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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning. Welcome to the 146th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

This morning, the committee is looking into a situation involving PSPC's plans for the white elm tree that lies on the east side of Centre Block, as you can see in the photo on the screen before you. There are three other photos that I took, and we'll run through them, too, so you get a closer look. It's just next to the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald. This matter was brought to our attention by today's first witness, Mr. Paul Johanis, Chair of Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital.

Before we start, I'll read to the committee a letter from the Speakers, so you know what their interest is. The Speakers wrote to the ADM of Public Services and Procurement Canada:

It has come to our attention that Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital has expressed concerns about the potential uprooting of a number of mature trees on the grounds of Parliament Hill to make way for the upcoming renovations to Centre Block. In particular, Greenspace is worried about a particular heritage elm tree, located next to the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald, just east of Centre Block.

With the understanding that such decisions are not taken lightly, we are asking Public Services and Procurement Canada to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of these mature and now vulnerable trees during the Centre Block restoration.

It is our hope that with your support, a solution can be found to address the concerns that have been raised.

Welcome, Mr. Johanis. Maybe before you start, you could identify anyone in the audience who is related to the four organizations you said had an interest in this topic.

Mr. Paul Johanis (Chair, Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital): Good morning.

Yes, there are members of Greenspace Alliance here, and members of Big Trees of Kitchissippi, which is a neighbourhood in the western part of Ottawa. We have Daniel Buckles and Debra Huron. Also here is Robert McAulay, president of the Beaverbrook Community Association in the Kanata area of Ottawa, who is very active in tree protection. Jennifer Humphries has just joined us. She is a member of the Community Associations for Environmental Sustainability, CAFES.

The Chair: Thank you.

The clerk will cycle through a couple more photos.

Mr. Johanis, we look forward to some opening remarks, and then we'll have some questions from the committee members.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, vice-chairs and members of the standing committee.

We're very honoured to be here. I have to say that we never expected to be here, but we're very happy to be here. Thank you for putting this on the agenda for the committee's consideration, and for inviting me to speak to you today.

I speak to you on behalf of four organizations that sent you the letter concerning the elm on March 18: Ecology Ottawa, a grassroots organization with a broad environmental mandate and a large following, mostly aimed at a younger demographic; the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club, founded in 1863 and the oldest natural history club in Canada, with 800-odd members; the Community Associations for Environmental Sustainability, CAFES, a collective of about 30 neighbourhood associations in Ottawa, including all or most of those in this riding, Ottawa Centre; and the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital, of which I'm the current chair. We're a 100% volunteer, non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and preserving green space in the Ottawa-Gatineau area since 1997.

We're here to ask for two things. The first is to delay the removal of the centenary elm until after "leaf out", so that its condition can be ascertained clearly and without controversy. The second is to reconsider the currently held assumptions about the size and location of phase two of the visitor welcome complex.

Why reconsider these assumptions? These assumptions are the proximate cause of the planned removal of the elm. We believe they should be revisited to confirm that the implicit trade-off that is being made between preserving the elm and building phase two of the visitor welcome complex in the same location still holds. To be clear, unless the government is open to considering or reconsidering these assumptions, the elm cannot be saved.

Why delay the removal of the elm? Well, to reconsider this trade-off, you as parliamentarians really need up-to-date, conclusive information about its condition.

Why this tree? Why are we going all-out to protect this one tree? First, it's not just any tree. It's an American elm. It's a species that was widespread in this part of Ontario until it was all but wiped out by Dutch elm disease in our area in the 1970s and 1980s. There were many on Parliament Hill, but this one is the sole survivor. It is unique. It's distinctive. It's historic.

For our colleagues in the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club, on this basis alone it would deserve protection and preservation wherever it might be located, but it's not located just anywhere. It stands next to Canada's most iconic building, Centre Block of Parliament. From this close proximity, it acquires an added significance and takes on an emblematic quality. Whatever happens to this elm makes a statement, which gets magnified and resonates far and wide.

To community organizations such as CAFES, the elm is emblematic of every mature tree being routinely taken down in their neighbourhoods to make way for infill and renovation. The loss of mature trees in Ottawa's core, and in urban centres across Canada, has reached crisis proportions. Community associations are desperate to stop the loss of tree canopy in their neighbourhoods. They are aghast to see the same dynamic being played out on Parliament Hill—they really can't understand it—wherein a builder with a plan always trumps green space.

To Ecology Ottawa, whatever happens to the elm is emblematic of the federal response to climate change. Mr. Reid, at the last meeting, referred to the 2006 long-term vision and plan for the parliamentary precinct. The rehabilitation of Centre Block represents the culmination of this vision. At the same meeting, deputy clerk Michel Patrice emphasized the need to reassess plans when things have changed.

Well, things have changed in a fundamental way since 2006. In 2019, climate change is real and action is urgently required to mitigate its impact. This is why the scope of the visitor centre now needs to be reconsidered. In this new context, different relative weights would likely be applied in the implicit trade-offs being made between preserving the elm and locating phase two of the visitor complex in that same space.

• (1105)

At this time of climate crisis, every action matters. Every bit of warming matters. Every year matters, and every choice matters. This is the message the youth strike for climate brought to Parliament Hill and all over the world on March 15. I was with them on the Hill that day, and I spoke with maybe 100 of them, singly and in groups. When I pointed out the elm to them and informed them of the government's intention to cut it down, all reacted with shock, disbelief and disgust. They don't think you have your priorities right.

Up until last Tuesday, the elm did not stand alone. It was surrounded by many other mature trees. Most or all were removed by PSPC when they stripped the site of vegetation last week and turned it into a construction zone. This little enclave was part of the city's urban forest, which is one of the city's most important assets in its defence against climate change. It provided shade for visitors to the Hill, which is otherwise quite denuded, cooling and filtering the ambient air, absorbing and fixing carbon and releasing the oxygen we breathe, just the basic life-preserving work that trees do for us.

This clear-cut may seem catastrophic, but in fact it is also an opportunity. One of the arborist's reports commissioned by PSPC in September 2018 includes this recommendation:

If this tree is to be preserved where it stands, multiple measures will need to be taken....If we are to see any improvement in the trees health the entire critical root zone measuring 9 meters from the trees trunk in all directions should be carefully excavated and cleared of all unnatural debris. This area...would have to be closed off to the public and all soil within the area would need to be remediated.

If the option of preserving the tree were selected rather than cutting it down, the clear-cut and vegetation stripping carried out by PSPC has in fact made a good start towards doing this remediation work. It's an opportunity.

In prior communications, both PSPC and the NCC have asked us to consider how their plan includes the greening of the area after the renovations are complete. To replace the elm with like for like would take 100 years. It is, for all practical purposes, irreplaceable.

Regarding the planting of other trees in 10, 13 or however many years it will take to complete this renovation project, all we can say is that it's literally too little too late. We have the same 10 or 12 years to take effective action against climate change if we wish to keep its impact within adaptable limits. Again, however, the clear-cut may present an opportunity. The field is now clear to proceed with this replanting immediately with large caliper trees and the 4:1 replacement ratio recommended by the NCC to recreate a new, improved green enclave in this location.

Every one of us is being called upon to take action against climate change in whatever small way we can, reducing our greenhouse gas emissions or preserving or increasing green space as carbon sinks in our homes, in our lifestyles and in our own backyards. Preserving the centenary elm and restoring this green space is something parliamentarians can do right here on Parliament Hill in your own backyard.

PSPC has referred to the poor condition of the centenary elm as justification for its removal. We have found that the information supporting this judgment is contradictory and inconclusive. Our technical report on the subject was sent to you on March 18. I will read out only its conclusion here:

Given the conflicting information concerning the condition of the tree, the dramatic unexplained changes observed in September 2018, the lack of testing or other inspection other than ground level visual observation and the fact that weather conditions in September 2018 might well indicate that heat and water stress were at the root of the tree's observed condition, it would seem appropriate to delay the removal until such time as 1) it is ascertained whether the tree has survived into spring 2019, and 2) further testing is done to determine if the tree is affected by any disease.

• (1110)

Destruction of this elm must not happen, and it can be stopped by you, Canada's parliamentarians.

While the National Capital Commission provides federal land use authorization and Public Services and Procurement Canada, as custodian of the land and buildings, executes the construction and renovation project, both are working to requirements approved by the Speakers of the House and Senate who, on your behalf, exercise the powers of Parliament to regulate its own affairs and to administer its precinct. Indeed, this standing committee has rightly taken upon itself the exercise of oversight that is so badly needed for this renovation project.

We've heard from PSPC and parliamentary staff, at the last meeting, that designs for the second phase of the visitor's centre are still very preliminary. All they know right now is how big a hole they want to excavate. It's very big—wiping out the centenary elm and forestalling the growth of any greenery in the northeast quadrant of the Hill for many years. Is this what you want? Is this what Canadians want?

Please do the right thing. Preserve the elm and restore its retinue of trees for the benefits they provide locally here on Parliament Hill. Also, take this opportunity to send the right message to all Canadians watching. Every action matters. Every choice matters. Please delay the removal of the centenary elm until leaf out and initiate a process whereby the currently held assumptions about the size and location of phase two of the visitor welcome complex are reconsidered.

Thank you.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before we go to questions I just want to add a little bit of information that may affect your questions, or Mr. Johanis you could comment on them in your answers to questions.

First of all, I want to know how long these trees can live. The researcher looked that up for me. Do you want to read the quote?

Mr. Andre Barnes (Committee Researcher): The chair wanted to know the life expectancy. According to the University of Kentucky, many white or American elms can live to 100 to 200 years old, and some have been recorded as more than 300 years old.

The Chair: We also have a dendrologist from Natural Resources Canada, who was asked to provide information to Public Works Canada.

He said:

Thanks for your request and for the opportunity to view the large white elm (*Ulmus americana*) located to the east of Centre Block on Parliament Hill.

The elm in question currently has less than 20% of the expected live crown of a healthy tree. The few leaves present in the crown are less than half the normal size expected for a white elm, are curling and show dead tissue among the leaf margins. In my opinion, the tree is unhealthy and may not survive into the spring of 2019.

Without testing, it's not possible for me to say what is affecting the tree, but I would speculate either Dutch elm disease or phloem necrosis.

Regardless, as the tree is no longer capable of generating a functional live crown, it can be expected to succumb in the very near future.

Don't hesitate to contact me should you require additional information.

We'll go to questions. We'll start with Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Thank you.

I'm not sure that I'll fill up all seven minutes for this, but we'll start.

In the picture we have in front of us—which won't be in Hansard, but nevertheless—there are two other trees. Is either of them an elm tree?

Mr. Paul Johanis: No, the other trees aren't elms.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Do you know what they are?

Mr. Paul Johanis: I believe they're Norway maples, but I'm not a tree identification specialist.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If those trees were to be removed, would that cause a problem?

Mr. Paul Johanis: They've already been removed.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Okay, then I guess no.

Mr. Paul Johanis: The only tree that remains right now—that we can see, anyway, from beyond the fencing—is the elm.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: So 100 years from now, what do you expect this tree to look like?

Mr. Paul Johanis: That elm?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Yes, that elm.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Elms have the capacity to actually just keep growing. Many trees hit a plateau, but elms can grow beyond their current size for a very long time. As we heard, the life expectancy of an elm such as this can be up to 200 years. There are elms that are twice the size of that, just from having packed on carbon, basically, over many years.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Let's say we hold off until the spring, for the sake of argument, and the tree does not survive. Would there be any objection to removing it once it's dead?

Mr. Paul Johanis: No. If it's dead, then clearly you can't just leave a standing dead elm there.

We're here to advocate for green space. The elm is the star of that area, but there is other green space in that whole area. It's planned that there will be green space in the future, with the planting of trees, which is in the plan right now. We're just saying to accelerate that, do it right away.

There's a plan to commemorate the elm. We've heard that the wood from the elm might be used for furniture or other things. Another option for commemoration would be in situ carving of the stump of the elm. There are very beautiful stump carvings that are preserved and used as memorials from various things. That would be another option.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: If the tree is found to be unhealthy—we are hearing strong evidence that it is—would you object to having it cut down and used for furniture?

Mr. Paul Johanis: No, we wouldn't object to that. We're just more concerned that measures be taken to keep it alive if it's savable.

• (1120)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Go ahead. If you have more to say, go for it.

Mr. Paul Johanis: I would like to refer to the comment, the memo that was read out by the chair. In fairness, this person responded on a 24-hour basis to a request from PSPC, provided a very quick response and was not able to produce a report with the full methodology and caveats that would normally be associated with a professional report.

Our contention is that the weather conditions of September 2018 weren't taken into account. Certainly, I don't think it is indicated in the report. We had two very long periods of heat with temperatures above 28°C to 30°C during September, which was very unusual, and very little rain all through to September 21, when the tornadoes swept through this place.

The tree was examined at a time when it was potentially under water stress and heat stress. That's not taken into account.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Have you seen the visitor welcome centre at the other end of Centre Block? You would have had to walk through it today.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Above it, you find a space that could be used as green space. I don't know how much space there is, but there's some space that could be grassified above that. Is it your hope regardless that the space between Centre Block and East Block become green space that we can then use? Could that be built above a visitor welcome centre?

Mr. Paul Johanis: It certainly can. The only problem is that to get there in 10, 12 or 13 years, everything there, including the elm, has to be cut down. We are hoping that the government would be open to considering alternatives and that instead of building the next part of their visitor centre under that green space area, it could shift it somewhere. It could shift it in a way that wouldn't require that green space to be removed.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Do you have any suggestions on where that could be?

Mr. Paul Johanis: We're very much at a disadvantage, because there's no public information on what the plans are. We just don't know. We're just shooting in the dark here.

We can infer from the fact that we're told all those trees are in the middle of an excavation area that the plan is to extend the visitor centre towards the north. Mind you, this is an underground visitor centre, so there would be no reason, I don't think, once it's been extended along the front of Centre Block, that rather than building it out towards the north, it could sort of be a mirror image instead and be built towards the south, to the west side of East Block. But I mean, this is just.... Who knows? Again, we don't have public information.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You mentioned in your opening comments the need to inspect and further test the tree. What would that involve? Is that core samples? What work would that require? Would that in itself endanger the tree?

Mr. Paul Johanis: No. I think there are non-invasive ways in which the tree could be further tested. Even in this memo that the chair read out.... Further testing could be done in a way that would determine whether there's any disease in this elm, and in a non-invasive way.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I don't have a lot of time left. We've heard there's a nine-metre or 30-foot radius of roots on a tree like this. How deep does that go? Do you know?

Mr. Paul Johanis: It really depends on the subsoil conditions, I think, but one of the tests or one of the procedures that can be done,

for example, is to actually map it out. There's equipment now that you can use that would map out the actual root extent of the tree.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Is it possible to build under the tree while supporting it, or does that become extraordinarily complicated?

Mr. Paul Johanis: I think that's an engineering question. It's possible to tunnel under the whole city of Ottawa to put in an LRT, so maybe you can tunnel under here to do a visitor centre, but....

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We'll call it Elm Station.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I think my time is up.

The Chair: "Parliament Sinkhole", maybe.

Just before we go to our next speaker, this is for Public Works and Services and Procurement Canada officials in the audience. Could you cover some of these points that have been made when you do your presentation in the next hour? Hopefully, you'll cover the specific design of the new visitor centre and where exactly it would be. Second, if there's any irrigation like water sprinkling in that area related to the September drought, that would be helpful for us to know, and also if there's any comment on the one-day analysis of the tree that I read out, the cursory analysis.

Now we'll go to Mr. Reid.

● (1125)

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We heard from that report that was read by our chair that the tree, according to the arborist, might be sufficiently unhealthy that it wouldn't survive the winter. Is it your view that we will be better able to figure out whether it survived the winter if we wait for the winter to end before cutting it down?

Mr. Paul Johanis: That is one of our requests: Can we just wait until it leafs out and see whether it has, in fact, survived the winter, and if it has, in what condition?

Mr. Scott Reid: Right. The proposal to cut it down was based in part upon the assumption that the wood would be more usable for furniture if it was cut down prior to the sap starting to run. I am not an expert on the preparation of wood for furniture making and what having sap in the wood means, but I think I would be right—you can correct me if I'm wrong—that in the event that the tree is not healthy enough to survive the summer and it were cut down this autumn, if it was surviving but in a very poor state, the sap would be out of the wood again and we'd be back to a state where the wood was similar to the way it is now. Would that seem correct?

Mr. Paul Johanis: I would think so, although, again, I don't have that expertise myself. However, I think that probably at this point the sap has already started to rise in that tree, and I would think that whatever opportunity there was to cut it down for that purpose is probably lost at this point.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right. That's a good point.

Obviously, the reason I raised those two questions was to say that if we are treating the health of the tree as being the driver here, as opposed to considerations about what kind of work has to go on in and under the space occupied by the tree, then there is no cause for hurrying. One can deal with this just as well in the autumn of 2019 as in the spring of 2019. The point was to put out to colleagues in this committee that we ought not to hurry for that reason.

There was talk about soil remediation and the importance of doing soil remediation in this area, which I just simply don't understand. What is the reason for doing soil remediation?

Mr. Paul Johanis: The critical root zone of the elm right now is partly a parking lot. There's pavement and cars parked there. The rest of it, up until very recently, was very publicly accessible. There's a lot of foot traffic and a lot of vehicular traffic right around it, so that will cause compaction of the soil. The remediation is basically to loosen up the soil to allow for more oxygen penetration and to make it more available to the tree that way.

Mr. Scott Reid: Oh, I see. So, soil remediation could be done in order to help enhance the health of the tree.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Absolutely. That's what it's required for, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: So, if we were to cut down the tree, there would be no need for soil remediation.

Mr. Paul Johanis: No.

Mr. Scott Reid: If we try to save the tree, then there might be need for soil remediation.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes, because then what you want to do is give it every chance to survive and every chance to thrive, so you would want to take this opportunity in a way. Now that everything has been cleared out, you can actually do the soil remediation because half the work is done.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, that makes sense. I get that.

I'm sitting here with the 2006 "Site Capacity and Long Term Development Plan" for Parliament Hill. On page 64, the visitor centre is south of Centre Block. The tree is east of Centre Block. I made a point of going there. I've visited that tree many, many times over the years, or passed by casually on my bicycle, walking or driving, but I actually went to look specifically. It's nowhere near the area that is shown as being covered by the visitor centre. These are very sketchy plans, of course, but nonetheless, as far as I know, no one has ever authorized putting this visitor centre under that spot or close enough that the key root structure of the tree.... Perhaps some peripheral roots might have gone that far, but the key roots that are essential for the tree's survival can't possibly be within the space the visitor centre is going to be built on. There must be some other reason why this space is needed. Do you know what that is?

Mr. Paul Johanis: As I said, there is no public information about phase two of the visitor centre, so I'm in the dark.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

It did occur to me that, as a practical matter, it might be hard to remove the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald without cutting down the tree in order to get the crane over top. I'm not sure that's literally true, but the thought did occur to me. I'm not asking for a comment on that; I'm just wondering.

With regard to the size and survivability of the tree, are you familiar with the Washington elm in Concord, Massachusetts?

• (1130)

Mr. Paul Johanis: I've looked at a number of examples of historic elms like this and it's surprising how many you can actually find. Just around the table here there are examples that I could refer to. I have not seen the Washington tree itself, although I think it's in the book on the trees of D.C. I think one of our members has brought that book.

Mr. Scott Reid: The reason I mention it is that tree died at around the age of 200, more or less; no one knows exactly when it was planted. It was already a large enough tree that it served as a good spot to commission the American army. Supposedly, during the revolution, the American army was commissioned by George Washington under that already large and majestic tree, which was probably a little under a century old at the time. For that historic reason, there was a desire to preserve it until such time as it died a natural death. For the last part of its life it was struggling—for a number of decades.

After ill health was shown, it managed to survive another 40 or 50 years, suggesting that that possibility exists for this tree, at least potentially. There may be some other reason. It may be that Dutch elm disease, which did not exist at that time, is a more formidable opponent. I throw that out more as a comment than as a question, to say that there are situations where trees that are not in perfect health can survive a fair number of years.

Mr. Paul Johanis: I think that's a very good comment. Many of these historic trees are in fact braced, trussed and filled in ways that preserve them and keep them alive. They're extraordinary measures, if you will, but people care about and want to have these trees—are awed by these trees—enough that they will take these kinds of measures.

I'm just looking at Ms. Kusie over there. There's a tree in Calgary, I think—the "Stampede" elm—right in the middle of a parking lot.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): It's in Centennial Park, yes.

Mr. Paul Johanis: It's been kind of kept alive that way. There's other examples like that. The "Comfort" maple near St. Catharines is a huge maple thought to be over 300 years old.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you for recognizing my city as well. I'm very impressed that you would know I'm from there. It means a lot.

Mr. Paul Johanis: You're welcome.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you. That was very informative.

Over my mantelpiece in my house in Perth is an engraving from the 1870s of Parliament as it was then. I think perhaps it was somewhat idealized. The trees are more mature than they would have been at that time. The image that the original Hill was to have was of a park for the general enjoyment of the citizenry. There was an assumption that it would include more green space and less.... We do have a large lawn that is just grass that gets rolled out on a big roller every year, but that was not the plan.

I don't know if you would agree with me, but I feel that we—with our constant construction and reconstruction up here—have lost sight of something that was part of the original vision for this place, which was to be a sort of arboretum for the people. I think that may have been forgotten.

Mr. Paul Johanis: I would agree with you. It's for the people locally, but it's also a strong symbol. It's a strong message.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Could I get you to roll back to the first photo? I think it's quite significant. When you have a look at that photo, what trees do you see? You just see one tree. If our project here is to restore Centre Block, it's not just the building, but it's the site that gives meaning. That tree has stood there almost as long as Centre Block, so I guess I start from a perspective—it's not really a question—in saying we have lost sight of what we're trying to do here when we're focused on the visitor centre rather than the restoration of Centre Block to its former glory and the site that it sits on.

It's not really a question, but maybe you'd also have a comment. Would you agree with me that we're losing sight of something here?

• (1135)

Mr. Paul Johanis: I certainly agree with you. That northeast quadrant, up until last week, was a green space on Parliament Hill. You're up here all the time and you know that in the summertime it's a pretty impressive place if you're standing in the sun out there. It's nice to be able to get a little bit of shade and go and rest. I think preserving the elm and restoring that green space can be considered a priority.

As I said in my statement, we are dealing with a climate emergency. We need to do every small thing we can and we need to do it as soon as possible—not in 10, 12 or 13 years because we have 10, or 12 or 13 years to actually act. Why not regreen that corner right now?

Mr. Randall Garrison: If I understand your presentation and some of the other commentary we've had, even if this tree is unhealthy that doesn't mean it's certainly a dead tree in the short term. It could live a very long time as a less than fully healthy tree, and we can take measures to improve its health, to remediate it.

Is that what you're telling us today?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes. I think only a full assessment of its condition, a complete real general exam with appropriate testing, would answer that question. We just need to take the time, I think, to address that.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Another thing that struck me in your testimony is that I don't believe this project will be done in 10 years. I don't believe it will be done in 12 years. I think it will be a bit longer than that.

When you look at having green space on the Hill, that's a long time that we could invest in planting trees, in remediating this tree, and planting other complementary things on that site.

If we get back to what's our intention here, which is to have that green space, then what you're saying to us is we're throwing away 10 years of progress we could make on regreening that hill?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes, unless assumptions that are currently held about the size and location of the visitor centre are reconsidered, then, yes, that's the case.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Again, as you said, it makes no sense to me that we would not be able to put the visitor centre under that flat grass at the front. I don't know the engineering reasons, but we should at least have a report that tells us whether we could or could not do that before we would begin to consider, in my view, taking apart the green space site there and for 10 years making it inhospitable. It doesn't make any sense to me.

But then I'm from Vancouver Island, and I'm pretty used to citizens chaining themselves to trees to try to preserve them, and I generally am on that side myself.

Are there other examples of this tree anywhere near to the Hill? My understanding is there are not.

Mr. Paul Johanis: No. This is really the sole survivor. There were many elms on the Hill. I'm old enough to remember that there were elms all along the front right by the walls on the Wellington Street end. At every 50 feet maybe there was a large elm shading the front of the Parliament Buildings, shading Wellington Street.

There's a CBC archive video from 1979 showing the workers cutting down all those elms in the fight against Dutch elm disease. It's a pretty hard video to watch actually. Yes, it's not that long ago there were many significant large elms on the Hill, but this is the only survivor now.

Mr. Randall Garrison: What you have presented today is I think two things from my point of view. One is there's no need to rush here. We have a 10- to 20-year construction project going on here so there's no need to rush. There are good reasons.... I think you pointed out that there was a visual evaluation of the tree from last September. I remember last September. All of us were a bit wilted and less than fully healthy at that point.

Is there any reason why you can see that we should accept that evaluation as a full evaluation of the tree?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Our request is that we wait until leaf out to really see if the tree has survived the winter, how well it has survived the winter, and then do proper investigation of its health so there is complete, conclusive, non-controversial information about that topic.

• (1140)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Right. If it's possible to get a re-evaluation of the visitor centre, then the groups that you represent would be supportive of not waiting until we finish the renovation to replant that site, but to replant that site immediately.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Absolutely.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Great.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Lapointe, you have the floor.

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Johanis, for being with us today. I appreciate the information you have provided and the questions from my colleagues.

From what I understand, the tree is about 100 years old. Is that correct?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes, that's right.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Our analyst said earlier that American elms can live 100 to 300 years, or more. You say you got this information from the United States, but are you also considering information that is relevant to Canada? Our climate is more northern.

Mr. Andre Barnes: The information is from the University of Kentucky.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: We are still further north. Do you think that has an impact?

Mr. Andre Barnes: I don't know precisely for these trees, but I could do some research and then forward you the information.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay.

Mr. Johanis, do you have anything to add?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes. Allow me to make a comment.

In the city of Aylmer, just outside Ottawa, there is an American elm tree like the one on the Hill. This elm tree must be at least 200 years old. The tree on the Hill has a diameter of 84 centimetres, and the diameter of the elm in Aylmer must be double that. It's a giant elm tree. In Canada, and even in our region, in Aylmer, elm trees can live a very long time.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: It is certainly sad to learn that the elm tree has a disease. You mentioned the one in Aylmer, but are there several American elms in the area?

Mr. Paul Johanis: In 1979, the National Capital Commission, or NCC, took action to combat Dutch elm disease. It decided to protect the 2,000 elm trees on its lands, and probably the one on the Hill. There was a fumigation program, then an inoculation program for these 2,000 elms.

We don't know how many of these elm trees have survived to date. Several have probably died since then. Perhaps the NCC has this information and should be asked for it. It's a question that we're asking ourselves. We're told that it's the only one to have survived, but is it one of 1,500 or one of 20?

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Where were these 2,000 elm trees?

Mr. Paul Johanis: They were located throughout the National Capital Region.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Does that include the region on the other side of the Ottawa River?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes, because the NCC still has land on this side of the National Capital Region.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Do you think it's the only elm to have survived?

Mr. Paul Johanis: We don't think it's the only one to have survived, but are there 20 or 200 remaining? We don't know.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Speaking of the 2,000 elms, I suppose that others have grown since 1979, haven't they?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Several elms have succumbed to this disease, but they have been replaced by hybrid elms, which means that they have been crossed with species that have a capacity to resist this inherited disease. The elm tree we are talking about today is a native elm, so it has not been crossed with other species.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: This cross is meant to make them...

Mr. Paul Johanis: ...able to withstand the disease.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: In my riding, there is a problem with ash trees.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Here, too.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: All ash trees are being cut down in Laval and the Lower Laurentians. I hope scientists find ways to control tree diseases, including elm disease.

You said earlier that the elm tree on the Hill could be saved. Do you have any doubts? Three arborists went to check, and it seems that this tree is sick. Do you think it could be saved if it was given shock treatment?

Mr. Paul Johanis: We'd really have to see. We have to wait to see how well it has survived the winter and what condition it's in.

I would like to clarify something about arborist reports. In May 2018, in the spring, the first report concluded that the elm tree was in good condition. The second report made following the observations on September 1 concluded that it was in average condition.

It was only in the last two reports in mid-September and late September that it was concluded that the tree was in poor condition. There has been an evolution. Something happened in September that caused the tree, which was considered to be in good condition, then in average condition, to deteriorate rapidly in September. What exactly happened? We think that the weather conditions played a role, but there is no answer. Time should be taken to do a complete examination of the tree to see whether or not it has been affected by a disease.

● (1145)

Ms. Linda Lapointe: I have more questions. You said earlier that you were present when the young people demonstrated on the Hill. It was reported in the news today that the climate in Canada is warming twice as fast as we thought and in the Arctic, it is three times as fast. Believe us, we are very much aware of this. I'm speaking for my children and grandchildren. There is no doubt that action is needed, and we must take it.

You said that you talked to the young people and told them that the tree would eventually be cut down, but did you tell them that the tree was sick?

Mr. Paul Johanis: No. I simply told them that we were thinking of cutting down the tree to make way for a visitors' centre.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay, but couldn't the fact that the tree may not be in good condition have been discussed with them?

These young people were told that a tree will be cut down, but that four trees will be planted in its place. We're concerned about the CO₂ that we breathe and want to remove from the atmosphere, but we're talking about having four trees rather than one.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes, of course. When this measure is taken and the displaced trees have been replaced, there will be a beautiful green space. That's for sure.

As for the elm, there was sufficient doubt about its condition that it wasn't necessary to simply say that it was very sick. We don't know if this is the case.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: There are still three arborists who have been there.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your being here and everything you are doing to safeguard ecosystems. It's important.

That's it for me, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lapointe.

[*English*]

Before I go to Mr. Reid, I'd comment that your researcher appropriately has a green tie on.

Mr. Reid, you're on again.

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. Adam is a man for all seasons.

I believe I made an error in my earlier discussions. I think I said that the Washington elm was located in Concord, Massachusetts. It was actually in Cambridge, Massachusetts. People in both places will be furious with me.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'll discuss it with my friends in both of them.

Mr. Scott Reid: With regard to the term "American elm", that's not a reference to the United States; that's a reference to the American continent, correct?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes. The *Ulmus americana* is the genus for that tree, so it's the North American version of the elm.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

Obviously we are in the natural range of it. Are we at the northern edge of the range?

Mr. Paul Johanis: North of us starts being boreal forest, and so it would not be found in that area. We're near the northern edge of its range.

Mr. Scott Reid: The reason I ask this is that if you're trying to build a long-term prognosis for a tree and it turns out that it is, say, at the southern edge of its range and we expect that climate change is going to cause the Ottawa area to become warmer, then it would be harder for it to survive. However, if this is a tree that is close to the northern extent of its range, that doesn't necessarily mean it has a dismal future on the basis of climate change.

Does that sound like a reasonable thing—

• (1150)

Mr. Paul Johanis: I think that's a correct assumption, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Do you know how far the roots typically extend horizontally for a tree?

Earlier I said I didn't think they would lapse into the area that would be part of the new visitor centre. However, it occurs to me that I might be wrong. Indeed, if there's remediation being done on the eastern wall of Centre Block, which is possible, then it might be that is incompatible with leaving the roots intact.

Do you have any idea of that information?

Mr. Paul Johanis: In normal circumstances, the root ball of a tree more or less mirrors the crown of the tree. That's kind of the general rule of thumb, but it really depends on local growing conditions. If the soil is somehow in certain areas not as permeable as in other areas, the roots will find the best place for them to go, so you can have very idiosyncratic patterns of root growth.

Mr. Scott Reid: There's a lovely photo up right now taken directly south of the tree. If we treat the crown as being the mirror of the root ball, it would indicate that the tree is a fair distance from East Block. The crown appears to go about halfway across the street.

Mr. Paul Johanis: That's likely, yes.

Mind you, there is technology now that allows you to remote sense underground and map out the root pattern of a tree.

Mr. Scott Reid: Cool.

Mr. Paul Johanis: There are arborists who have this equipment. In fact we've had some contact us to offer to provide that kind of service.

The Chair: Could you provide the committee those contacts later?

Mr. Paul Johanis: I can.

Mr. Scott Reid: That's a really good idea.

I assume that being close to an area where activity like blasting is going on.... They were doing it when we were in Centre Block, and we had to listen to the blasting, and I can tell you it was stressful for us. I suspect that it's also stressful for trees.

Do you have any knowledge about whether that would affect the survivability of the tree?

If the visitor welcome centre goes in as planned—and other things will happen with Centre Block that are intrusive and loud—would that affect to any degree the ability of the tree to survive?

Mr. Paul Johanis: As far as I know, if it's not in the immediate vicinity of the root ball of the tree—the vibrations might alter the actual structure of the earth around it and that might loosen up its roots. Unless it's very close to there, I don't know that it would have any negative effect on the elm's survival.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

I have one last question then.

Let's say we make it our goal to try to allow the tree to survive. If it turns out that it is healthy enough that we can expect that it would survive for years into the future if treated properly, what positive actions ought to be taken for its health?

For example, right now, temporary structures associated with the construction are being moved in and placed quite close to the tree in that area. As always happens in a construction zone, you put those temporary structures in spots that will not be excavated but rather in areas that are close to the excavations.

Does any of that—having a lot of traffic over and around its roots—negatively affect the tree?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Yes. If it is going to be a construction zone with heavy equipment all around it, then that compacts the soil. That makes it very difficult. Often trees are lost to exactly just that, the “oops” moments that occur as a result of construction work too close to a mature tree. At a minimum, very solid hoarding would have to be built around the tree to protect it in terms of its immediate surroundings. Preferably, it would not be in a construction zone. Preferably, the construction zone would be moved.

Mr. Scott Reid: The impression I get is that they are not going to have heavy equipment moving through that exact spot and that the immediate vicinity is going to be occupied by those trailers that get dropped in place, in which people go to examine drawings and warm up in the winter and so on.

• (1155)

Mr. Paul Johanis: We had thought, in fact, that it was going to be a staging area in that way. If that's the case, then it would just need to be protected. We were told, that, no, in fact that tree and all the other trees that were there are in the middle of the planned excavation area.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

We're going to find out in a few minutes from the folks who are actually administering this what that situation is.

I want to thank you again. This has been really helpful. I have learned a lot from your testimony.

Mr. Paul Johanis: You're very welcome.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Graham, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have a couple of quick follow-up questions.

Mr. Garrison commented that there's only one tree visible. I'd like to correct the record. There are actually tens of thousands of trees visible in the background.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I said on the Hill.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: On the Hill, there are fewer.

I just want to make sure we don't lose sight of the forest for the trees there.

Mr. Randall Garrison: There is one visible on the Hill.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: One is visible on the Hill.

For the elm tree, if it's only one, how do we pollinate it? Can it be pollinated? Is there another tree around here that could be used to do so? Can it self-pollinate like corn can?

Mr. Paul Johanis: Elms are actually both sexes. They self-pollinate.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Then this tree, if it were left to survive, would have viable seeds survive.

Mr. Paul Johanis: It could survive and it could propagate itself.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: My point was not whether it could propagate itself but whether we could harvest those seeds for use to replant elms after this tree disappears.

Mr. Paul Johanis: That's a very good point.

The seeds could likely be harvested. There is a group called the elm recovery project, at the arboretum at the University of Guelph.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I love the arboretum.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Have you been?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I used to go to the University of Guelph.

Mr. Paul Johanis: That group collects genetic material from these centenary elms. This particular elm wasn't registered with them, and we registered it with the arboretum.

We spoke with PSPC when we had the opportunity to meet with Ms. Garrett—who is here today—and we spoke about the elm recovery project. They undertook to contact the university. We were already in contact with them. I don't know whether we worked as matchmakers here or not, but in the end the contact was made.

Our understanding now is that the University of Guelph has collected twigs from the elm, and that these twigs will then be grafted into root stock and have saplings grown from them. In four or five years they'll be inoculated with the Dutch elm disease—not all of them, but a sample—to see how they react and if they have any resistance. Then the researchers will know whether this elm has genetic material that is resistant to the Dutch elm disease or not. In any event, there will be young trees propagated from this elm.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You made frequent reference in your comments to climate change, which is—as you know—something we all take quite seriously. What is the greenhouse gas impact of working around this tree—there would be a significant amount of extra movement and extra displacements, potentially—compared to the environmental impact of simply moving the tree? What are we saving in terms of that? It's symbolic, but in terms of real savings, I'm trying to see what they would be.

Mr. Paul Johanis: Locally, it's just one tree. It has produced and continues to fix carbon and to exhale oxygen that we breathe in, but it is just one tree.

In the big picture, we're not making the argument that this going to have an impact in that sense. We are saying that this is not just any tree; this is a very symbolic tree. Whatever we do here is in a sense the image of our commitment to fighting climate change.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's all I have for now.

Thank you.

The Chair: Does any Liberal who hasn't spoken have a one-minute question?

I'll go informal now, like we do for one-minute questions.

Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Chair, my question is a procedural one at this point. I know we have other witnesses to hear on this.

From what we've heard today—and I certainly find it very persuasive—we're trying to get a moratorium on further damage to the tree at this point, and then an evaluation of its health. That's one question. How do we go about getting that in terms of this committee?

The second, of course, is a bit of a broader question in terms of the siting of the visitor centre and my own concern that we get busy on the green space and not wait 10 years for that.

I'm a visitor here today. How would the committee have impact on those two decisions?

• (1200)

The Chair: We'll defer that until the end of the meeting, but it's a good question. We just won't do it now, because we have other witnesses.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I understand that we have other witnesses, but I—

The Chair: Are you leaving?

Mr. Randall Garrison: This is my third committee today. I hope not. Also, I have one more coming up. No, I'm not planning to leave, but it's a critical question. I don't think we should mislead people. If, in fact, this committee doesn't have any power to affect either of these decisions, then we need to direct our witnesses to where they need to go next, if it isn't this committee. That's my reason for asking while they're still here.

The Chair: Well, I'm sure they'll stay to hear the next witnesses, so we're going to discuss that at the end.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you.

The Chair: Does anyone else have a question?

We're going to suspend for a very short break to change witnesses, and then we'll carry on.

Thank you very much. It was very helpful information.

Mr. Paul Johannis: Thank you for having me this morning.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Welcome back to meeting number 146 of the committee as we continue our inquiry into the status of the elm tree on Parliament Hill.

We are pleased to be joined by officials from Public Services and Procurement Canada. Here with us today are Robert Wright, Assistant Deputy Minister, Parliamentary Precinct Branch; Jennifer Garrett, Director General, Centre Block program; and Lisa MacDonald, Senior Landscape Architect and Arborist.

I want to make a couple of comments before we start.

One is on the relationship with the National Capital Commission. From *Parliamentary Privilege in Canada*, page 169, “The grounds are maintained by the National Capital Commission by virtue of a

request from the Minister of Public Works”. That's where the buck stops.

I'd also just like to put this discussion about one tree in the larger context. I think that over December and the beginning of this year we crossed the Rubicon in having parliamentarians have input into the development of their precinct. I want to thank Public Works and the Board of Internal Economy for coming to those agreements, which I think will make for good development.

Mr. Wright, before you came here I mentioned that I hoped you might include in your opening comments some real, technical description of the relation of where the visitor centre would be in relation to the nine-metre base coming out from the roots of the tree.

Second, the May report said the tree was in good condition, and subsequently it deteriorated; one of the reasons given was the drought in September. I'd just like to know if there's irrigation in that section of the Hill, water sprinklers, etc.

Lastly, do you have any comments on the fact it was fine in May? I read the dendrologist's report by Mr. Farr that your department provided to us; apparently there was just a one-day cursory evaluation of the tree.

Ms. MacDonald, first, could you tell me a little about your position and your scientific background?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald (Senior Landscape Architect and Arborist, Department of Public Works and Government Services): I'm a landscape architect and certified arborist. I have been a certified arborist for seven years and have been practising landscape architecture for 10 years. I have been employed with CENTRUS since September. I've examined the tree a number of times starting in late September, including having some information from an aerial inspection that was conducted recently.

The Chair: Pardon my ignorance, but what's an arborist and what's a dendrologist, and what's the difference?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: I believe a dendrologist is his position at NRCan, I'm not 100% sure, but he's also a registered professional forester. That's a different qualification. A certified arborist is somebody who practises in the field and has certification offered by an organization called the International Society of Arboriculture. You write an exam to enter, and then you have to maintain your certification with continuing education credits.

The Chair: So that's related to the scientific growth of trees?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: It's related to understanding trees, how they grow, yes.

• (1210)

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Wright, thank you for coming, and I look forward to your comments.

Mr. Robert Wright (Assistant Deputy Minister, Parliamentary Precinct, Department of Public Works and Government Services): I do have some formal opening comments, but I'll try to address some of those questions up front so that sets the stage, if that would be okay.

The location of the visitor welcome centre is obviously a really critical matter to this study. You would all be aware of where phase one of the visitor welcome centre is located, in between Centre Block and West Block, which creates the new public entrance to West Block. The blasting that was referenced through some of the discussion in the first hour was related to the creation of that phase one of the visitor welcome centre. It's a large excavation.

Although the final elements that will be going into the visitor welcome centre are not final at this point, and we're working very closely with officials within the parliamentary administration to clarify that, it is becoming clearer over time. We'd be happy to come and make a presentation on where things are at. We do know, however, and have known for a long time, the broad contours of the visitor welcome centre. The visitor welcome centre in simple terms has phase one as the western section in between West Block and Centre Block. We would see the mirror image of that on the eastern side. The parliamentary complex, the triad, would work together as an integrated complex. As people were referencing during the discussion, it would extend out under the front lawn in front of Centre Block and be a fairly significant facility that would connect the triad and create a host of services that have been requested by Parliament.

First and foremost, of course, it creates significant enhanced security to the triad. That has for a long time now, in getting to an integrated visitor welcome centre, been seen as a priority. Two, it provides a universally accessible, barrier-free front door to Parliament for the first time, obviously extremely important; a number of services for Canadians who will be visiting the Parliament Buildings; interpretive services provided by the Library of Parliament; and of course core services. The intent would be to have some core services for Parliament as well. At this point, working with parliamentary officials, and again it's not final, it would be envisioned to have some committee rooms within the visitor welcome centre as well. We have heard loud and clear on Centre Block that it is very important to retain the look and feel of Centre Block. You would see many important services taking place within the visitor welcome centre. That would enable a restoration instead of a changing of Centre Block, which I think we've heard, critically.

That's the visitor welcome centre. We would be happy to come back or follow up with some images that could demonstrate that in a clear manner.

On the question about irrigation, there is no irrigation in that area. It happens from natural rainfall. Perhaps Ms. MacDonald can speak to this more clearly.

There is a suite of maples, for the most part, and the elm tree is in the area. Some of the maples are invasive. There are some linden trees that are invasive as well. Then there are a number of indigenous trees. My understanding is that maple trees are more susceptible to drought than elm, but you see some of those being quite healthy.

Now, the range of opinion on the health of the tree is critically important, because the conversation really began with asking, "What is the condition of the tree? Would it really be viable for removal and replanting?" Initially, we had a couple of different perspectives, going back to 1995, when a very eminent arborist indicated that it would have a lifespan of about 20 plus years, which we're at about

now due to a couple of factors, of having suffered from Dutch elm disease and....

Just by way of interest, I grew up in "the city of stately elms", Fredericton, New Brunswick. I've been an elm tree lover for a long time.

● (1215)

We took this very seriously. We had some differing reports, so essentially we went out and got a second opinion and a third opinion, as you would if you were getting a medical diagnosis. In fact, I think at this point there are six assessments. It would seem fairly conclusive evidence—and I'll maybe have Ms. MacDonald speak to this more specifically—that the tree is in poor and declining health and is not a good candidate to be removed and replanted, which really informed our advice.

With that, I'll move to formal comments.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon. My name is Robert Wright, and I am the Assistant Deputy Minister for the Parliamentary Precinct at Public Services and Procurement Canada, or PSPC.

[*English*]

Also here with me today is Jennifer Garrett, the Director General for the Centre Block rehabilitation program, as well as the professional arborist Lisa MacDonald who works under the design team for the project, CENTRUS.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Chair, I would like to start my remarks today by thanking you and all the committee members for your keen interest in the restoration and modernization of the Parliamentary Precinct.

[*English*]

Public Services and Procurement Canada is committed to working in partnership with Parliament in implementing our long-term vision and plan that is focused on restoring and modernizing the parliamentary precinct to ensure it meets the needs of a modern parliament and continues to serve as an inviting environment where Canadians can gather.

A core part of this joint plan is the restoration of the iconic Centre Block and the construction of an expanded visitor welcome centre, which will provide important services to parliamentarians and the Canadian public visiting Parliament Hill, providing both enhanced security and a barrier-free front door to Parliament.

Our joint plan to restore and modernize the precinct extends beyond the buildings to safeguarding and renewing the parliamentary grounds and all other spaces key to the operations of Canada's parliamentary democracy.

The landscape and the setting, including the great lawn that serves as Canada's market square as well as the rugged escarpment and the urban forest, are as much a part of what makes the precinct uniquely Canadian as the beautiful neo-gothic buildings themselves.

The restoration of Centre Block and, more to the point, the construction of the next phase of the visitor welcome centre, which will be located underground to minimize the visual impact to this important landscape, will require significant excavation work. Unfortunately, there are a number of trees, including the large elm tree, in the middle of the excavation zone.

To enable the work to proceed, it is impossible for the trees located in the excavation zone to remain in place. Although excavation work is not scheduled to begin for several months, it is highly dependent on the completion of preparatory work this spring and summer on the east side of Centre Block. These preparatory activities include archeological work, the relocation of underground services including an IT duct bank and the completion of a construction road.

[Translation]

Demonstrating leadership in sustainability is a core objective of the long-term vision and plan and the Centre Block rehabilitation. Public Services and Procurement Canada is committed to working with Parliament to reduce its environmental footprint, as well as protecting and enhancing Parliament's urban forest.

[English]

As a means to achieving this important commitment, Public Services and Procurement Canada has developed a comprehensive strategy to minimize the impacts of this required excavation work as much as possible. The focus of this plan is on relocating, wherever feasible, healthy trees that are indigenous to the area and replacing within the precinct all removed trees at a 4:1 ratio. Note that this plan exceeds the National Capital Commission best practice recommendation of replacing trees at a 2:1 ratio.

Of the 30 impacted trees, 14 will be relocated within the precinct. Of the 16 that will be removed, eight are invasive species. To offset the removal of the 16 trees, 64 new trees will be planted within the precinct.

•(1220)

Additionally, the Centre Block and visitor welcome centre projects will include the implementation of a landscape plan that will see additional trees replanted in the east pleasure grounds.

To implement these plans, we worked hand in hand with parliamentary officials who have been engaged throughout the process. We also engaged with the federal heritage buildings review office, given Parliament Hill's important status, and with the National Capital Commission, which reviewed our plans and provided approval to proceed.

[Translation]

In addition, Minister Qualtrough has communicated with the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital about the plan to remove the tree. Departmental officials also met with representatives of that organization. In addition, PSPC responded to a joint letter from the speakers of the House of Commons and the Senate of Canada.

[English]

I want to ensure the committee that removing trees in the parliamentary precinct is seen as a last-resort option. Unfortunately,

the American elm tree is located in a high-intensity construction zone requiring significant excavation work and will not be able to remain in its existing location.

Given the tree cannot stay in its location, Public Services and Procurement Canada sought the advice of independent experts on the possibility of relocating the tree. Multiple arborists were consulted. They found that the elm is in deteriorating health, and given its health, the elm would not likely survive the trauma of relocation even if world-leading best practices in tree relocation are used. The costs to relocate the tree would be significant, estimated at approximately \$400,000. These costs were developed by the construction management firm for the project, PCL/EllisDon, in joint venture. The combination of the elm's declining health, its low likelihood of survival and the significant costs that are involved led us to recommend the tree be removed.

Even if the construction on the visitor welcome centre does not proceed as discussed here earlier and the tree remains in place, significant construction activities in support of the Centre Block rehabilitation, such as the excavation of the foundation and work on the building's exterior masonry, will undoubtedly cause the tree stress and exacerbate its already poor condition. To preserve the legacy of the American elm, it is proposed that the dominion sculptor repurpose the wood in consultation with Parliament. As you may be aware, the thrones used in the newly restored Senate of Canada building used wood donated by the Queen from her estate.

As well, on the advice of the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital, we are working with the University of Guelph to propagate the elm as well as provide genetic samples to support the university's elm recovery project. We recently took approximately 100 twig samples with the objective of being able to propagate up to approximately 50 elms within the parliamentary precinct.

This means that the tree samplings will be reproduced under scientific supervision, and we are committed to continue to work with Greenspace Alliance to commemorate the tree and to work with them and Parliament to find appropriate locations where the newly propagated elms might be planted.

Now that parliamentary operations have been moved out of Centre Block, we are preparing to begin the major rehabilitation program. We want to keep the project on track so that Centre Block can be reinstated as the seat of government as soon as possible. Work in the east pleasure grounds starting this spring is essential to maintain the program's momentum.

[Translation]

In closing, I would like to reiterate that the ongoing engagement with Parliament is essential to ensure that the work being undertaken meets the needs of a 21st century parliamentary democracy without losing touch with our collective past.

Once again, I would like to thank you for your interest, and I would be happy to respond to questions from committee members.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm looking at that picture. Is there any reason the new visitor centre can't start where the little grey hut is and come south towards the lawn?

Mr. Robert Wright: Our understanding at this point is that it would reduce up to around 15% of the planned volume of the visitor welcome centre, which would have significant impact.

If we were to take the root system, as was discussed—and I'll pass it over to Ms. MacDonald—it certainly extends well beyond the trunk of the tree. There's a large zone that would be proscribed, which would require no activity around there.

You couldn't leave it there without changing the visitor welcome centre, but if the visitor welcome centre were to change, it would be very difficult to protect it.

Our understanding is that if there were no construction in this area and the Centre Block rehabilitation were not happening and there were no visitor welcome centre, then it is likely that this tree would have a one- to five-year lifespan, potentially up to 10 years. The likelihood that this tree would still be living when parliamentarians return to Centre Block is quite low, from our understanding and the analysis that has been done, which has been fairly significant. To date, I think there have been six assessments, which is fairly robust for the assessment of a tree.

• (1225)

The Chair: Okay.

We'll go to questions.

Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

Based on what you just said, what would it cost to leave the tree in place?

Mr. Robert Wright: We would have to take a significant analysis of that.

Before we get to costs, you would have a visitor welcome centre that would not be symmetrical. It would have an impact on how Parliament Hill and the landscape look. There would be no getting away from having a visitor welcome centre that would not have the symmetry that was envisioned from its beginning. We've already essentially created that symmetry with phase one.

Because phase one was essentially an anchor for the visitor welcome centre, we did do a broader conceptual design for the whole visitor welcome centre, which at the time was presented to parliamentarians, as well as going through the NCC and so on. It would be a significant re-envisioning of what the visitor welcome centre is, first and foremost.

Second—I couldn't today—we could undertake an analysis, but it would be a significant cost to try to save this tree. What I could say with confidence today is that it would have a low chance of success.

I think one thing that is important to note—because it has been noted that there is construction, and ATCO trailers and the like that are already there—is that the actual construction zone when we set it up will be much larger than what it is. There is no way that this tree will not be behind the hoarding. For the duration of the project, I

can't see how it wouldn't be behind hoarding. It could not be a green space for the duration of the project. I think that's an important element.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: When does this tree have to go, for your timelines as they currently stand?

Mr. Robert Wright: We started with the initial plans, of which this was a part of a broader suite. It made sense with the plan to reuse the tree, to cut it before the sap started running. That was important. We had contracts in place to do the other tree, so it made sense to do it as one piece.

As I indicated, there's a suite of work that has to happen this spring and is essentially starting now. Three essential elements include archeological work; the removal of underground services, including an IT duct bank; and a construction road, which will enable Centre Block to go into rehabilitation. It will allow the decommissioning of Centre Block and enable the excavation work to proceed. Those are critical precursor projects.

All of that has to start this spring. At the very end—and it would cause challenges—as the visitor welcome centre is envisioned now, there's really no way to proceed in which the tree could remain, up to a maximum of the late summer.

• (1230)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You talked about planting 64 trees. Would they be around Centre Block or within the precinct generally?

Mr. Robert Wright: At this point they would be within the precinct generally. We've taken essentially a principle to not replant trees multiple times. The escarpment is the focus of replanting at this point, especially along the pathway at the bottom, because we know that there will be no impact over time.

There is a master landscape plan that will be implemented as we proceed with the projects. As you can see with West Block, there are elements of that landscape plan that are being put in place at the end stage of that project. One thing we could take to analyze is if there are ways to accelerate other elements of the landscape plan over time. We took quite seriously the comments about not waiting for 10 years to have more trees and green space on the Hill.

Of course, the long-term vision and plan guides all of the work that we do in partnership with Parliament. That is kind of a co-developed plan, and we are actually undergoing a revamp of that plan right now. It would be a good time to look at how the landscape plan interweaves within the long-term vision plan and whether there are elements that could be integrated more quickly than others.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I don't have a lot of time left, but I do have some more questions.

In my riding, we estimate we have about 3 or 4 billion trees, so I have a slightly different perspective from others to forestry because we practise silviculture, which is the practice of planting trees, cultivating them and harvesting them 40 years later. I have a slightly different perspective from my urban colleagues who might not do that.

You've already talked about cutting down the tree. The sap should start flowing any day now, I assume. Can we turn it over to the House of Commons to carpentry to make long-lasting furniture for the House, for the new chamber? Is that the intention?

Mr. Robert Wright: Absolutely. We would want to work hand in hand with Parliament on what is appropriate.

We've already engaged with the dominion sculptor to commemorate the tree, and that could come from some carvings that would be put in Centre Block. It could be in other parliamentary buildings. It could be furniture; it could be some significant elements. It could be in public space or in chamber space. That's really to work for co-development with Parliament on that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We talked to the previous witness about the fact that the University of Guelph has taken stubs of this tree. Would you be able to plant the same tree back on the Hill by doing that?

Mr. Robert Wright: Yes. There are two things. One is that they have the genetic material from the tree to be part of their ongoing scientific research. Second, yes, the plan is to plant the same stock throughout the parliamentary precinct. We would be more than happy to work with Greenspace Alliance and Parliament to find the appropriate spots to place those.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you to all three of you for being here, and particularly Mr. Wright. I know of your genuine love of this place. We had the chance, just by coincidence, to find ourselves both on the floor of the House the day before Parliament moved to West Block. I could see you looking on the one hand with a critical eye and on the other hand with a loving eye on the work that had been done thus far. While we are all critical in our own ways of this or that aspect of the move, I think what has been achieved in West Block is, in many respects, absolutely remarkable, quite an extraordinary accomplishment.

I also want to say one other thing. Someone decided to hold off on cutting down the tree until this meeting occurred. I don't know if that was you or somebody else, but if it's you, thank you. If it's somebody else, perhaps you could pass on our thanks for respecting the fact that we did want to meet with you earlier. Events beyond the control of anyone in this committee put that off.

Having said that, I want to ask a few things. I didn't know there was such a thing as the master landscape plan. I wonder if you'd be in a position to send that to our clerk just so that we can get an idea of what that is. We'd all be very grateful for that.

• (1235)

Mr. Robert Wright: Absolutely.

Mr. Scott Reid: Should I assume that's a living document that changes with time?

Mr. Robert Wright: Absolutely, and as I said, we're going through essentially a reboot of the long-term vision and plan, so that is one element that will be updated as well. The master landscape plan dates to 2012, I think, to inform many of the projects such as West Block and others. It is one of those elements being updated as part of the long-term vision and plan update.

Mr. Scott Reid: I have here a copy of the 2006 update to the site capacity and long-term development plan. Is that the most recent update of this plan, or is there a more recent one?

Mr. Robert Wright: That is the most up-to-date plan at this point.

The Chair: Can I interrupt just for a second? Just for the lights, it's a quorum call, so you don't have to worry about it.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, thank you, Mr. Chair.

Please, Mr. Wright.

Mr. Robert Wright: That is the existing framework, and that is the plan that is being updated. There's a trio of documents that create that long-term vision and plan and the implementation framework that goes along with it. We've completed phase one of the update, and now we're in phase two. We'd be happy to come and make a presentation on that.

Mr. Scott Reid: On page 64 of that document is an overhead view of where everything is located, including the visitor centre. I know this is no help to you, as I'm sure you're intimately familiar with this. To state the obvious, it is south, rather than east, of Centre Block, and the tree is not on the footprint of the visitor centre as shown here. I gather something has happened since that time that has been approved through the appropriate channels to extend that footprint.

Mr. Robert Wright: As you can see, that's almost a line drawing at that time from a conceptual perspective. What has evolved is the design development around phase one of the visitor welcome centre, which has recently opened, which also, in a positive way, forced thinking about the broader visitor welcome centre. That initial line drawing has continued to develop, both with professional architects and with the administrations of Parliament, about what would be envisioned in that space.

Again, we'd be happy to come and discuss where we are right now in working with parliamentary officials on what is envisioned, both in Centre Block and in the second phase of the visitor welcome centre.

I would say that the final decisions certainly have not been made with regard to the exact elements that will be in there. However, we are envisioning a visitor welcome centre phase two that would be approximately five to six times the size of phase one, which is a little over 5,000 square metres, so it's a sizable—

Mr. Scott Reid: The 5,000 is the current one or the one you're going to build?

Mr. Robert Wright: The 5,000 is the current one, it's phase one.

Mr. Scott Reid: Would we be talking about building something that's 25,000?

Mr. Robert Wright: That would be up to 30,000. That is *grosso modo* where we are looking.

Again, that's not final at this point, but this is driven by requirements that we're working to put in place.

Mr. Scott Reid: Not all of us might agree with doing that, so I'll have to ask the question: Who would be approving this? We might want to insert ourselves in this process so as to redirect the outcome. Who exactly signs off on this?

• (1240)

Mr. Robert Wright: Again, this committee has been having conversations, I know, with the administration of the House. There's a lot of good work that's going on to help ensure that parliamentarians are more engaged in the work, which I think is essential. To walk this through in maybe a simplified manner, and hopefully it's not overly simplified: We don't do anything without the requirements coming from Parliament.

Mr. Scott Reid: Of course.

Mr. Robert Wright: Parliament sets the requirements and we then work hand in hand with parliamentary officials to develop the plans and designs. We then work hand in hand again with parliamentary officials to ensure that those requirements are being developed—

Mr. Scott Reid: I'll stop you to ask you, when you say parliamentary officials, who do you mean? Do you mean the Board of Internal Economy? The Speaker? Some other body?

Mr. Robert Wright: As Public Services and Procurement Canada, we don't directly interface with parliamentarians. It's the administration of the House that leads that engagement with parliamentarians, of course with the Senate. We come as requested to parliamentary committees.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm just trying to figure it out. Someone signs off so you can say this has been authorized. I'm trying to figure out who. We literally don't know who that someone is.

Mr. Robert Wright: On requirements and on major plans, absolutely. To date, and I know things are perhaps shifting a little now, those presentations and endorsements would have been through the Board of Internal Economy, of course, which the Speaker chairs.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I want to thank you all for being here. I assure you that, like Mr. Reid, I do trust that you understand and appreciate the significance of the Hill and are dedicated to that work. There's no doubt about that on my part, although I may be asking you some tough questions about that.

In terms of the landscape plan for this site, I guess I'm one of those for whom—I've only been here eight years, and I hope to come back for a few more—the treed spot next to Centre Block has been very important. I often meet people there in the only shaded spot. Does the landscape plan for the future include a treed spot on that exact spot?

Mr. Robert Wright: Certainly, and part of the National Capital Commission's review was to really make sure that there was going to be enough soil over the visitor welcome centre to support the replanting of large trees in that area. So yes, part of that plan is to, if you will, reforest that area over time.

Mr. Randall Garrison: So the visitor centre, as it's currently planned, does extend under that site.

Mr. Robert Wright: Yes, if you get an idea from phase one, it's an underground facility and we have the ability to landscape over top of the facility.

Mr. Randall Garrison: You talked about the symmetry, but you're talking about it being five times larger on one side. That doesn't seem symmetrical to me. It would seem logical to me that you could make reductions, and you talked about 15% if you moved back. You wouldn't lose symmetry as a result of that. You might lose it for other reasons. But the size is so different. The scope is so different.

Mr. Robert Wright: Most of the size comes from in front of Centre Block not from.... It would be symmetrical in size, the eastern portion to the western portion. Most of the size is really about the visitor welcome centre. If you've been—and I'm sure most of you have—to the Capitol building in Washington, you'll know the underground visitor centre is fairly similar. The largest component of phase two, the visitor welcome centre, will actually be under the great lawn, invisible to the eye.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I'm still having trouble with the symmetry argument, because it would seem quite possible architecturally to recreate symmetry without having to go underneath this site.

Mr. Robert Wright: As you might note on the western side, there's a plaza and an entry point that acts as a node for Centre Block and West Block. So in the vision, we would be creating that same symmetrical node on the eastern side with the connection point between Centre Block and East Block.

Mr. Randall Garrison: That would be in front of this site, since you've told me that this site would be a treed site.

• (1245)

Mr. Robert Wright: The trees will be over the top of the site, yes.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Like Mr. Reid, I share some concerns about the size, but I've not been sitting on those committees and it's not for us to stick an oar in at this point.

Obviously, we're going to be operating with the new phase one of the visitor centre for at least a decade. So the capacity thing for security and for visitors must already be solved or we wouldn't be able to operate for 10 years just with that portion of it operating. We're operating with committee rooms. All those things are operating for the next decade.

I have questions about whether the necessity of that visitor centre being of that size has been a proven point. I guess it all comes back to what our priorities are here. My priority is that it be a treed site and that the work start on that essentially.

When you talked about the studies for the tree, you said an interesting thing we hadn't heard before. I'd like to know how many of those studies were premised on the tree having to move, because that's what you actually said to us, that the tree was studied for moving not for preservation.

Do we have any studies that asked what it would take to preserve that tree on site? It doesn't sound as if we do.

Mr. Robert Wright: There are a number of points and questions there. I'll maybe start with the last one and then pass off to Ms. MacDonald.

You're quite right. A lot of the analysis was about whether this tree was a viable candidate for relocation and replanting, but we did look at what would be required if the tree were to stay in situ; if the visitor welcome centre were going to be quite significantly altered in its scope, what would have to be done? It seemed to be, one, fairly significant, and, two, with a low likelihood of success.

Maybe I'll pass it on to Ms. MacDonald to give some expert testimony.

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: I evaluated the tree primarily for assessment as a candidate for transplant, for sure, but one of the earlier reports specifically looked at retaining it in place. The determination of that arborist was that the remediation to the root zone would not likely ensure long-term survival of the tree.

I have similar concerns for its long-term survival. I think it probably will leaf out this spring, but, to me, the questions are, how much longer does it have and why do we think that?

The drought conditions that were experienced last summer are a really valid point in terms of that being the sole determination of the tree's health, but that wasn't entirely what I based my assessment on. When I looked at the tree in September, it had very poor foliage, but it was compared to the other tree and also compared to the different components within the tree that were of concern to me. The north half of it had really bad foliage and the south half had slightly better foliage. Based on my evaluation at the time, I concluded that the north half is possibly diseased.

It is also impacted by a really large cavity injury. A cavity isn't necessarily a bad thing in a tree. Very large trees can survive cavities with no problem. However, the location of this one was of concern to me. The fact that it was on the part of the stem that was showing diminished foliage was more conclusive to me in terms of the tree's general health, as opposed to just the tree having not very many leaves. It is sort of a question of being relative to itself.

In the long term, I think there will be more and more dieback on that tree. The decision has to be made about what value it is offering in terms of that, and I suppose at what point it is past the point of being worth saving.

It's difficult to determine exactly when a tree is dead. If a tree has one living branch on it and the rest of the tree is not alive, then technically it's still living.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Excuse me. With respect, we're a long way from that with this tree.

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: It's certainly a long way from having just one living branch on the whole tree. However, I found that a good

half of the tree was in pretty rough condition, and that was confirmed by an aerial investigation we did in March when we were looking for the twigs to send to the University of Guelph.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Would your professional evaluation be of a higher quality if you had a bit more time to wait to see about the leaf out? Would that give you a better perspective, as a professional, on the health of the tree if you could wait for...? I call this spring, but I'm from Victoria.

Should it wait for spring to see the leaf out? Would you be able to give a better evaluation of the long-term prospects of the tree at that point?

• (1250)

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: More data is always better just objectively, but I feel fairly confident of the assessment I have given so far, considering I had multiple opportunities...including when the tree was in leaf already. The aerial inspection, and looking closely at the twigs, is a really valuable tool as well for arborists.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Chair, I'm back to my same question of how we can be effective decision-makers.

The two questions, again, are, in the short term can we get a good evaluation of the tree, and second, are we making a right choice here with the visitor welcome centre on this spot?

Those are two questions that I'd still like to know how parliamentarians can address.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Garrison.

Now we'll go on to Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): I'm not sure if we're embarking on a venture into palliative care, because for this particular tree, I don't have a lot of faith in its ability to live beyond what we already see.

You just said something about an aerial view of the tree. Can you explain how that works? Does that give you substantial knowledge, a good dataset, as to how long this tree will survive?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: It gives you more information about the health of the canopy of the tree. In this particular case, it gave us more information about the health of the cavity within the tree.

Viewing the tree only from the ground is considered a limitation in terms of an assessment. Last week we were able to get a piece of equipment that brought a staff member up into the canopy to collect the twigs. Looking at the length of those twigs, and the health of the buds across the different parts of the tree does give you a good idea of the health of the tree in terms of how much growth it was able to sustain last year. That's not isolated just to the most recent period; that's the entire year's growth.

It's very important to get a close-up look at the cavity as well. It gives you an idea of whether the tree is successfully containing the decay agent for whatever caused that hollowing.

Mr. Scott Simms: So that's how you monitor the cavity, from above?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: Yes. You go into a lift, and you get close up to it. You can probe it.

Mr. Scott Simms: I had this vision of a drone. I apologize.

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: No, there was no drone; it was a person in a lift.

Mr. Scott Simms: Yes. I was looking for something far more grandiose.

I understand there are limitations to being on the ground. I should know: I'm five foot four. When you look at the tree, what is the most valuable dataset you can collect? Whether it's aerial or it's actually measuring from the outside of the tree, what is it?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: Again, more information is always good.

Mr. Scott Simms: What is the most specific one you look at? If you were to walk up and say you have one measurement to make on this tree, what's it going to be, to decide whether it's in good health or not?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: I would never evaluate a tree based on one measure alone. I'm sorry. It's really a combination of factors. I'm sorry to not provide a more comprehensive—

Mr. Scott Simms: It's quite all right. I have to look at policy all day. I always get it mixed up. I know how you feel.

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: I look at the structure of the tree, whether there are any significant defects like the cavity, in combination with the health of the leaves, in combination with the environmental factors around it, and in combination with how other trees that are nearby and sharing similar environmental conditions are doing.

You look at all these together. You really shouldn't look at any one of them in isolation. Any one out of context could be misleading.

Mr. Scott Simms: You said earlier that what you have seen thus far leads you to believe the conclusion about the lifespan of the tree. Mr. Garrison spoke of waiting to see what we have this coming spring, although you are satisfied with what you have seen so far. But that's not in isolation, is it? How far back are you going?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: We reviewed reports from as early as 1995, but my personal observations started in September of last year.

Mr. Scott Simms: Those are your personal observations in addition to what has been measured since 1995?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: Yes.

Mr. Scott Simms: So since 1995, what would that be?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: We had a report from 1995 and then a further five reports done by external arborists and registered professional foresters in 2017 and 2018.

Mr. Scott Simms: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Wright, this is obviously a more general question beyond just the one tree.

Let's look at the forest separate from the tree. When it comes to green space, how is the green space situation around Centre Block going to look 10 years from now as opposed to what it looked like last year when we closed down or this year when we close down?

• (1255)

Mr. Robert Wright: The plan is to have significantly more green space on the Hill, not less. We're moving towards more green rather than away from it. That really is the plan.

One thing that's critically important is that we're really trying to move to a campus approach to the way the precinct works. One element of that is how—

Mr. Scott Simms: Can I get you to back up for a second? What is a campus approach?

Mr. Robert Wright: The implementation of the long-term vision and plan has been quite an integrated and fairly holistic plan, but it has not addressed things like parking to the same degree as it has addressed buildings or material handling. All of that back-of-house infrastructure that integrates and supports how a campus or integrated space works is critical.

You will note that there is still a fair amount of surface parking on Parliament Hill. The vision over time is to get away from surface parking, to still provide parking for the operations of Parliament, but some kind of parking structure, probably somewhat underground, is envisioned that would allow a significant amount of the paved space to go green and to be replanted with trees, etc.

Mr. Scott Simms: There are a couple of things there. More green space also provides less parking area on the surface. I don't want to say there's less parking.

Are you looking at some underground parking? Has that been decided yet?

Mr. Robert Wright: That is part of the long-term vision and plan. There is no approved project at this point to implement that. However, that has always been part of the long-term vision and plan, to move away progressively from surface parking to an underground type of facility that is not designed and not approved at this point.

Mr. Scott Simms: If you have the right amount of soil above it, as you mentioned earlier, then that underground parking space can be as big as we wish, or that doesn't go out beyond campus.

Mr. Robert Wright: Right. We're well aware of the parking requirements and other requirements of ensuring that Parliament is able to operate.

Again, we work hand in hand with the officials to ensure that the operations of Parliament are supported and that we're able to restore appropriately and modernize the precinct so that it supports a 21st century parliamentary democracy.

Mr. Scott Simms: Right, and the soil above the parking would be thick enough to support a tree of that size.

Mr. Robert Wright: Again, it's not designed at this point. The point is that we're trying to move towards more green space on the Hill, not away from it.

We do, unfortunately, run into these in-between moments when we're doing a major project that has an impact. I understand that the duration of this type of project is a significant period of time, but it is really part of restoring and modernizing the Hill so that it supports the precinct now and 100 years from now.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you. I have one more quick question.

The idea of the underground parking can't be cheap. Has it been incorporated in the budgeting?

Mr. Robert Wright: No, it's not a project that is approved at this point with a specific budget.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. MacDonald, you referred to the previous reports. Apparently the one in May said the tree was in good condition. Has that cavity, all of a sudden, come since May?

Ms. Lisa MacDonald: No, that report actually mentions the cavity and does note the decay in the cavity as well. However, that was done in early May, so the tree hadn't leafed out. It's noted in the limitations of that assessment that there were no leaves on the tree at that point. Whether the cavity was directly influencing the tree's ability to sustain a healthy canopy in that part of the tree at that point wouldn't have been measurable.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Wright, when I asked the question right at the beginning about the possibility of you starting at the grey building and coming forward, you said it would have to reduce the visitor centre by 15%, but why would that be? The front lawn of Parliament is pretty darned big. It seems as though there would be unlimited room there to have that.

Mr. Robert Wright: We could always extend what is envisioned in the front of Parliament. You're right about that. It is the symmetry that would be affected. From all the evidence we have, it would be changing a major component of the plan—which is your prerogative. All the evidence we would have is that it would not lead to the tree living for a long period of time.

• (1300)

The Chair: Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Chair, I'd like to move that the committee request a moratorium on the removal of the centenary elm and construction activity that compromises its health until the end of June to allow for a further evaluation of the health of the tree and of alternative plans that would allow for its long-term survival.

The Chair: Okay. We'll discuss that shortly.

Are there any other questions for the witnesses?

Mr. Scott Reid: Mr. Chair, I was going to have questions, but why don't we just see if there's any interest in debating that, and if not, I would call for a vote?

The Chair: Okay, read the motion.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Lauzon): The motion is:

That the Committee request a moratorium on the removal of the centenary elm and construction activity that would compromise its health until the end of June to allow for a further evaluation of the health of the tree and of alternative plans that would allow for its long term survival.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): We can ask questions to clarify that, right?

Since we still have the witnesses here, what would essentially be the effect of approving a motion such as this? If we were to wait until June, how far back does that set your plans? Could you just give us a better idea of what the repercussions would be?

Mr. Robert Wright: It would have a schedule and cost impact. There's no question about that.

For all of these precursor projects—the archeological work, the removal of underground services and the construction road—the devil would be in the details of how much we'd be able to do given that type of motion. That work was planned to essentially start now, so you would have essentially, I guess, a three-month impact with the escalation costs associated with that, which are significant.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Could you estimate what the costs would be?

Mr. Robert Wright: May I pass that over to Ms. Garrett?

The Chair: Go ahead, but I have to intervene as soon as you're finished.

Ms. Jennifer Garrett (Director General, Centre Block Program, Department of Public Works and Government Services): Contracts worth approximately \$11.5 million have been issued to subcontractors via our construction manager to do the planned work for the east pleasure grounds area, so we will have to work with our construction manager to renegotiate those contracts, and if they obviously can imagine with multiple activities occurring.... It's a very integrated and coordinated level of effort and you have multiple contractors in place, so we would have to task our construction manager, to go back and renegotiate those contracts to make sure that we could phase the worker hold-off of the work—

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Could you possibly end up being in default or breach of those contracts?

Ms. Jennifer Garrett: Not likely in default or breach, but there are definitely increasing costs associated with that work.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but it's past one o'clock and I need the permission of the committee to continue.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You won't have it, because she has a committee meeting. We all have one.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: We have to go.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Let's see if there's majority support to adjourn.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Adjourn.

The Chair: Adjourn?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Adjourn the debate or the...?

Mr. John Nater: If you want to adjourn the meeting, we should have a vote on that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: We put off the inevitable for this tree if we do that.

The Chair: Is there agreement to not adjourn?

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I'm ready to vote on the motion if you want to do that.

The Chair: Okay. Is everyone ready to vote on Mr. Garrison's motion?

• (1305)

Mr. John Nater: I would like a recorded vote.

The Clerk: Mr. Garrison's motion states:

That the Committee request a moratorium on the removal of the centenary elm and construction activity that would compromise its health until the end of June to allow for a further evaluation of the health of the tree and of alternative plans that would allow for its long term survival.

(Motion negatived: nays 5; yeas 4)

Mr. Scott Reid: Before you move to adjournment, Mr. Chair, I wonder if I could just...?

The Chair: Yes?

Mr. Scott Reid: I had additional questions. I recognize that we're at the end of our time and we are on the verge of someone moving adjournment, but I have a number of further questions—I suspect that other members do as well—not in relation to the tree, but in relation to the entire visitor welcome centre and what's been approved, what hasn't been approved and the kinds of contracts that have been given out and so on. I wonder if we would be willing to invite the witnesses—in particular, Mr. Wright—to come back.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Mr. Chair, it's one o'clock.

Mr. Scott Reid: Sorry, I'm not trying to move something. I'm just trying to serve notice of that.

The Chair: We're going to have to adjourn.

To follow-up on that, as you know, and Mr. Garrison would know this, we've worked out a procedure with the Board of Internal Economy to work on these larger issues and plans. We'll follow that procedure and sort out something related to that.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: For sure, those things are all on the table.

Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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