

Beetle may devour house values

City swings axe widely to stop pest destroying hardwood trees; infestation primarily between Finch Avenue and Highway 407

By SIMON AVERY 01/10/04

Ron Scovell expects that his Etobicoke property is about to lose half its value. He doesn't know exactly when the city workers will show up with their chain saws, but he reckons that they will clean his land of as many as 50 elm trees and a massive weeping willow out front.

The trees range between 45 and 100 years old, and they give the home overlooking the west branch of the Humber River a rustic, secluded feel. Unfortunately, they are within a 400-metre radius of a recent sighting of the Asian longhorned beetle, a pest that scientists consider so dangerous that it could cause more damage than Dutch elm disease, chestnut blight and gypsy moths combined.

In an urgent effort to contain and destroy the beetle before it begins to reap havoc through the province, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and city officials have begun cutting down all the hardwood trees favoured by the beetle within several hundred metres of any sighting. About 600 trees have been removed to date, with hundreds more due to face the axe before May.

A team from Toronto's Urban Forestry Services continues to survey potential hot spots but has not made any new sightings in several weeks.

The beetle infestation was first discovered in September in Woodbridge, Ont. The epicentre of the outbreak is in the Greater Toronto Area, primarily in the industrial area between Finch Avenue and Highway 407, concentrated near Highway 400.

The infestation has spread to several other areas, including the Beechwood Cemetery at Jane Street and Highway 407, and Riverdale Drive near Albion Road, where authorities have found the bluish-black, white-spotted beetle in at least four trees.

Some of the oldest trees in Toronto are found in the immediate area, said Suzan Hall, city councillor for Etobicoke North. "This will have a major, major impact on this neighbourhood. It is one of the worst areas [the beetle] could hit," she said.

"It will have an impact on property values initially."

Under the federal Plant Protection Act, the CFIA can send tree cutters onto private property to prevent the arrival or spread of dangerous pests or disease. But the act does not provide for any compensation to landowners.

Some privately owned trees have already been cut, but for the moment the issue of who will pick up the costs of planting new trees lies in the murky area between federal, provincial and municipal governments and the voters.

Without any means to recoup at least some costs if they lose their trees, homeowners may be reluctant to alert authorities to the presence of the beetle -- a cause of concern for Howard Stanley, a project officer at the CFIA.

"We really need public co-operation. Please, please, if you see signs of the beetle call the 1-800 number [1-800-442-2342]," he said.

One telltale sign of the pest is piles of rough sawdust left by adult females under infested trees. They chew small holes in the trunk and limbs to deposit their eggs.

The Asian longhorned beetle is a serious enough problem that individuals will most likely not be able to contain it themselves.

In addition, it's imperative that nobody removes any wood of any kind from an infested area, Mr. Stanley said.

"There's a very reasonable chance of eradicating this pest as long as there are no other infested sites in the GTA that we don't know about."

Ms. Hall said she is trying to initiate a process in which Ottawa, Ontario, the city and the lumber industry contribute toward reforestation costs.

For Mr. Scovell, a retired biologist who has lived on his property for 42 years, the drastic remedy to the beetle invasion will not only leave an unsightly lot, but will leave the back of his yard, which sits on a six-metre ridge, vulnerable to rapid erosion, he said.

After attending three local meetings with the conservation authority and other officials, he said he's resigned to losing his trees. "How do you fight government? What are you going to do?"

Mr. Scovell would like to see the city try to eradicate the beetle with a chemical called imidacloprid rather than by cutting the trees.

Imidacloprid has been approved in the United States but the Pest Management Regulatory Agency in Ottawa is still evaluating the safety and effectiveness of the substance.

Chris Krepski, a spokesman, said the agency is still waiting for more information from the CFIA, but a decision could come in a matter of days once all the data is provided.

The Great Lakes Institute at the University of Windsor warns that if the bug is not contained, it could have a huge financial impact, possibly wiping out the country's \$100-million maple syrup business and taking a big chunk out of the \$11-billion forest products industry.

There were Asian longhorned beetle outbreaks similar to the one in Toronto during the 1990s in both New York and Chicago, where thousands of trees were chopped down and more than 100,000 others in buffer zones were treated with imidacloprid.