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BAINBRIDGE ISLAND
REVIEW

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Writer***Apr 13 2007**Activists hope to save
cherry trees in the way
of BHS expansion.*

Through several seasons, school officials have carefully tended the financial, logistical and political soil in which the Bainbridge High School renovation project has taken root.

Vacation of the old 200 building – set to be replaced with a structure twice its size – has already begun. The district will select a contractor early next month, and construction on the estimated \$20.6 million renovation will begin in June.

But as many eagerly await the project's approaching bloom, others have turned their attention to the blossoms outside, on the hillside below the doomed 200 building.

Rooted there are a cluster of cherry trees, donated to the school more than 70 years ago by the Bainbridge Island Japanese-American community, and scheduled to be removed to make way for the new building.

"Some people will tell me it's a question of money," said island plant pathologist Olaf Ribeiro, who came to Thursday's school board meeting to voice his dismay. "But if you consider the intrinsic value of the trees, that answer just doesn't cut it."

In all, 19 trees, including three of the five historic cherry trees and one



Brad Camp/Staff Photo

Richard Stephen-McRea and Ben Hudgen walk past Bainbridge High School's historic cherry trees near a parking lot on High School Road. The trees are slated for removal during a school expansion project.

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large beech, will be lost to the project.

The two remaining cherry trees will be joined by 30 new cherries, a specimen beech and 154 more trees of various species, all of which will be planted as part of the renovation, according to a memo to the school board from Cascade Design Collaborative, the school's landscape architect.

CDC's Eric Schmidt said planners did what they could to protect trees, including the historic cherry trees, but site constraints left them no alternative but to remove them and expand to the west.

Moving the trees elsewhere, officials said, would be too big a hit to a budget that has already been trimmed considerably.

"Our mission is to educate kids," said board President Bruce Weiland, adding that any potential delay to the project would cost up to \$250,000 per month. "Before someone says that money is no object, they need to put their sweat and blood on the line. With all due respect, you haven't sat here for three years working on this."

Capital Facilities Director Tamela VanWinkle said there would be no delay as a result of the controversy.

Still, officials supported the idea of saving the trees, if someone could find the money and methods to do so.

"No one is going to stand in your way," Weiland said. "Go out and save the trees. You have our blessing."

Ribeiro, along with island historian Jerry Elfendahl, members of the nonprofit Kitsap Trees and Shoreline Association and a small group of students are scrambling to do just that.

Lacking time and money, the group is looking for all the help they can get. Planners said the trees could be moved somewhere on site if there were a way to do the work.

Jim Trainer, a retired forester and a member of the KTSA, said he and members of his group would do the work for free if someone would provide the equipment. Trainer said a crane would be ideal, but a backhoe would suffice.

Ideally trees should be moved in the fall, he said, though he believes the BHS trees could be saved anyway.

"It's a shame the school didn't contact someone about this sooner," he said.

Superintendent Ken Crawford said he was disappointed at the perception that the district didn't make an effort to spare the trees.

After planners decided there was no other choice but to remove them, he said officials "agonized" over how to handle the situation.

They spoke with families of those who had donated the trees and

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explored several options for recognizing their historical significance, in the end deciding on a "cherry tree walk" that would incorporate the two remaining cherry trees with those yet to be planted.

Maintenance crews last week also moved several trees, plants and shrubs from beds surrounding the 200 building to a new planted area near the 300 building.

"Any hint that we don't care is the wrong impression to extrapolate from the removal of those trees," Crawford said. "This hasn't been an easy process, but we believe we have a plan that properly honors their history."

Furthermore, Crawford said, the district has done everything it can to teach and honor the history of the local Japanese community.

"From my perspective," he said "how you deal with history is reflected in the actions, deeds and values incorporated into the organization."

Elfendahl, who has been trying to raise awareness about the trees for several weeks, said he was surprised to find that students he spoke with were unaware of the trees' history.

Among them was Arianne Abbott, who pleaded with the school board for a chance to find a solution.

"I don't know what it would cost to save them," she said. "But if someone would have come to the students, I'm sure they would have taken the initiative to help."

Elfendahl agreed, but said it would take a decisive community effort to save the trees.

"This community has a wonderful history," Elfendahl said. "Now as we're growing we're starting to bulldoze that history."