

The sequoia at City Hall speaks up

By Moira Walker

Soon to be felled, unless we act, this stately tree makes some thoughtful observations about Victoria, its history, and itself.

HELLO. MY NAME IS LUCY. I'm a settler tree who lives on the traditional territories of the lək'wəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples. I am the sequoia that, for the moment, stands in Centennial Square beside Victoria City Hall.

Maybe you don't know my story. Let me tell you.

The first of my kind in this area arrived as a gift from the government of California in 1859, a year after the discovery of gold in the Fraser River. As a result of the discovery, Victoria transformed into a bustling port that served as a supply base and outfitter centre for the miners who poured into the area primarily from San Francisco. The government of California decided to send sequoia seedlings on one of the ships bringing miners and supplies up the coast. Legislators must have trusted the seedlings would flourish and by golly they did.

The next shipment of sequoia seedlings arrived in 1889, having been brought here by a former Victoria mayor and business man.

Once brought to Victoria, we were spread across the city. Some of my siblings are in James Bay, up Moss and Cook Streets and even Hillside Avenue. One seedling, now a grand tree, was planted on the edge of the harbour. She stands beside a statue of a young Queen Victoria with the stately Legislature Building behind her.

When we seedlings first arrived, Queen Victoria was 39 and had already been on the throne for 21 years. She would reign for another 42 years.

Eight years after the first arrival of sequoia on the West Coast, Victoria became the capital of the crown colony. In 1871 when British Columbia joined confederation, the town became the provincial capital. My fellow sequoia were here to witness it all.

When the first sequoia arrived in Victoria, City Hall had yet to be built. Designed by an English settler, the building was constructed between 1878 and 1891. Designated a national historic site of Canada in 1977, it remains one of the best surviving examples of public architecture in the Second Empire style in Western Canada. Quite the settler building, wouldn't you agree?



Centennial Square and "Lucy", the sequoia, February 2025 (Photo Leslie Campbell)

Compared to my fellow sequoia in Victoria, I myself am a mere youngster. I arrived on a late-winter day in the early 1980s, planted beside City Hall by a horticulture crew. One of the crew, Stu Montgomery, recently told the *Times Colonist* that cutting me down is “a waste” that “doesn’t make any sense.”

The plaza where I stand is the result of a visionary Victoria mayor who decided to save City Hall, which was slated to be demolished, and to create a park beside it. The preliminary plans were drawn up in late 1963; the work was largely completed in October 1965. Fittingly, the park was named Centennial Square to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the incorporation of Victoria in 1962.

By the way, City Hall is not the only historic site you Victorians have sought to demolish. You almost allowed the Empress Hotel to be razed; you did lose the old Klondike Hotel, despite the efforts of Pierre Berton and a 1000 others to save it. A downtown mall now stands on the historic site of the former hotel.

Sequoia, natives of California, are not ordinary. We grow into what is the largest tree species in the world. John Muir called us the “King of all the conifers in the world.” We are also thought to be the

oldest living organisms on Earth. One of my relatives is estimated to be 3,200 years old. Botanist, biochemist, polymath, and writer Dr. Diana Beresford-Kroeger believes we sequoia are “the remnants of an ancient race of trees” that once “flourished as far north as the Arctic.” So in coming to Victoria, we were perhaps being repatriated.

Another name for us sequoia is giant redwoods. In England where seedlings were also sent in the mid-1800s, we are known as Wellingtonia, being named after the Duke of Wellington. Over 100 of us, planted in the 1860s, still line Wellingtonia Avenue in Crowthorne, Berkshire, UK.

Although still a mere youngster given my expected lifespan, I have today a trunk diameter (at breast height) of 165 cm and a “crown radius”—my size from the middle of my trunk to the outer edge of my largest branch, that is, my dripline—of 8 metres.

Even at my young age, scientists estimate I have stored inside me anywhere from 10 to 15 tons of carbon.

In addition to storing carbon, I am a natural defence against floods and atmospheric rivers, absorbing gallons of water from the soil and releasing it into the air again as oxygen and water vapour in a single growing season. I am a natural misting and cooling system. Without me, the temperature in Centennial Square will rise.

While I value modesty, I do know myself to be stunningly beautiful: I am a symmetrical, green, shapely structure. My location on a skirt of grass in Centennial Square means I have access to rain water and protection from winds because of the shelter of City Hall.

It’s a strange world in which what is life-enhancing, being beautiful and restorative, has to be defended.

But some are aware of my importance. Architect and urban design planner, Chris Gower, who has worked for more than 30 years in downtown Victoria, has noted that that my inclusion in Centennial Square made a “kind of environmental statement for the city itself.”

Scientists regard me as being impressive in size, age, and resilience. My attributes, however, may not be enough to save my California relatives. They are under threat because of climate-change driven weather that has brought hotter, drier weather and more intense fires such as the recent ones in Los Angeles. In fact, the sequoia is now listed as an endangered species. Scientists in England speculate that those of us that emigrated from California, beginning in the mid-1800s, may have a better chance of surviving than those of us who still live in the US.

Various groups in both England and the US are endeavouring to protect us. I am touched by the words of US Indigenous leader William Garfield. He reminds you humans that for thousands of years we sequoia have “provided healing, shelter, and warmth to his people.” His words echo those of the Buddha who regarded a tree as a wondrous thing that shelters, feeds, and protects all living things. Garfield believes people have a “duty to do everything” in their power to make sure that the sequoia is protected so as to pass the tree to future generations just as it was passed to the present generation. Garfield knows what scientists now understand: trees and humans share a quarter of their genes. We trees truly are your relatives.

While we sequoia have come from California, we are not an invasive species; you need not worry that we, like broom or English Ivy, will take over the city. We are content to grow where we were placed in this city, beginning over 150 years ago.

In the recent decision of Victoria City Council to chop me down, councillors gave my settler status as one of its reasons. I was actually confused by this as I may not actually be a settler, according to Beresford-Kroeger, and I can also see from my vantage point all the many settler trees and shrubs in this city: the magnolia, the chestnut, the lilac, the hawthorn, the rhododendron, the white birch, the many varieties of cherry tree, the apples, the sugar maple, and the plane trees.

The pretty hanging baskets designed in the early 20th century contain settler flowers. Some in City Council have argued their century-old design, like me, must go.

I know potatoes, tomatoes, and squash—settler vegetables all—are prepared in homes all over the city and are served in the finest local restaurants.

I've also noted that not a single member of the present City Council or the mayor is Indigenous. All are settlers.

While some object to my continued presence in the city, the wildlife has allowed me to take my place among it. Just speak to the birds that perch in me, the squirrels that play inside me, the spiders who string their webs in me.

And speak also to the people who relish my shade and those who are in awe of my immense and impressive beauty. I don't mean to boast.

In another attempt to justify my removal, a Dialog Technical Memorandum dated September 24, 2024, states that a "mature" tree such as myself functions best as a "strong focal point" in a "passive space," such as a park. The writer would seem to have mistaken a tree for a piece of furniture; a grassy area for a showroom. The memo, rich with self-serving reasoning, is challenging to read.

I am certainly not against or in the way of some revamping of the square. Any redecorating of Centennial Square can be done by accessing the area from the SW corner. I also provide the square with a protective border from the noise of Douglas Street. No small new plantings can do this work.

Some city officials have suggested that the tree will pose problems for underground infrastructure. Ryan Senechal, MUFL, arborist and urban forest educator, [argues otherwise](#), noting that there are modern arboricultural management techniques used every day in our region to retain trees.

Another reason cited in the past by the former City Council to cut me down is that a place is needed for a larger bus stop and a bike rack. City Hall, unlike the University of Victoria, is not a bus terminal. And it is hard for me to understand why there is no other room in Centennial Square for bicycles.

Yet another reason cited by City Council as to why it must cut me down is that the public regards the area where I stand as "unsafe" and "unwelcoming." If the whole square were to be transformed into a park with grasses, trees, a pond, and me—imagine a mini Beacon Hill Park—it would be a beacon for families visiting Chinatown and other places downtown. (I hope you will excuse my pun.) The

dark, soulless city offices along the north side also need to revert to cafés and shops for any plan to work.

The current plan is to make the area “more welcoming” by having much of the ground covered in concrete with the exception of some contained spaces for “plantings.” The new square is to have some “climbable cut stone blocks” and “water features.” In this way, the square will become, according to the Councillors, “greener, more welcoming, accessible, lively, and vibrant.” It is expecting rather a lot of those cut stone blocks, I think.

The company hired to redesign Centennial Square, BC Architecture Engineering, retained Talmack Urban Forestry to do a tree inventory. The report of May 16, 2024, deems my health to be “good” and my structure also to be “good.” It also took my measurements, which I’ve noted earlier. Despite City Hall’s dislike of settler trees, the inventory notes that the London Plane tree, three Chanticleer pears, and a hawthorn are to be retained.

The budget for the new square is \$11.2 million. The City has already spent over \$800,000 on the design. The cost for chopping me down: possibly \$4000.

The simple truth is that for the last half a dozen years, City Council has decided not to like me. In recent years, councillors seem particularly fond of concrete and black top. They would rather put up a parking lot than a park. Were Joni Mitchell to know about this state of affairs, I can’t imagine she’d be pleased.

In contrast, Singapore has recently been designated a “Blue Zone,” that is, a place where its citizens live longer, healthier lives than elsewhere. Part of the credit for the change of status of the Asian city is given to its Urban Redevelopment Authority. By “incorporating green spaces into urban life,” it has provided “a clean and well-maintained environment” that has helped to improve the quality and longevity of Singaporeans.

As I think about my fate, I recall the words of the artist born in Victoria about a dozen years after the first sequoia arrived. Emily Carr wrote, “It’s a horrible sight to see a tree felled.” She believed one could hear a cry from a tree’s heart when we are cut. She said we make a dreadful groan as we fall.

Why wouldn’t we? We are living beings.

Said to be a “selfless man with a long vision of the city he helped to make beautiful,” Herb Warren was responsible for designing Victoria’s boulevards of flowering trees and its hanging baskets. Working as the superintendent of parks from 1930 to 1970, Warren reflected on the public’s attitude toward trees in a book he wrote at the end of his tenure in office, *Historic Trees of Victoria*: “I can remember a time when the proposed removal of Garry oak trees on city street brought for the people with shotguns, prepared to defend them.”

While I do not recommend shotguns, some thoughtful consideration of the importance and value of trees would be a refreshing change to the cavalier removal of so many older trees in the city in recent years. We, the remaining Garry oaks, London Plane, Japanese cherry, Douglas Fir, and sequoia, would welcome it.

Hello. My name is Lucy. City Council has voted to cut me down. While it chose for the first time in most people’s memories not to decorate me for Christmas—not wanting to draw attention to me, I

suppose—I am still here, extending my limbs of greenness outward toward you and your family. Visit me. Touch me. Smell my freshness. You may not have long to do so.

Lucy, the heritage sequoia tree at Centennial Square (AKA Moira Walker).