "very pro-tree," in large part because "we have a D.C. Urban Forestry Administration within our Department of Transportation. They have recommendations about what grows well and are extremely professional."

The problem is getting city trees to survive and grow well. Arborists, she notes, agree it is the first three years that are crucial. "Once they are growing, they don't need as much care."

RMA's goals are to raise awareness about the importance of protecting trees and greenery along one of Washington's most imposing thoroughfares, as well as act as a model for

other groups interested in doing similar work elsewhere.

RMA doesn't plant trees — the group doesn't have the money for that — but its members do offer advice and, to some extent, help maintain trees. To date, they have arranged for more than 160 plantings, including 80 from the city and 80 from the nonprofit Casey Trees (whose \$50 million endowment set up by philanthropist Betty Casey is meant to beautify the nation's capital).

Ms. Shapley had observed how the city "would pull up one [tree] and put down another" but not bother much with follow-up care. "For many years I had been walking up and down Massachusetts Avenue watching trees along the sidewalk die. Many other species were suffering from different problems, and there was a lot of cutting due to the renovation of buildings. There was no way I could personally remind property owners up and down the avenue to get out their hoses."

She discovered that many property owners along the route — including their household staffs — didn't even know they were allowed to water the trees. Since many of the trees involved are out of the reach of hoses, RMA felt it had to hire a commercial service to do the job during the high summer heat in 2007. Another issue is dealing with pruning and educating people about when and how this is best done.

"The concept we are putting forward is 'you cannot understand architecture without the landscape,'" Shapley says. "One analogy is if you go to Mount Vernon and only see a house. You need also to see a driveway and the land around it."

She began the organization in 2006 by stirring up the residents near her apartment on a fabled stretch of land that runs from Sheridan Circle to the U.S. Naval Observatory. Known as Embassy Row, it is home to many diplomatic missions whose tenants may be unaware that, while they are technically "extra-territorial,"



Inange Mbikusita-Lewanika, ambassador of Zambia, thanks more than 100 volunteers from Casey Trees and RMA after they planted 15 trees around the embassy at 229 Massachusetts Ave. NW in April 2008. The embassy of Slovenia and Bulgaria and the park at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and S Street NW are carefully chosen new sites that do not exist. (Photo courtesy of Restore Mass Ave.)

The large tree seen from the 2500 block of Massachusetts Avenue NW was one of the original American lindens that lined the avenue's lawns for four miles across the city. They made a shady alley with lindens aligned next to the curb. In the foreground is a new linden tree Restore Mass Ave added to fill in the row in May 2007 in front of the home of the late S. Dillon Ripley, at 2324 Massachusetts Ave. NW. To date, Restore Mass Ave has arranged about 50 of these "second row" trees - lindens, oaks, or elms - where the original trees are gone. (Photo courtesy of Restore Mass Ave.)



Volunteers from Casey Trees and RMA plant a new oak tree that will one day shade the sidewalk in the 2000 block of Massachusetts Avenue NW, where hundreds of people board the shuttle to Georgetown University every day. (Photo courtesy of Restore Mass Ave.)

i.e., foreign property, they are responsible under city law for maintaining their trees.

A main accomplishment of the group, starting in 2007, was establishing that the District's tree laws applied to these missions. "D.C. law declares that trees within its boundaries are a vital resource and classifies that [responsibility] as something important to the operation of the city," she says.

"A big thing that I think now is widely understood is for delegations not to take down any trees larger than 55 inches in diameter."

Such concern - and action - is necessary, she notes, since the federal Historic Landmark and Historic Preservation Act of 1978 governs buildings not landscapes.

"People who own buildings can be made to appreciate the potential of a single unified landscape [along the route]. And they naturally have an interest in caring for trees near them since they are the ones they see every day."

Maintenance is not the only important thing; so is an understanding of how so-called monoculture - planting a single species - can be fatal. Take into account, for example, the fate of the original Dutch Elm that fell prey to an apparently unstoppable blight.

The initial idea was to find people in the neighborhood interested in the trees near them - "people with fire in their eyes. It could be a gardener, an ambassador, or homeowner."

The first check rolled in from Kindy French, a concerned citizen in the community. "Her check for \$10,000 showed up in an envelope and I didn't even have a bank account yet," Shapley recalls. To date, the group has an email distribution list of 590. An April reception held at the temporary Massachusetts Avenue residence of the ambassador of Cyprus drew 70 supporters. A grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation will allow RMA to produce a brochure "to promote historic landscape and show this avenue was planted originally as one large civic space like the jewels on a necklace." **WL**