Minutes of the Norwich Conservation Commission (NCC) – Special Meeting
Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) Updates, Potential Actions, Next Steps
Norwich Historical Society, 277 Main St, Norwich, VT
6/4/2024, 7:00 pm

NCC members present: Lynnwood Andrews, Chris Rimmer, Lindsay Putnam, Craig Layne, Alex Gottlieb, Michael Loots (a quorum)
Others present: Matt Hall (Norwich Tree Warden), Doug Hardy
Attending via Zoom: Adam McCullough (Urban Forester with Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program), and concerned Norwich residents Robert Kewer, George Clark, Judy, Jon, Jonathan Frishtick, and Andrew Samwick (who has 15.5 acres and wishes to manage his property responsibly)

Chris gave a brief overview. The NCC website has good info on EAB, which is now established in Norwich and was first documented in January at an undisclosed residence on Elm Street

- the Town Manager and Selectboard (SB) know about it and are aware that we need to address it.
- adult beetles have begun to emerge and will continue to do so into September, infesting new trees. Many more trees are likely to be infested in the months ahead, yet currently, Norwich has no formal plan for action. All acknowledge the urgent need for such a plan.
- dealing with EAB will entail a big financial burden, but community input is sought.
- none of us on NCC are EAB experts. We have good tools at our disposal, but we will need help from the Norwich community.

Doug Hardy reported that he is learning a great deal about EAB, and soliciting information from other communities as to how they planned for and are now managing EAB.
Three basic options for dealing with EAB:

1. preemptive removal -- once ash are infested and begin dying, they become quite brittle, and breakage can occur unpredictably, making removal more expensive and dangerous. Municipality, utilities, and individual landowners would be responsible parties for this action
2. injections – chemical inoculation into a healthy tree's stem is a proven method to stave off EAB infestation. It must be done every 2-3 years for at least as long as a local infestation persists, and treatment is expensive (~$20/inch of DBH).
3. Inaction -- trees can be left to die, and this option makes the most sense in areas where infested trees do not pose a public safety hazard. Mortality of ash regionwide is expected to be extremely high (>99%). This option does entails risks.

Both aesthetics and safety are primary concerns.

NCC coordinated a roadside ash survey in 2018-19, primarily in the Right of Way of several main town roads. Results indicated a relatively high density in Norwich of ~135 rrees per mile—-other towns have recorded ash densities of ~50-75 trees per mile. Density becomes a factor if preemptive removal is considered. Questions were raised about "cost recovery".

Adam McCullough from the Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCFP) then gave an overview of the State's perspective on EAB and his thoughts on action steps for Norwich. He is the former City Arborist for Montpelier and now the Urban Forester for UCFP. Notes from his summary:

- Montpelier was prepared in advance for the arrival of EAB with funding and a local advocacy group, which helped build a realistic understanding of what EAB means to community. Their consistent communication was key.
- Norwich's short-term strategy should be creating a EAB management plan -- Urban and Community Forestry Program website has good examples, and a number of communities have established EAB programs.
- Key is for Norwich leaders and residents recognize and accept the fact that EAB <u>is</u> a problem, and even though folks may see stumps lining our roadways, it's a "good thing for the community".
- A resource management approach is needed. Adam assured the group that "It's going to be alright". He also believes that the Town likely won't have to pay for 135 trees per mile.
- We should start assessing which trees are privately owned, which are on school property, and which are on town property and so the town's "responsibility"
- We need to avoid "overreach", e.g., avoiding the error of cutting down trees that are <u>not</u> on Town of Norwich property.
- Green Mountain Power *may* be a good partner, but they only touch trees within 10 feet of a power line, or those that *look* like they may fall on a power line.
- Chris asked how we prioritize trees for removal or treatment by injection. Adam responded that few trees will be candidates for injection. Treatment may not be effective if the tree is already infested by EAB, and there often are no outward signs of infestation until it is too late, so we all need to be ready for dramatic ash decline.
- Adam recommends cutting the" biggest, gnarliest, most difficult, pre-infested trees" first – as in ASAP. That is safest for workers removing the trees. Cranes are an option, as are other mechanical removal techniques.
- Start with the most important things first, once the funds and political will are there!
- It's all about LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION. Size, leaning status, what's nearby, etc. If no "target" is creating a hazard, removal may not be necessary.

Norwich Tree Warden Matt Hall then explained what a tree warden actually does, and what his role is in Norwich's emerging EAB situation:

- When someone has a tree that is an issue, they can call Matt directly, or the Town Manager, who will then contact Matt. Matt will inspect the tree in question and can suggest to the Town whether it should be cut down or not.
- The Town of Norwich doesn't have much of a DPW crew for tree removal. Most of that work will need to be contracted out. Currently, the Town has $9,500 appropriated for tree removal.

- Matt estimates that on Turnpike and New Boston roads alone, removal of already unhealthy/dead trees (not just ash, but other species as well) would cost at least $35,000.
- Norwich's thoroughfares alone have many targets for removal. Roads like Willey Hill and Hopson have relatively high numbers of unhealthy/dying ash trees
- Matt suggests that many ash trees across Norwich appear to be dying due to EAB, though he acknowledges he is not an expert. Even if not infested by EAB, dying trees will need to come down.
- Chris asked a process question as to whether Matt himself must specifically recommend every tree that needs to come down, now and in the future. Matt is not certain of this, but as EAB will dramatically increase the number of ash that need to be removed. His capacity is likely to get overwhelmed.
- There was a discussion (mostly in the form of questions) about costs of townwide removal of ash, whether preemptive and/or reactive. Doug pointed out that Jericho budgeted $437,000, which is not even the highest amount for a single VT town.
- There are other treatments potentially available, like the Jarraff tree trimmer, which is believed to cost $8,000/day and can cover 2 miles of road in a day. There is also a parasitic wasp that offers some hope of biocontrol, but that may be too far in the future to prove effective for Norwich in the short term; this needs to be investigated.

Discussion followed of what other VT towns are doing to fund EAB work. Many towns are budgeting for removal of 20% of their ash trees per year. There is potential for grant funding at state level, but significant resources are needed for mapping, processing information, providing biological expertise, and drafting a plan, let alone implementing that plan. This also needs to be investigated.

Various points of discussion followed:

- This meeting is among the first "formal" steps of creating a draft EAB action plan for consideration by the Norwich SB. This special EAB group of the NCC, which includes several committed community members. The group's goal is to present a draft action plan to the SB by June 30.
- A top priority is to survey the village to identify "high-value" trees that should be treated for preservation.
- Matt Hall received an estimate from Chippers that the large stately ash in front of MCS would cost $633 to inoculate in 2024, and then again every two years. Lindsay asked how we can be sure if the tree is "worth" protecting, and the answer was that it is hard to know! Cal Felicetti at Chippers indicated that there is proven protective value to inoculation. Lindsay asked how many years inoculation would need to be done, and the response was 8-10 years
- Lynnwood mentioned that there is no predictable timeframe on local EAB infestation, because smaller ash (too young to serve as infestation hosts) will continue to come up, then mature to a size that will attract adults EABs as a food source.
- Chris mentioned that there are 3 white ash on the town green, and that these would be strong candidates for inoculation: the very large tree in front of MCS, and two others on

either side of the band stand. These are very close to the infested tree at 17 Elm and this would need to be treated in summer 2024. The Town of Norwich has $12,000 in an EAB Response Fund, which could cover the cost of an initial treatment of these 3 trees.
- One short-term strategy would be to ask the SB for funds to treat those 3 trees, then for remaining funds for lapsed tree removal budget.
- A question arose as to whether the big ash in front of MCS is owned by the school district or the Town of Norwich. If owned by the Town, would the school district have to essentially "approve" its treatment?
- Matt Hall has already received estimates for inoculating trees, and there is potential to increase the scope of treatment (and lower costs) if SB can approve more funds.

There was considerable discussion about what to do with trees after they are felled, whether or not they are EAB-infested. Infested trees must be dealt with in specific ways after being cut and cannot safely be moved off property!

- On New Boston Road, felled trees have been moved from the roadside right of way (ROW) a short ways into the forest.
- There may be things that could be offered to homeowners that would mitigate costs of removal, such as firewood. It was considered that trees are generally cut into large sections/chunks, and that most residents who might use firewood don't want to buck it up themselves.
- Could folks be asked to have a site on their property where logs could be left to decay naturally? The group thought this would be a reasonable option.
- The Town can cut trees down in ROW, but homeowners might have to have the debris hauled away, if it threatens the ROW. We need to investigate what other VT towns are doing in this regard.
- If a private citizen's tree falls into the ROW, is the Town authorized to clean it up, and then give the homeowner a bill? Are there issues with insurance? We need more clarity.
- There are distinct, accepted protocols for removal of woody material after tree removal, such as chipping, taking to centralized location. We will need to investigate these protocols and include recommendations for Norwich in our draft action.
- It is important to emphasize that not every ash tree needs to be removed, just those that pose an identified public safety risk and that individual homeowners elect to remove.
- American chestnut, which was decimated by an introduced fungal blight ~100 years ago, is a good counter example to cutting all the ash. Some ash trees can and should be left standing, as a few individuals may possess genetic resistance to EAB. There is apparently some evidence that as many as 1-10% of trees may be resistant, although the EAB mortality figure commonly used is >99%.
- Chris asked what is needed in terms of doing further inventory, and how that work is going to happen. Craig proposed focusing on big trees with highest potential to impact public safety targets, mapping their locations GPS. The State of Vermont has excellent resources for assisting with inventory and mapping

We concluded the meeting by discussing next steps, which include:

1) Identify and mark ash trees in public spaces (and especially the village proper) for removal and/or inoculation. UCFP has an ArcGIS mapping tool for municipalities, and UCFP staff technician Joanne Garton is available for training community members. Doug Hardy is in contact with her.
2) We need to determine the role of the State AOT and Green Mountain Power in dealing with EAB in Norwich. A rhetorical question was posed as to whether “the squeaky wheel gets the grease?” Related to this, we need to know where State responsibility on Norwich roads begins and ends. Someone from NCC can ask DPW about this.
3) We need to identify the group’s role in communicating with Town Manager Brennan Duffy
4) It is imperative to get the word out about EAB within and across Norwich. Regular listserv posts are valuable. Chris could take lead in writing an EAB article for Norwich Times. The NCC could update its post office display to focus on EAB. Could there be listserv postings similar to those done by the Norwich Energy Committee? Could there be an article in a school newsletter? We can and should offer community outings, workshops, and lectures.
5) Importantly, arrange for a Norwich site visit ASAP by Adam McCullough and/or Joanne Garton of UCFP. They can provide invaluable technical advice on managing EAB, with public outreach component. They could also guide and train us in conducting additional geospatial inventories with the ArcGIS mapping tool. This would be an excellent opportunity to organize a community training event.
6) Well before June 30, mapping needs to be initiated, budgeting for townwide EAB management needs to be done, and grant opportunities (NRCS being one option) need to be identified. Again, this aspirational target date poses a tall order for a group of volunteer citizens!

Minutes compiled by Michael Loots
June 5, 2024.