



The Role of Trees in Historic Neighborhoods

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Trees were on the minds of many Michiana residents following the storms in early July. Fallen limbs and toppled trees damaged homes and property, knocked out electricity, and required extended cleanup.

Like many things in the background of our day-to-day life we may not think about the trees in our neighborhoods very much – until we're forced to, either by storms, or the calendar, when it's time to rake – again...

It's easy to think of our neighborhoods as made of separate individual pieces - our homes, businesses, streets, the open spaces, parks and trees - but in reality they are not independent. All of these parts combine to form the unique places we live and work. Think about recent changes in your own neighborhood; the last time a new building went up, or one came down, think about recent (or ongoing) road construction, or maybe look at the empty space down the street where that tree stood until the last storm.

These sorts of changes can affect the entire neighborhood, for both residents and visitors. The impact can be more dramatic in historic neighborhoods, where the trees themselves may be historically significant as well as contributors to the overall character of the landscape.

This was the case in many historic neighborhoods in downtown South Bend. The Historic Preservation Commission of South Bend and Saint Joseph County (HPC) documented damage in a number of historic districts and local landmarks including downed trees and damaged homes and cars. Just one example is in Howard Park, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, where efforts are underway to clean up several downed trees and repair significant storm damage to the Works Progress Administration-era cottage.

Of course, safety, restoring electricity, and repairing damage are top priorities in the recovery efforts, but keeping preservation in mind when making these decisions goes a long way toward avoiding any unintended impacts to our neighborhoods. Damaged limbs and other tree hazards must be taken very seriously as a risk to public safety, but once the immediate threat is addressed, several options are available to proactively manage trees, balancing preservation and safety.

The HPC has prepared guidelines for each of the nine local historic districts in South Bend (available on their website). These address the unique histories, buildings, and environment of the individual neighborhoods, and include standards for maintaining elements that reflect the district's character, regarding both structures, and natural elements. In general, the guidelines recommend removing trees only due to damage, disease, or if the tree threatens a structure, or is otherwise unsafe. When planting new trees the guidelines also recommend choosing certain tree species that reflect the historic character and correspond to the ecological setting of the

district. Preventative maintenance can extend the life of a tree, some of which may be performed by homeowners or volunteers, such as proper mulching, or simple regular inspections. Others, such as pruning, cabling, or aeration should be performed only by a certified arborist.

Many properties in these districts have trees, either individually in yards, standing along streets and sidewalks, or in greenspace. Some of these trees were likely planted immediately following the initial construction of homes, or individually chosen to remain in place by the builders. Others though likely predate construction, such as the large stand of oak trees in the Riverside Drive District that may date to the late 1800s.

These trees contribute to the character of these neighborhoods in many ways. The overhead canopy in the Edgewater District creates the effect of an entrance to the neighborhood, distinguishing it from the surrounding area. The trees planted along the sidewalks in the River Bend District help create a separate space for pedestrians by separating the sidewalk from the street. Trees also help to link many of these neighborhoods to the St. Joseph River, to open spaces such as Leeper and Shetterly Parks, and to adjacent districts.

Whether in a formally designated historic district, or other neighborhoods, trees shape the character of our community. Along with providing ecological benefits, shade, and space for recreation, they also connect us to our past - either by allowing us to stand in the same place as the French explorer LaSalle at the site of the former Council Oak in Highland Cemetery, or to simply climb the same tree that your grandfather did when he was young. By incorporating a little preventative maintenance and enlisting a professional arborist when necessary, we can help preserve the important places in our community.

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