

Saving the Sycamore

Bethel residents rally to preserve a 900-year-old tree

BETHEL—It was already ancient when the pilgrims first tasted the Indians' maize. The stately sycamore on Greenwood Avenue in Bethel is an estimated 900 years old. In recent months the 120-foot tall tree has stirred more controversy than during all of the previous years of its long existence. A state plan to widen the intersection at Route 53 and Greenwood Avenue (Route 302) could cause the tree's demise, according to the town's tree warden, Bernard Wright. To stop that from happening, local citizens have held vigils, signed petitions and tied yellow ribbons around its 22-foot base. At least nobody's trying to poison it.

"That tree has been here 800 years longer than cars; it should have priority," said Irene Adams, a waitress at the adjacent Sycamore Restaurant, an old-fashioned drive-in, which 40 years ago was named after the tree. "The tree only has a little patch of green around it now," said Richard Melvin, owner of the Sycamore. "The roots aren't getting enough nourishment as it is," he added.

Although no one is planning to take a chain saw to it, experts and non-experts worry that excavation around or under the 140-foot spread of the sycamore would interfere with its root system, eventually causing it to die. Tree warden



Still providing shade after 900 years, the Bethel sycamore. (Lydia Douglas photo)

Wright started fighting to save the sycamore in early May and was soon joined by the David Glahn family, who rallied to the cause with a petition. An estimated 3,000 signatures have been collected and 1,400 have already been notarized. In addition to Bethel residents, signatures have been collected from residents of surrounding towns and even some from as far away as Waterbury and Prospect.

"When my father started circulating the petition on Father's Day he hoped to get 25 signatures,"

said Susan Glahn, who is still collecting signatures at the Food Bag on Greenwood Avenue, where she works.

Local opposition coupled with letters from state representatives have caused the Department of Transportation to send its original plans for road improvement at the site back to the drawing board. "We realize the importance of the tree and have a lot of concern for it," said Bradley Smith, DOT engineer of design. "By maintaining the curb line at its present location we may be able to make some changes which will not interfere with the tree's root system."

How much the road plan can be modified depends on the volume of traffic, Smith explained. Anticipation of a heavy increase in traffic from the newly constructed Francis J. Clarke Industrial Park led to the plans for an expanded five-lane intersection at the site. New traffic counts are in progress and there is reason to believe that earlier estimates were too high, said Smith. In the meantime, the road improvement project is on hold.

In about a month the DOT will present a new plan to town officials. So far, town officials have remained mum. "The town will not take any action on the issue until the final design has been submitted," said a town spokeswoman, Sharon Wat-

son. While legally the DOT has the final word on the matter, Smith says, he anticipates no problems. "We are doing everything in our power to revise the design so that it will not interfere with the tree or its roots."

As for the sycamore, it stands as it has for more than eight centuries, silently shedding the olive green bark from its broad branches, leaving its vulnerable cream color inner bark exposed to a changing world that no longer automatically cedes it the right to exist.

Susan Elan

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