Trees and Parking Lots--The Parks Advisory Commission, 1993
By Bob Elton, June 2011

In 1993, I had been on the Parks Advisory Commission about 4 years. My appointment had been a contentious one. Republicans had 6 votes on council, but Democrats had managed to hold up my appointment for about 6 months. Eventually I was appointed, though not unanimously.

After a few years of service, I was selected as chair by the other commissioners. I felt that it was an honor to be able to serve as chair, and I tried to be an effective chair. I remained as chair until I left the commission about 1996.

Sometime in 1993, the city and the VA hospital wanted to fix the problems with Fuller Road, just east of the hospital. The road, essentially, had a series of right angle turns that greatly impeded traffic. The road also encouraged people going to the art school to take a short cut through the VA parking lot. This was clearly a situation that needed to be improved.

The city's planners laid out a path for the right of way for the improved road. Unfortunately, it involved taking down a number of large, old oak trees. Needless to say, there was a lot of resistance from the community. Some of that community resistance was presented to the Parks Advisory Commission at several of our meetings.

It soon became obvious that there was a solution. Re-route the right of way only slightly, and the oaks would be saved. The problem was that the U of M owned the land needed to change the routing. They were not interested in selling the city any land, not even the small amount, less than half an acre, needed to reroute the road and save the trees.

As chair of the commission, I worked closely with Ron Olson. He was fairly new in the job of parks superintendent, but it was clear that he was already making a difference in the way the department was run. Morale was definitely improving, and Ron's reorganization, putting good people in important positions, was making a visible difference in the community. In particular, park maintenance was greatly improved. In other words, the grass was mowed and the trees were trimmed.

I knew from Ron that the U of M was adamant that they were not going to part with any land, not even the sliver we needed to save the oak trees. That was consistent with their stated policy, and with our experience in trying to make land deals with the university over the years.

Then one day in 1993, a representative of the university showed at the PAC meeting. He had a favor to ask. The university wanted to make a temporary parking lot on the park next to the river, a park that was used mostly as soccer fields. There were no trees to cut down, no natural features to destroy, just some grass to be removed and replaced with gravel. The university was willing to shoulder the cost of the parking lot and take care of the construction.

Repeatedly, the fellow from the university told us it was a temporary parking lot until some of the construction of the new hospital complex was finished.

"We only need this for a year or two" he said.

I was stunned. The university was stonewalling us about a sliver of land that they had no real use for, or even the glimmer of plans for use, and at the same time asking us for a favor.

I suggested that perhaps we could trade, the sliver of land to save the oaks in return for the temporary parking lot.

You would have thought that I was suggesting eating our young. This guy was horrified.

"They're not the same issue" he said. Several commissioners echoed the sentiment.

But, I suggested, they could be made into the same issue, and I intended to do just that. After all, bargaining for a used car is all about reaching compromises on price, condition, repairs and so on.

It was obvious to me that in an affluent community like Ann Arbor, no one on the commission, or at the university, had ever bought a used car.

The result of that first meeting was that the university's representative left in a huff.

A few nights later, one of the Democratic city council people called me at home, late at night, and basically told me I was unfit to be a commission member if I treated the university in such an underhanded and impolite mannerNevertheless, at the next PAC meeting, the representative of the university was back. "We only need this lot for a little while, and we can return the land to its original form, replant the grass". That was the promise.

PAC voted to have Ron Olson negotiate a deal to swap the sliver of land to save the trees for the temporary use of this piece of the park.

"If we can negotiate this issue and save the trees, we'll be the real heroes" I said, and was quoted in the newspaper. Ron came back with an agreement that, essentially, did just that. PAC agreed that the city would loan the university the parkland for a parking lot, temporarily, and that the university would cede the sliver of land needed to save the trees to the city. After a great deal of discussion, much of it centered around the possibility of ground water runoff from the lot polluting the river, we recommended that council sign up to this agreement. The agreement clearly stated that they were using a part of the park, and that it was clearly a lease. There was no ambiguity about either definition.

Council agreed, and the deal was done. I considered it a significant achievement of my tenure on the Parks Advisory Commission.

Time passes

The "temporary" parking lot seemed to take root. A decade later, it was still there, albeit still unpaved. I suspect that most people were happy enough to have saved the trees that they paid little attention to the lot.

Memories fade over time, including mine. It is obvious now, after reading about the agreement that we reached, agreeing to a 15 year loan of the land, meant that the university had no intention of having a "temporary" parking lot. And, agreeing that they could continue to renew the loan agreement indefinitely, reinforces the sense that this was never going to be temporary.

Had we been a little less elated over saving the trees, and a little more critical of the agreement, perhaps we should have realized this at the time.

But we didn't.