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photo by Bob Zybach

The remaining standing portion of the broken bigleaf maple at 601 2nd Street. Homeowner Mike Arnold believes the tree was planted in 1902, when his home was built, making it more than 110 years old. Note the well-established rot that extends through nearly 90 percent of its trunk; also the previous unsuccessful attempts to treat the diseased tree with sealer or tar.



OPINION

Cottage Grove needs a plan for its trees

BY BOB ZYBACH
For the Sentinel

I was sitting at my desk a week ago last Saturday, corresponding via email and listening to the first heavy rains of the year, when a tremendous boom sounded over my head – sounding just like a nearby thunderclap – and my computer, lights and heat immediately went off and then back on again.

After restarting my computer and resuming my typing, I waited for additional sounds of thunder. When there were none, I figured a large tree must have fallen nearby. A walk to the neighborhood store a short while later revealed that a tree had indeed fallen, but it was three blocks from my home – much further away than it had sounded.

I returned home and got my camera to take pictures, but the police had blocked off access by that time because of the live electrical lines that were lying on the ground. The fallen tree had narrowly missed a nearby house and the power was off all

over the neighborhood. A picture of the fallen tree – one-half of a century-old bigleaf maple – was shown on Page 9 in last week's Sentinel.

The reason I am writing this now is because last year, just about this time, I wrote a front-page article for the Sentinel, warning about the potential danger of all the giant conifers and dead and dying older street trees that are scattered throughout Cottage Grove.

The maple split in two because it was rotten through almost 90 percent of its trunk and because of the early seasonal timing of the rains, which took place while the tree was still fully leaved out. The weight of the rain on the leaves had been too much for the tree to bear, and it broke apart under the added weight.

Trees are a danger

My article last year was on the 50th anniversary of the Columbus Day Storm, which I recall very well and which re-

sulted in a number of deaths and hundreds of millions of dollars damage from northern California through western Oregon and into southwest Washington.

Cottage Grove is fairly well protected from windstorms of that magnitude because of all of the nearby hills, but significant damage occurred from falling trees in town, and several people were killed in Eugene from that event, and dozens more to the north.

The broken maple is just a warning salvo for the winter storms that will come through town this winter. When they do, more lives will be threatened, more property will be damaged, more streets will be blocked, and there will be more power outages to local homes and businesses.

Last Thursday, I went back to the site of the fallen tree to interview the affected neighbors: Kelly Burton, whose home was hit by the tree, and Mike Arnold, the tree's owner.

The main limbs of the tree narrowly missed Burton's house and her bedroom, where she was

at the time it fell. However, she said she was unconcerned with the damage because the house "was insured," and she remained unafraid of falling trees. As we talked a repairman was restoring the power on the tree-side of the house, which had been out for five days.

When I talked with Mike Arnold, he said the tree had gone down "with a loud boom" and he had watched a live wire in the neighbor's yard catty-corner from his own "shoot out flames 15 to 20 feet in the air" for "20 or 25 seconds." The power company arrived sometime before midnight and cut the power to the live wires. His power had been restored by 9 the next morning, a little over 12 hours after it had gone out.

Trees are an opportunity

A few days later I talked with

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TREES

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the neighbors where the livewire had landed, and they confirmed Arnold's story, saying they had been so frightened by the flames they had dialed 911 but got no response. Mike said he was going to have the rest of the tree cut down, but it would cost him about \$1800, which he had been told was "a good price."

The sidewalk around the fallen tree is seriously cracked and damaged by its roots, a common problem with most of the trees in Cottage Grove that have "outgrown their function." That is how professionals say a tree has become too large and too old to further serve the purpose for which it was planted. Typically, it is recommended that such trees be removed and replaced with smaller trees or other vegetation.

When I discussed the needed sidewalk repair with Arnold and how the City code had been recently rewritten to make adjacent landowners responsible for both sidewalk repair and liable for any claims for injury or other damages the broken walks might cause, he said he already knew that because "someone had already tried to sue" him several years ago.

Old trees are both a risk and an opportunity. This one tree, for example, has resulted in work for power company repairmen, woodcutters, insurance adjusters, tree surgeons and lawyers – and should probably also involve a sidewalk repairman and a nursery for replacement stock. There are hundreds of such trees and sidewalks all over Cottage Grove, and there are thousands of younger trees, too, needing pruning, irrigation, treatment for bugs and disease and regular seasonal maintenance.

We need a plan

Last December I presented a Powerpoint version of my Columbus Day article to the Cottage Grove Urban Forestry Committee, which had been formed in 1994 to produce a tree inventory and management plan for the City. Both are still needed. Here is my presentation, including a specific list of recommendations:

http://www.nwmapsco.com/ZybachB/Presentations/2010-2013/20121210_UFC/index.html

My recommendations focused heavily on the educational, business and employment opportunities the trees of Cottage Grove provide our older students, young families and other residents of this City – beginning with the need to inventory



photo by Bob Zybach

Broken top of the maple that narrowly missed this house on 205 Quincy Street. Note the rot extending into a large branch of the tree that had been cut away to remove the fallen trunk from the street.

our trees and produce a viable management plan for them.

Technical equipment has improved greatly since 1994, and the use of digital cameras, GPS receivers and GIS mapping provide marketable job skills that do not require advanced degrees — the types of transferable skills that can be readily taught to most high school and community college students and instructors.

The same holds true for Internet communications since 1994. A viable community plan can now be shaped and records distributed via email and dedicated websites capable of sharing documents, photographs, videos and other aids to discussion and decision-making. These capabilities, too, can be taught and used as employment skills.

In sum, we have a serious injury and property damage risk and financial problem facing Cottage Grove – and many other western Oregon Cities and towns – and something needs to be done about it. That "something" provides all kinds of educational, business and employment opportunities for our City's young adults and existing businesses. We need to take advantage of those opportunities in order to make our community a safer, more productive and more beautiful place to live.

Dr. Zybach has a PhD in Environmental Sciences from Oregon State University and has been Program Manager for the 501 c(3) non-profit educational website, www.ORWW.org, since 1996.