

RIGHT AT HOME

Facing expensive upkeep costs when towering trees cause sidewalk hazards, some suburban towns opt to uproot them entirely.



By **Ronda Kaysen**

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Like many New Yorkers who left the city for the suburbs, I was drawn to my block, an otherwise forgettable street, for its soaring sidewalk trees — pin oaks, lindens and ash — that shade it in the summer and stand like barren giants in the winter.

So I was stunned to step outside a few weeks ago on a bitter winter afternoon and see a line of white X's spray-painted across their trunks. The next day, my next-door neighbor, Stacey Millett, whose home shares the corner with a ginkgo whose leaves turn golden in the fall, called the town forester and learned that all the trees would be cut down as part of a repaving project.

“ALL of them,” Ms. Millett, 41, who has lived on this block of West Orange, N.J., with her family since 2010, texted me. “He wasn’t kidding.”

Look out an apartment window in the city and the trees certainly add color, texture and life to the streetscape. But the view is often dominated by the architecture of the skyline and the street life below. In the suburbs, trees play an outsize role, offering not just shade and beauty, but sometimes the richest character on a block, particularly one like mine with mostly smaller, unmemorable homes.

And so, the iconic Norman Rockwell-style streetscape is fading away. As West Orange replaces sidewalks and curbs, it often removes old town-owned trees and plants new species that are more compatible for the location, if homeowners request them. “Over the next 20 or 30 years, there won’t be any tall trees where there are overhead wires,” Mr. Linson said.

Conservationists espouse maintenance methods that could protect more trees, like permeable sidewalks and more careful pruning. While these efforts are often costly for cash-strapped towns, they could preserve a resource that cleans particulate matter from the air, absorbs runoff and reduces the heat index. “The benefits to society far outweigh the costs” of higher maintenance, said Robert McDonald, the lead scientist for the Global Cities program at the Nature Conservancy.

West Orange does make some accommodations. Some trees, like those far from utility wires or set back from the curb, where their roots are not compromised, may stay. For smaller repaving projects, the trees may not be affected at all. If a property owner asks for the tree in front of his or her house to be spared, the town will try to save it by leaving the existing curbing or using an alternative curb material like a steel plate, which is less attractive than the typical Belgian block, but does not require the deep footings that cut into root systems. The town may also cut the sidewalk out around the trunk or build an incline over the roots, or simply leave that portion of the sidewalk unrepaired. But if the tree stays, the homeowner would be responsible for the cost of any future sidewalk repairs.

Repairing a sidewalk is not cheap, costing a homeowner an average of \$1,318, according to HomeAdvisor. Delaying work could mean tickets from the town, or a lawsuit, if someone trips and falls.

In 2016, West Orange residents Miriam and Mark Reimer were warned by their homeowner insurance company to repair their damaged sidewalk or face a rate hike or a loss of coverage. Soon after, West Orange sent them a separate letter, saying that as part of a sidewalk replacement project, the town planned to remove the tree in front of their house, along with most of the others on the block of large, stately trees. The town would pay to replace the sidewalk. The Reimers didn't contest the plan (nor did their neighbors), and requested that a new tree be planted.

"If we hadn't gotten that letter, maybe we would have chosen to keep some of those trees" on the block, said Ms. Reimer, 38, a freelance editor, who described the new look of her street as "barren."

West Orange removes roughly 300 trees a year, and plants about 100 new ones. "It's a deficit," Mr. Linson said. "It's mainly because people don't want a tree" in front of their property, and the town will not plant a tree a homeowner does not want. Some homeowners see the trees as a nuisance, with leaves that need to be raked, roots that may eventually upend sidewalks, and branches that could come crashing down in a storm.

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