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Bristol selectboard eyeing trees; wants to balance safe sidewalks with tree health & beauty

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By Gaen Murphree





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BRISTOL TREE WARDEN David Brynn, above, stands alongside a tree near the corner of Church and Maple streets that has “exceeded the capacity of the site.” The tree’s roots are buckling the sidewalk, branches have been trimmed to make room for power lines and the tree is showing signs of stress. Below left, the roots of this maple tree are now starting to bust up the sidewalk. Like many urban trees, this maple is growing in the green strip between the road and the sidewalk. Below right, the groove in this tree’s trunk shows a weak spot that also indicates that the tree is not in optimal health. Independent photos/Trent Campbell

BRISTOL — The Bristol selectboard is trying to figure out what to do about those trees between the street and the sidewalk in the village that are busting up sidewalks.

Cutting back the roots so the sidewalk can be repaired could end up killing the tree; removing the tree takes out an important Bristol asset.

“Sidewalk trees are a big part of the beauty of Bristol village, as is its walkability” said Bristol selectboard Chair Peter Coffey. “Trees are important. Safe sidewalks are important.”

The board opened a discussion on the issue at its Sept. 25 meeting. Coffey said the selectboard feels it’s important to collect as much information as possible before making a decision, the process would likely take months, and the board would seek public input, including a possible public hearing.

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ectboard asked Bristol Tree Warden David Brynn, executive director of Vermont Family Forests and a former county and state forester, to talk to the selectboard about Bristol's sidewalk trees, options for trees affecting sidewalks, the trees' overall health, and how best to maintain them.

"It's tough to be a shade tree," Brynn told the *Independent*. He observed that the average lifespan of an urban shade tree is just six years.



Unlike trees situated in a forest ecosystem, urban trees — especially those growing in the narrow strip between road and sidewalk — must usually contend with less-than-ideal growing conditions, such as compaction to roots, salt from treated roadways, having limbs cut to make way for power lines, weed whackers, air pollution and insufficient water.

"A tree can't relocate. It has to stand there and take it," said Brynn.

He pointed out, for example, that once construction of water and stormwater infrastructure on West Street concludes and the street and sidewalks are repaired and put back to normal, people will quickly forget the heavy equipment, months of digging and construction work, and disruption. Not so the West Street trees.

"The trees are not going to forget it," said Brynn, explaining the many ways construction could negatively affect the trees' continued growth.

In the case of a tree whose roots are busting up the sidewalk, Brynn said that such a tree has "exceeded the capacity of the site." He pointed out such a tree near the intersection of Church and Maple streets

and showed how to his forester's eye the tree was also exhibiting signs of "starting to fail."

Brynn, like Coffey, emphasized the importance of Bristol's trees and its easy walkability to the town's overall beauty and livability. And like Coffey, he emphasized that deciding what to do would require thoughtful discussion and deliberation and much public engagement.

Brynn said the virtue to employ in considering Bristol's sidewalk trees is "prudence." Each tree's situation, he said, is site specific, and has to do with its size, age, species, proximity to the road and power lines, its overall growing area and the needs of nearby human neighbors.

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Bristol apply to the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation for a grant to fund an inventory of the town's sidewalk trees, a step the selectboard will begin investigating once new town administrator Valerie Capels comes on board. Along with considering what to do about those few individual trees that are breaking sidewalks, Brynn also suggests that Bristol use the inventory to consider how to better plant for the future and how to best maintain its trees now growing. On the Bristol town green, for example, he points out two maple trees: one, well maintained and healthy, the other less well maintained and showing signs of stress. How can the town best conserve and protect this valuable resource?

"To have a beautiful urban forest over time requires planning, careful maintenance, careful site selection and careful species selection. It's much like managing any other natural resource," said Brynn.

"Trees provide shade and comfort and beauty. And they remind us of the legacy of a place. They are members of the community. One of the reasons Bristol is as beautiful as it is because of its shade trees."



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