

Long Branch lot severance plan will kill heritage tree, set precedent: residents

'Our intention is not to kill the tree': applicant's agent; committee of adjustment hearing set for April 27

BY TAMARA SHEPHARD ETOBICOKE GUARDIAN
APR 14, 2023



Long Branch homeowner Steve Vella fears a development proposal to sever the lot next door to build two detached houses will kill the roots of this towering, 130-year-old Silver Maple in his backyard. Forests Ontario registered it as a Heritage Tree in 2018. - Steve Vella photo

By Steve Vella photo

Some south Long Branch residents fear a residential lot severance proposal, if approved, will kill a 130-year-old heritage tree and potentially set a development precedent not just in Etobicoke, but throughout Toronto.

Steve Vella is urging his neighbours to write letters to the [Etobicoke York Committee of Adjustment \(COA\)](#) at coa.ey@toronto.ca before the April 20 deadline on the project to divide the property next door to him at [36 Ash Cres.](#) and build two detached houses.

The [development proposal](#) will be heard at the [committee](#) on April 27.



Long Branch homeowner Steve Vella fears a development proposal to sever the lot next door to build two detached houses will kill the roots of this towering, 130-year-old Silver Maple in his backyard. Forests Ontario registered it as a Heritage Tree in 2018. — Steve Vella photo

“The tree is beneficial for the neighbourhood,” Vella said. “It’s not just our tree. It’s a neighbourhood tree. It’s very prominent. ... The development will kill the tree by removing half the roots and a major portion of the tree canopy to the extent the tree won’t survive. When a 100-year-old tree dies, it doesn’t get replaced.”

In 2018, [Forests Ontario](#) recognized the towering maple as a heritage tree, having grown on historically significant land.

The tree is “one of the last original trees of the southwest Toronto Pine Beach region,” Forests Ontario said on its website.

Babak Naghash with [BN Engineering](#), the property owner’s agent, said they are aware of the heritage tree and are taking measures to protect it, which he’ll be presenting to the committee.

“The way we designed this house, we’re not going deep, we’re going above,” he said. “We’re only digging down five feet. And we’re vacuuming the soil; we’re not going in with machines. Our intention, my client’s intention, is not to kill the tree. We’re spending money to preserve the tree as a heritage tree.”

Vella expressed concern that even if the project meets the city’s 1.2-metre setback, it will grievously injure the tree’s roots.

Naghash said they’re working on it.

“The 1.2 metres is probably going to be 2.4 metres,” he said. “We’re working on the structure of the house so the way we build it, it doesn’t interfere with the roots. In the basement, we’re going to do some kind of structure, not the conventional one, to preserve the tree.”



Sandy Donald with SaveLongBranchTrees.ca, left, and Steve Vella with the Long Branch Neighbourhood Association, right, are fighting a development proposal to sever the lot next door to Vella they fear will kill the 130-year-old recognized heritage tree in Vella's backyard and set a precedent across Toronto. — Dan Pearce/Metroland

Vella is a member of the [Long Branch Neighbourhood Association](http://LongBranchNeighbourhoodAssociation), a group well acquainted with the phenomenon of lot splitting in Long Branch, where builders construct two tall, narrow houses on 50-foot or larger lots, often at the cost of trees.

The association has fought several residential development applications in their lakefront neighbourhood through appeals of Committee of Adjustment decisions to the [Toronto Local Appeal Body](http://TorontoLocalAppealBody) or TLAB.

They can't any longer.

Recently, the Ontario government amended the Planning Act and generally removed the rights of third parties, including neighbours and community groups, to appeal Committee of Adjustment decisions. It maintained appeal rights for applicants, the province, public bodies like institutions and utility providers.

That concerns Vella.

“Severances are not appropriate for Long Branch,” Vella said. “There’s been no success around severances in Long Branch since 2017. Everybody who tried to do it either walked away or built a single house.”

Sandy Donald with Savelongbranchtrees.ca fears if the COA approves the project, it will set a citywide precedent.

“This decision could be used as a precedent that no tree in Toronto is safe, no matter its size or even if it’s a historical tree,” Donald said. “If you can take down a heritage tree, you can take down any tree. Effectively, it would take everything Toronto is trying to do around trees and put it aside.

“It will be open season on trees.”

RELATED LINKS

- [🔗 Long Branch sees spike in lot severances](#)
- [🔗 Long Branch's towering red oak designated a Heritage Tree](#)
- [🔗 Long Branch Remembers honours veterans with tree planting project](#)
- [🔗 Could Toronto's approval of garden suites hurt Long Branch's dwindling tree canopy?](#)

Tamara Shephard

Reporter

Tamara Shephard is a journalist in Etobicoke reporting hard news, politics and health and human-interest stories. Tamara loves to travel and is a fan of foreign and independent films.