Arborist Soapbox: Why Are California's State Capitol Park Trees Slated for Removal?

Gordon Mann and Paula Peper

Are you aware of the $1.2 billion, proposed Capitol Annex Project in Sacramento, CA has been approved by the California legislature? The proposed project includes demolishing the Annex and replacing it with a much larger, glass-plated structure, an underground visitors' center (on the left-hand side of the dome), and an underground parking lot (on the right-hand side of the dome) offering **free** legislative parking. The East Annex will be demolished (up to its connection to the original Capitol building) shown by the red line to the right of the dome. This "Double T" footprint will significantly impact the park, its trees, and nearby street trees (Figure 1).

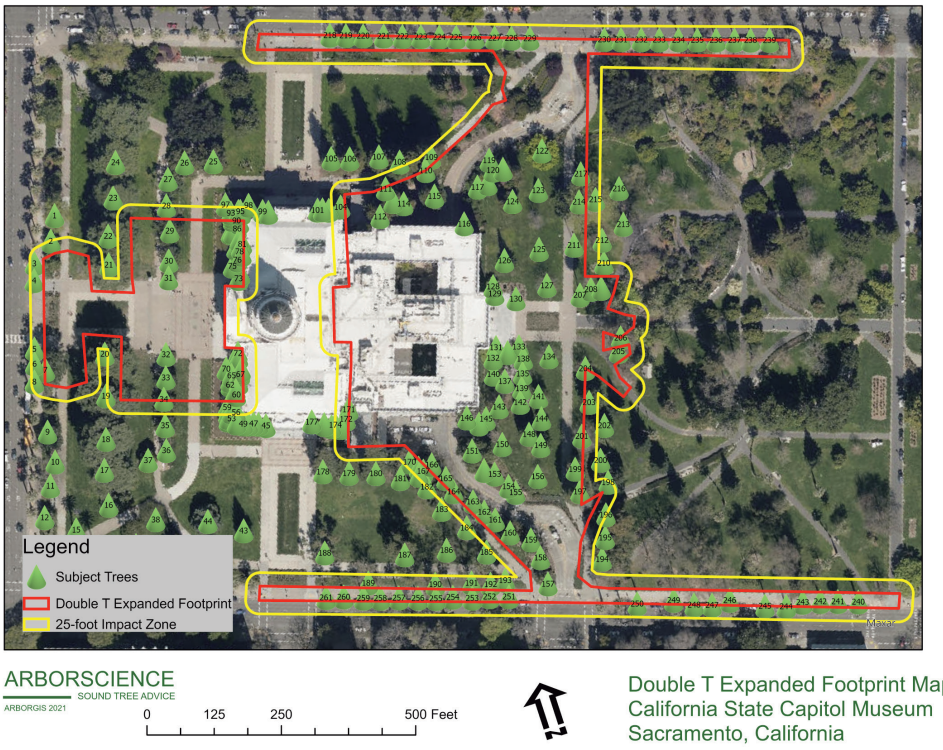

Figure 1. Trees impacted by the construction of the "Double T" design selected by the California Joint Rules Committee of the Legislature. ***Photo courtesy of Dr. Kent Julin, ArborScience.***

All trees within the yellow outline are subject to removal, relocation, or protection. The offices and underground parking lot in the rest of the outlined area also require city street widening and the relocation of rows of massive historic palm trees. Table 1 shows the proposed summary of potential impacts to the trees in the park.

Overall, the park consists of 849 trees with 210 unique species, including gifted trees, historical plantings, trees memorializing "important" people, and the coast redwood planted from seeds sent to the moon on the Apollo mission. The park was established in the 1870s as an arboretum, holding trees from every major country of the world.

This project impacts 193 of the 849 total trees (approximately 26.5%) in the entire park, and the majority of the trees growing in the western third of the park. An iTree study was performed on the park tree inventory in 2017. According to this study, the total replacement value of the trees in Capitol Park was $5.8 million in 2017; the total replacement value of the impacted trees was $1.5 million. However, the iTree study cannot calculate the historic values, nor do justice to the immense sizes of the trees given that the park trees are much larger than any trees studied for the iTree software development. Moreover, the size and value of these trees have increased in the time since the iTree study was conducted.

Since 2018, the State Legislature via the Joint Rules Committee has been changing CEQA rules for this project, one that will dramatically reshape the historic State Capitol and surrounding park. The historic Midcentury Modern Capitol Annex, designed by renowned State Architect Alfred Eichler, would be demolished and replaced with a much larger, glass-sheathed, generic structure. The West Plaza and Capitol Steps of the original restored Capitol –

Project Actions	Count
Trees Proposed for Removal	69
Trees Proposed for Transplantation	75
Trees Proposed to be Protected in Place	15
Trees within 25-foot Impact Zone	34
Total Trees danger of loss, harm, or failure	193

Table 1. **Summary of proposed actions for the subject trees. *From a report compiled by Dr. Kent Julin, ArborScience.***

the site of innumerable marches, speeches, and celebrations —would be eliminated by an underground Visitors' Center with a theme-park-style entrance. Nearly 70 trees, including many massive historic trees, would be removed, and 49 historic palms will be transplanted to make room for entrance and egress from the underground parking lot. Successful transplantation of these palms is doubtful at best, given their massive height, loose soils, and need for extensive bracing against the seasonal north winds.

The California legislature is clearly concerned about climate change and sustainability in recent laws they have passed, and the Governor's stated initiatives for only electric vehicles to be sold in California by 2035, but apparently this concern does not extend to their home turf. Does underground parking for our elected officials and their staffers improve sustainability, when that change threatens over a quarter of the park's trees, including state and national champion trees? How will it look when a largely uninformed California public suddenly sees their Capitol cordoned off for construction and well over 100 trees being either destroyed or moved and held for transplanting? Nearly 15% of the trees were lost in the last severe drought; perpetual drought, with the added disruption of construction, actively threatens many of the remaining trees. The face of the Capitol and its gorgeous park is going to change unless we speak up.

Many California residents and businesses have joined to voice their opposition to the project, agreeing that that this is not the best use of state resources, and is an inappropriately planned project that does not meet the regulations to which other projects would be subjected. Two organizations have formed coalitions and have been fighting these efforts over the past 18 months. They have worked to get the media informed, but COVID concerns overwhelm the news. Members of these groups have worked to talk with Joint Rules Committee chair Ken Cooley. They have worked to educate all legislators.

There are several simple questions to ask our legislators:

- Is this plan the best plan given all normal (not special) regulatory laws?
- Can you please provide the public with cost comparisons between demolish and rebuild vs. restore and rehabilitate?
- Why does your constituency know so little about this project?

Figure 2. **The Annex is slated to be demolished and all trees within this image removed for the planned underground parking lot. *Photo courtesy of Paula J. Peper.***

To date, calls for a reasonable re-shaping of the project – one that preserves and modernizes the historic Annex Building, saves over $500 million and all the trees, and ensures the access and safety of public and employees – have been ignored by the Legislature.

These trees, this park, has been the center of California government since it opened in 1874. The Capitol's glory, reported in newspapers across the nation, was its trees, then and now. Today they shade as we protest, march, speak and share our opinions. The park is in danger as much as the Annex. Only 5 of the 37 original Civil War Memorial Grove trees remain. There has never been a plan to preserve the near-arboretum quality of the collection, nor replace trees as they fail, despite efforts by the Historic State Capitol Commission to establish a tree and park management plan. Commissioners resigned their posts in protest to the Joint Rules over the project's lack of proper process and the absence of historic overview. They began this fight to keep well over one-quarter of the park's trees in place and to make the Legislature accountable to the people who voted for them.

Now, it has come down to a legal fight. On July 9, 2021 the following press release was issued and it includes the lawsuit in its entirety:

www.savecalcap.org/support/Save%20the%20Capitol%20Save%20the%20Trees%20Press%20July%209%202021.pdf

If you would like to support the fight you can do so by donating to the California Capitol Historic Preservation Society at the link below. Your donation is tax deductible to the extent permitted by law: https://tinyurl.com/atd74ame

You can also send a check, made out to the California Capitol Historic Preservation Society, to: California Capitol Historic Preservation Society Post Office Box 188155 Sacramento CA 95818

Online resources

For more information on the project opposition visit the following websites. Be sure to check out the "Updates" on each site:

- www.savecalcap.org
- www.saveourcapitol.org

For info from the Legislature on this project go to:

- https://annex.assembly.ca.gov/content/hearings

Julin, K. 2021. Tree Inventory and Impact Assessment Proposed Double T Expanded Footprint. Arborist report prepared for Save Our Capitol! Available from:

- http://www.saveourcapitol.org/updates/2021-arborists-report

Lastly, you can write an actual snail mail letter to your legislators and governor. The Public Accountability for our Capitol coalition has discovered that email letters are not even tallied and are mostly ignored.

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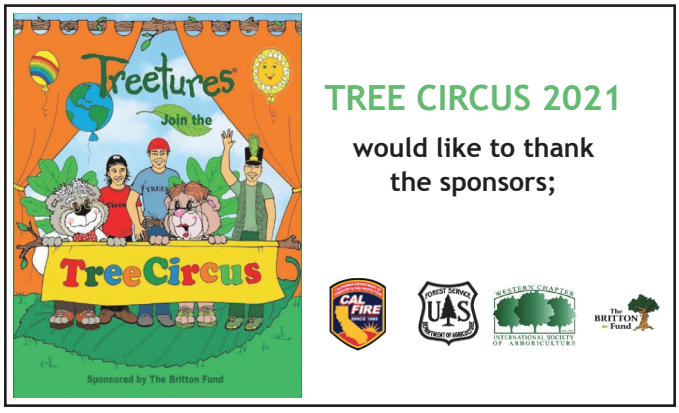
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