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By:

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Above: ?before and after? renovation images of the Abbot Road entrance to MSU, looking north towards Grand River Avenue.

Many East Lansing residents were surprised in late May to suddenly find that MSU had cut down almost two dozen mature trees at the Abbot Road entrance. As we reported ^[2] at the time, MSU explained that a series of mature, non-native, invasive Norway maples in the entrance area had become a safety and maintenance concern. MSU also said there was a need to bring the area up to code with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Results of a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request made to MSU have now provided some more details about the entranceway plan and its history. (You can view the results of our FOIA request for yourself here ^[3], here ^[4], and here ^[5].)

As early as 2013, expert landscapers at MSU had identified the Norway maples at the Abbot Road entrance as being problematic. Several of the trees had internal decay and many also had the species' characteristic problems of girdling roots and dropping of branches. The trees consequently presented maintenance and safety concerns. Frank Telewski, Curator of the Beal Botanical Garden and Campus Arboretum, had actually approved the removal of the trees in December 2014 because of safety concerns.

Crumbling masonry benches in the area also presented a concern, as did overgrown shrubbery.

MSU decided the entrance needed a complete overhaul to deal with the problems. In an April 2016 internal presentation on the planned renovation of the Abbot entrance, MSU stated its first goal of the project as being to "utilize funding to improve a signature campus site."

ELI readers who scan the FOIA response will see that in August 2013, Telewski had "propose[d] using the FRIB funds to support this project." FRIB is the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams, being paid for chiefly through federal funding. It is being built at a significant distance from the Abbot Road entrance.

Curious about this remark, ELI asked MSU's media representative Katie Gervasi if the funding came from FRIB grants. She explained that "The dollars used were MSU's dollars. According to Gervasi, the landscaping for the Abbot Road entrance project is estimated to cost \$67,000. She added:

"The FRIB is a very large, important construction project and it necessitated the removal of two or three campus trees. MSU looks for ways to save or move plantings whenever it engages in campus construction projects. Because the campus is an arboretum, decisions to remove trees are never taken lightly. In order to maintain the overall balance and diversification of trees on campus, MSU set aside approximately \$160,000 in the campus beautification fund to use in tree plantings elsewhere on campus."

Internal documents show that, besides "utiliz[ing] funding to improve a signature campus site," MSU's goals for the project included to "renovate an aging landscape to strengthen the university's historical entrance" and "to reinforce the Campus Landscape Master Plan."

In the month before the tree removal, Gervasi had warned her colleagues that there might be some blowback. She told them in email, "I don't anticipate much negative "hype" about it, but when it comes to trees being removed, it can be a sensitive subject" particularly in a highly visible area such as Abbot Road and Grand River [Avenue]."

Just before the trees were taken down in May of this year, Gervasi reached out to WILX to tell their staff of the "landscape rejuvenation project," saying, "The Abbot Road entrance will be reconstructed so that generations of future Spartans will enjoy the same landscape aesthetic as intended by its original designers." WILX then reported ^[6] on the "facelift," while also noting the safety concern about the Norway maples.

MSU has since replanted the area with a series of swamp white oaks, a native species that MSU landscapers believe will be long-lived and attractive. The planned changes also call for the planting of Sugar Tyme crabapples in the area "to provide seasonal interest backdrop" and for the restoration of the masonry benches outside Campbell Hall, which is across the landscaped median from the Union. Parking and sidewalks in the area are also being brought up to ADA code.

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