

# The Battle of Punky Spruce

County at odds with Bay Center residents over tree cutting

By NATALIE ST. JOHN  
EO Media Group

BAY CENTER, Wash. — It's been about a month since the Pacific County Department of Public Works cut down 19 spruce trees that bounded one side of Bush Pioneer County Park, and Bay Center resident Monica Pine says it's still shocking to see the long row of fresh stumps. In fact, Pine was so upset that she recently placed white wooden crosses on each stump as a form of protest against the county's decision.

In a late February commissioners' meeting, Department of Public Works director Mike Collins said the trees, which were roughly 80 to 100 years old, had to go because they posed a safety hazard and created liability for the county. But Pine and other frustrated Bay Center residents are skeptical. They say county officials should have done a better job of communicating with locals both before and after the work was done.

"The county should never have begun their tree-cutting project without consulting an arborist first, and Bay Center next. Where did the final decision to remove 19 trees this year alone come from? Are you relying on non-professional county staff to determine the need for cutting healthy trees?" Bay Center resident Caroline Harding wrote in a February email to County Commissioner Steve Rogers.

Bay Center, which is just across Willapa Bay from Leadbetter State Park, is in Rogers' commission district. The county park is a key recreational facility for the small community, in addition to hosting tourists, visitors from nearby South Bend and Chinook Indian Nation events.

## New tree controversy

This is the second time in recent months that a controversy has erupted over the way the county deals with spruce trees. When the Department of Public Works sent out a letter in October announcing plans to remove numerous aging trees on Park Avenue, a group of Ocean Park residents strongly objected. They asked the county to have an arborist evaluate the trees before making any cuts. The county ultimately agreed to leave the trees alone.

During gathering Monday at the park-side home of Eric and Carolanne Watness, several Bay Center residents said county officials should have learned that citizens greatly value trees that grow on public land, and want to be included in decisions about how to manage them.

Many of the residents feel that the trees in Bush Park provided a much-needed windbreak in a neighborhood that sometimes gets battered by powerful windstorms. Now that they are gone, they worry that increased wind volume will damage the remaining trees. They are also concerned about increased erosion, loss of habitat for eagles and other birds, and changes in their property values. "We feel pretty strongly they were uninformed," Carolanne Watness said. "We've yet to see the evidence that they have good information about the trees."

"I think they should have hired an arborist, picked out which trees they were gonna remove and let us know. Then there could have been a comment period. Those steps would have made a huge difference," Eric Watness said.

Another resident, Stan Harding, said county officials might have avoided another tree conflict. "If they had put more communication and investigation into it."

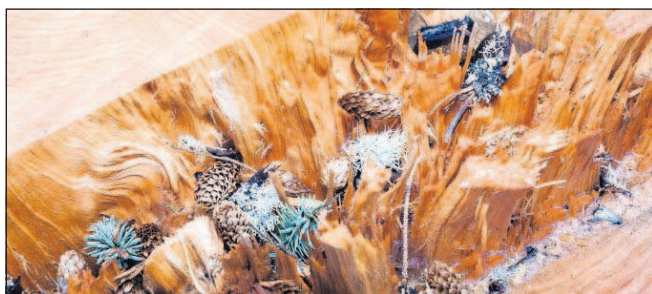
"Yep. Investigation and communication," Bay Center Association President Ed Whitford agreed.

## Restoring 'woefully neglected' parks

In a Monday phone interview, Rogers said the tree harvest was part of a new effort



Photos by Natalie St. John/EO Media Group  
Bay Center residents Carolanne Watness (left), Eric Watness, Ed Whitford, Stan Harding and Monica Pine discussed the need for better communication with county officials during a gathering at the Watness home on Monday.



County officials say these recently-harvested spruce trees were "punky" inside — Bay Center residents think they were healthy. They wish the county had consulted with an arborist before cutting them down in February.

to restore the county's parks, which have been "woefully neglected" in recent years due to budget problems. County workers have already installed a new play structure at Bush Park, and plan to clear overgrown campsites and trails, remove more trees, repair a clogged drainage ditch and install a chain-link fence around the park.

"They're hurt and I understand and I respect that. As a commissioner, I think I could have done a better job communicating, and I have no problem saying that," Rogers said. "But the bottom line is, the trees would have come down."

According to Rogers, Collins evaluated the trees and determined that their cores were "punky," or soft and rotten — a common problem that makes aging spruces more likely to come down in storms. Additionally, their spreading roots were causing stability problems and complicating needed repairs to a drainage ditch that runs parallel

to the trees, Rogers said.

"We have a history of trees over the years in our county parks falling and doing damage," Rogers said, adding that several years ago, an aging tree crashed down on the roof of the park manager's living quarters at Bruceport County Park. The repair work will make an under-used community asset safer and more appealing to citizens, Rogers said.

## Trees should be cut. But which ones?

At the Monday meeting, the residents made it clear that they have no problem with cutting down damaged trees in the park. They agreed that some of them definitely needed to go — on a walk through the park after the meeting, Watness and Whitford discovered that a rotten spruce had fallen during the previous week, smashing a wooden picnic table into splinters.

Whitford said Rogers



Bay Center resident Monica Pine made these crosses to show her dissatisfaction with the county's decision to cut down 19 trees in Bush Pioneer County park.



There is no doubt that some of the spruce trees in Bush Pioneer County Park needed to be cut down for safety reasons. This rotting spruce tree destroyed a picnic table when it fell during a windstorm in early March.

stopped by the local café a day or so before the harvest and told patrons the county planned to cut down "a few leaners." Whitford said he assumed the Department of Public Works only planned to cut down damaged trees, and agreed that the work was a good idea. So he was surprised when they cut down the tall trees on the edge of the park, rather than the more obviously diseased and ivy-covered specimens inside the park.

Some Bay Center residents have wondered why they didn't get a letter announcing the county's plans, like the Ocean Park residents. In the phone interview, Rogers was adamant that the lack of a letter was "absolutely not" a ploy to get the work done without any resistance.

"We just didn't do enough. We just said we were gonna cut some trees. We probably should have thrown a ribbon around them, and we probably should

have had a community discussion. That would have been the right thing to do," Rogers said. "I'm not happy about people being unhappy." He said he did not know why Collins hadn't hired an arborist, but planned to ask him. Collins could not be reached for comment in time for publication.

## Preventing controversy

It's too late to save the trees, but residents say the incident has made them realize that both citizens and county officials need to do a better job of communicating. They are working with Rogers to schedule a community meeting in the near future, and hope to weigh in on the county's future plans for the park.

"The question now is, what does the community want it to look like?" Caroline Harding said during the meeting. "... We need to do a good job of letting the county know what we'd like to see."

# Trial set for man accused in wild police chase

By KYLE SPURR  
The Daily Astorian

A trial date is set for the Seaside man accused of leading police on a wild chase last fall through a Cullaby Lake neighborhood.

Donald Allen Sanders, 35, is scheduled for trial beginning June 7 in Clatsop County Circuit Court. The trial is expected to last two to three days.

He is accused of eluding police, crashing into a yard, breaking into a deputy sheriff's home and assaulting the deputy's wife before being arrested.

He pleaded not guilty to 15 counts. The charges include first-degree burglary, first and second-degree assault, fourth-degree felony assault, attempt to elude, attempted unauthor-

**'Just because we are setting a trial date does not mean that we cannot continue resolution discussions up until trial'**

Cindee Matyas

Clatsop County Circuit Court judge

ized use of a vehicle, reckless driving, unlawful entry into a motor vehicle, recklessly endangering another person, first-degree criminal mischief and driving under the influence of intoxicants.

The October incident started when law enforcement witnessed Sanders speeding in Seaside, heading northbound on U.S. Highway 101.

Sanders continued on to the Cullaby Lake neighborhood. He drove through barricades and went over lawns

and down walking paths. He caused more than \$1,000 in damage, according to the indictment.

He then stopped and allegedly tried to steal a Clatsop County Parks Department pickup truck, but the keys were not inside the vehicle so he returned to his 1995 Nissan Maxima.

Sanders lost control of his car, crashed near the deputy sheriff's house and ran on foot. He broke into the house on the 33000 block of Cullaby Lake Lane and

assaulted the deputy's wife by slamming her into the corner of a wall, the indictment states.

The deputy sheriff grabbed Sanders and Warrenton Police Chief Mathew Workman arrested him.

Charges against Sand-

ers have aggravating factors since the deputy's wife was not provoking him, and he allegedly committed the assault in front of the woman's child.

Sanders' defense lawyer Squire M. Bozorth said he hopes to negotiate a resolution to the case before trial, but has not received any plea offer from the prosecution.

After setting the trial date Wednesday, Clatsop County Circuit Court Judge Cindee Matyas said both sides can continue negotiating until June.

"Just because we are set-

ting a trial date does not mean that we cannot continue resolution discussions up until trial," Matyas said.

Sanders remains in custody on \$200,000 bail.

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