

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Planting of new Colman Park begins this Saturday

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In 60 years or so, the upper forest of Colman Park should come out ahead, with a thick canopy of hemlocks, an understory of maples and a floor of verdant sword ferns, free of choking ivy and holly.

But someone has to plant those trees. After a federal judge's gardener chopped down more than 100 park trees to improve the view of Lake Washington in the summer of 2002, the upper slope of the Mount Baker park resembled a stubbly, clear-cut victim.

Saturday, a group of Cleveland High School volunteers will plant 100 trees in the area, the first planting of a massive restoration and improvement project paid for by the judge himself.

In August, city workers discovered a three-quarter-acre swath of chopped trees, including 120 mature bigleaf maples and indigenous cherry trees, some of them more than 40 years old and up to 55 feet tall. The area was behind the house of Jerome Farris, a 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals senior judge who retired from full-time duties in 1995.



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Karen Ducey / P-I

Jillian Archer, gardener for Seattle Parks and Recreation, posts stakes where trees and shrubs will be planted in upper Colman Park.

Farris said it was a misunderstanding. But many people were outraged, and the city of Seattle slapped him with a \$500,000 fine. He has paid \$200,000 so far and owes the rest by February of 2004.

For many people, the judge's actions have been a blessing in disguise. The new forest is expected to look better and be healthier than the spindly, weed-choked one the gardener cut down. The entire 24-acre park will benefit from a plan to rip out invasive plants, such as English ivy and Himalayan blackberry.

The neighborhood will get a youth employment program. And the money will pay for weeding, pruning and watering during the next five years.

"It'll be great," said Mark Mead, the city's senior urban forester. "It will be close to a semi-native habitat for this site."

But it's been a long haul. After Farris' gardener and his crew cut the trees, they left the logs scattered haphazardly and dangerously on the steep slope.

"It looked just like pick-up sticks," Mead said. He brought in a machine called a "spider" to pick up and stack the logs. Workers mulched branches and hacked a trail into the previously inaccessible site. Kids with a summer-work program built terraces, and the city hired someone to plot a map of future flora.

When Farris' gardener chopped the trees (making sure to leave two madrona trees as "accents"), it highlighted the frustration felt by homeowners whose expensive views are blocked by public trees. In the past, the parks department let people top trees on public property to improve those views. That practice was banned in the mid-1990s, and by 2001, the department had banned the removal of any tree to enhance a private view.

"A lot of people were really upset because they felt they had view restrictions, but they wouldn't ever take action like that. Other people were totally sympathetic with (Farris)," said Greg Morris, a Mount Baker resident and former co-chairman of Friends of Colman Park.

Morris, who has spent years planting conifers in the park and digging out invasive plants, said he likes the city's plan to diversify the vegetation.

"I would be cautious to make sure there's follow-up maintenance, because you can't just stick trees in the ground and expect them to grow," he said.

Mead said he spends much of his time listening to people complain about their views, and he's seen many trees topped by people who took matters into their own hands.

But he said the actions by Farris' gardener were the worst he had ever seen, and that the aftermath sends a message to would-be tree violators: The city doesn't tolerate them.

TO LEARN MORE

A public meeting for people concerned about private views and public trees has been scheduled for 7 p.m. Feb. 11 at the Mount Baker Club, 2811 Mount Rainier Ave. S.

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