

To: Members of the County Council

From: Anne W. Coventry

Date: November 27, 2023

Re: Bill 40-23, Tree Canopy and Roadside Tree Requirements - Fee Revisions

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Many thanks to Council Vice President Friedson and Council President Glass for introducing Bill 40-23 in recognition of the importance of our tree canopy and the need to adjust the fees for removing or failing to plant shade trees. I understand that the bill proposes to increase the fees commensurate with the actual cost of purchasing, planting, and maintenance, and that it will include an inflation adjustment.

I am in favor of this adjustment, and I hope you will vote in favor of it. However, it does not nearly go far enough, and the work on this issue will not be finished when you pass this bill.

The absence of a tree, where there ought to be a tree, is vastly more expensive to our community, collectively, than just those dollars that it would have cost to buy, plant, and maintain that absent tree. As you know, the loss of our canopy has dire consequences--urban heat island effect; health detriments; climate change; etc. Obviously, this is why you're considering fee adjustments. A few hundred dollars, however, is inadequate deterrent to alter the behavior of those who stand to profit—exponentially—from the absence or removal of the trees.

I live in the historic Wyngate neighborhood, in a home built in 1957, one of many very similar to it, all originally with healthy-sized front and back yards. I'm told that the first owner of my home, DC Superior Court Judge Joseph M. Hannon (a veteran of WWII and the Korean War), may be credited for arranging to have all the (now quite mature) cherry trees put in that line my street and many others in my neighborhood, which make the area look like a fairy land each spring. Unfortunately, we routinely see these family homes with healthy yards knocked down by developers, to be replaced with much larger homes, each with a footprint too big for its property--eating up the yard and leaving no room for healthy root systems of shade trees. They're required to plant or preserve trees, but they don't--instead, they simply pay a few extra dollars. Why? Because they can sell unnecessarily large homes for hundreds of thousands of dollars more than they could a home that's more reasonably sized for the lot (one that would have allowed room for the healthy root systems of shade trees). Unless the fines for failure to plant or preserve shade trees are sufficiently painful to deter this behavior, we will lose our canopy in Wyngate; it's just a question of how soon. The only thing we'll have to compensate our community for it is the few extra dollars in the Tree Canopy Conservation Account. That's better than not having the dollars, but it really won't suffice.

I do hope that you will pass the law, but more than that, I hope you won't think that passing this law resolves the problem.