

ANCIENT OAK THREATENED BY ROADWAY

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A group that includes the governor of Louisiana is working to protect a centuries-old live oak, *Quercus virginiana*, growing in the path of a road project in Jefferson Parish in southern Louisiana. (A parish is the Louisiana equivalent of a county.) The giant tree, registered as Old Dickory in the Live Oak Society, is in a strip of woods that has remained untouched for years. Coleen Perilloux Landry of Metairie, Louisiana, chairman of the Live Oak Society, estimates it to be at least 600 years old.

Since Landry discovered the threat to Old Dickory in January, multiple appeals on its behalf have been lodged with local and state officials. Volunteers have pitched in to clean up the littered woods that surround it, and a steady stream of sightseers has gone to marvel at the oak's 7.6-meter girth and 46-meter canopy. "This tree is a living antique, a part of our heritage and our history that is not to be destroyed," said Landry. "It was here long before any asphalt, and if it's protected, it could be here long after this road they want to build is gone."

Alerted by Landry of the tree's plight, Parish President Tim Coulon went to see Old Dickory for himself before asking state officials to try to save the oak as they refine plans. "This tree is worth saving, and that's why we've asked the design engineers and the State Department of Transportation to look at how to save it. It's worth taking extreme measures to save," said Coulon.

Old Dickory's plight has raised public awareness and turned everyday people into tree preservationists who want to help save a living American ancestor. Landry has offers of support from a cross-section of the community, including the hospital auxiliary, New Orleans Museum of Art volunteers, business groups, garden clubs, and civic organizations. "The former consul to Belgium and his wife also want to help," she said.

The response is all the more remarkable because Jefferson Parish, especially during its explosive growth from 1945 to 1986, seemed to place a higher premium on building roads, houses, schools and businesses than on preserving green space. Even today, land developers in most of Jefferson Parish need no permit to clear all trees from private property. And it was only two years ago that Jefferson began forbidding tree cutting on public property without official permission.

Preliminary plans for the roadway called for the street's edge to be built only 7.4 meters from the oak's massive trunk. That would cause root and canopy damage that would destroy the oak according to state landscape architect Herb Piller. Piller said, "Old Dickory is healthy and only needs a light pruning. It's a beautiful tree and it's so healthy because it's been protected here in this urban forest."

Governor Foster told Transportation Development Secretary Kam Movassaghi to see if the road can be rerouted and the tree saved. The design project manager, Ed Wedge, said that shifting the road would be very expensive, "but we all know how the governor feels about trees, and Dr. Movassaghi said to find a solution."

Of the over 4200 trees registered with the Live Oak Society in 14 states, the size and age of Old Dickory puts it among the top 100, according to Landry. The largest

of the Live Oak Society's registered live oaks is the Seven Sisters in Mandeville, Louisiana, a 1200-year-old behemoth with a girth of nearly twelve meters. Also among the big 100 is a tree named Mike, one of more than a dozen registered live oaks at the Franklin, Louisiana, plantation home of Governor and Alice Foster.

Buck Abbey, an associate professor of landscape architecture at Louisiana State University, said the threat to Old Dickory is an example of what happens when communities do not have laws to protect trees and green space. Landry is encouraged by the Parish and State's response to Old Dickory and has begun working with officials to map the state's mature live oaks.

"Thanks to a tip by someone who wants to remain anonymous, we caught this," Landry said. "But just think of what would have been lost if that tree was destroyed after it has sat peacefully all these years doing nothing but providing food for wildlife and giving children a place to play and climb."



Old Dickory: Coleen Landry with the ancient *Quercus virginiana* tree she is helping to save from road construction.

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