Tree Cutting at Cemetery Proves Controversial

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Tree-cutting has a long and controversial history on Kodiak Island, whether it be commercial logging or clearing land for home-building. The latest flashpoint is on the ridge that separates the Mission Road neighborhood with midtown, where the city cemetery lies.

Given the high visibility of that location, the city taking down 50 Sitka Spruce did not go unnoticed. Many graphic photographs in the Kodiak Daily Mirror helped spread word of the thinning, but at least one resident of Kodiak – Donna Jones – only needed to look across Potato Patch Lake to see a rapidly changing skyline:

“Just looking out my window right now you can see the trees are being thinned so much you can see the light right through them. And that’s a little bit of a dangerous thing to do because the trees are all connected with their roots underneath, and it makes the ones that are left more vulnerable to blowing over in the kind of wind storms we get here in Kodiak.”

And that is the potentially fatal flaw of the large and beautiful Sitka Spruce; their roots do not go deep into the rocky ground – instead, they spread out, interconnecting with their neighbors and help hold each other up. Because of the shallow root system, taking down one tree often necessitates taking down its neighbors lest they become weakened and blow over.

And that was one of the reasons stated by city Parks and Recreation Director Charlie Powers in an rather rare press release from the City of Kodiak Thursday.

In it, Powers pointed out that the Kodiak Island Borough cleared “a significant area of older growth Sitka Spruce” for the new long term care facility near Providence Kodiak Island Medical Center, creating a blow-down risk for trees remaining on city property. As a result, he said in the release, 50 trees were taken down, some because of blow-down potential, and others to make room for more graves.

But according to Jones, the trees were a vital part of the cemetery’s character.

“You know, a lot of people that you and I probably know and certainly everyone who’s lived here for a long time have friends and family buried there. And a lot of us go up and visit them. So I was pretty devastated when I drove by yesterday. I actually drove straight up to the care center to see what in the world it was I was seeing from down below. And it just looks like they’ve laid waste to it.”

Powers points out grass will be planted and plots will be laid out in an orderly fashion. However, Jones would like to see more community dialog before any more are cut down.

“I think what’s important is to stop cutting the trees right now. I mean no more trees – don’t cut any more trees starting today, as soon as possible. And then let’s have this open up to public comment and allow it to be dealt with in civil and proper fashion to make a decision like this. But for the meantime, let’s not cut the trees, because we can’t talk about it if they cut them all down.”

Jones said yesterday that she’s contacted City Mayor Pat Branson, who she said seemed responsive to her concerns. In the meantime, there’s probably another stand of Sitka Spruce somewhere that will be the next flashpoint in Kodiak’s love-hate relationship with tree-cutting.