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## Grounds for Enjoyment

by Jim Alexander, Trustee

Based on an article in the Fall 2007 edition of the *Lawrenceville Post*, Society Hill's Newsletter, updated August 2008.



**Society Hill at Lawrenceville is an attractive neighbor of its nearby parks, Village Park and the large Mercer County Park Northwest.**



living here.

In many ways, Society Hill looks like it *is* a park.

Heavily green everywhere you look in the summer, followed by a riot of autumn colors, then, after the chill of winter, renewed blossoms everywhere. Residents add to the joy through a profusion of attractive flowers, demonstrating their pride in



Gently curving roadways and courts allow the eye to focus on nature rather than a developer's grid. We're the envy of other residential developments, and the natural beauty of our seventy-five acres makes for more enjoyable living as well as aiding property values.

These beautiful grounds aren't by accident. They reflect sensitive design by the original developer and conscientious, ongoing maintenance under the oversight of your Board of Trustees and its Landscape Committee. Nobody's had the time to count the hundreds of trees and shrubs on the property (there are over 130 street trees immediately along Gordon Avenue and Society Way alone), but they are all regularly evaluated and annual services planned. Let's see what's involved.

## Ongoing Needs

Each year, the Association spends around \$150,000 on the grounds. (In December 2007, additional funds that had not been needed for snow removal were reallocated to additional landscape work.) This covers landscaping, mowing, seasonal cleanup, tree trimming and irrigation. With Society Hill now over twenty years old, many plantings have matured, and patterns changed, presenting new challenges that call for adaptive responses and longer-term perspective.

Our landscape contractor, DeVries Landscaping, performs regular mowing and maintenance tasks, and makes adjustments as needed. As our plantings mature, they need thinning, removal and replacement. New shade patterns affect both shrubs and lawns. Several times each year, the entire property is formally walked with Joe DiGiovanni of DeVries, and both resident requests and his observations are factored into a plan of work that fits our budget. Joe has been especially helpful in approaching the task with a long-term perspective as well as sound implementation techniques.



Marc Tolo and Joe DiGiovanni

Key to this strategic and yet responsive approach to maintaining and improving our grounds is the work of Landscape Committee leader Mark Tolo, who for a number of years has devoted his efforts to monitoring and planning our landscape. Marc may often be spotted walking among the trees, watching for emerging needs, monitoring plant success and problems, and chatting with residents. He regularly advises the Board of needs and works with

Management and DeVries to fine-tune priorities.

Reflecting this long-term approach, our goal is not simply to perform individual tasks, but to do so with an eye to future changes. For instance, we may plant a tree where it doesn't seem to be needed, in anticipation of a nearby tree reaching the end of its life. Conversely, we may leave an area open after a tree is removed, because a nearby one will grow to fill in the area. We introduce new tree varieties and shrubs in response to experience with insects and ground conditions.

We are especially mindful of the beneficial effects of trees in blocking exposure to the street, and in providing helpful shade. At the same time, with some older plantings now having grown too close to buildings or blocking other trees, selective removals are in order.

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As the box indicates, we have conducted extensive tree maintenance and shrub replacement, as well as renewed turf renovation. There is more yet to be done.

**Major Landscape Work Performed in Last 24 Months**

- 51 Dead or injured trees removed.
- 31 Large pear trees pruned.
- 88 New shrubs planted.
- 46 Tons of topsoil placed as part of turf renovation, including aeration, organic fertilization and reseeding.
- 5 New trees planted, more planned.
- 12 Tree stumps removed.
  - All courts, encroaching trees trimmed.
  - Restoration of wooded area at rear of Coral Tree Ct.
  - Planting of pachysandra and other ground cover in multiple areas.

*As of May 2008.*



Our irrigation system, designed before plantings had matured, is now not as efficient in placing the water where it should go and some components are worn. Working with our irrigation contractor, the Board has authorized some repairs. In the summer of 2008, the system was generally not used, in an effort to encourage the grass to send roots deeper into the earth.

### Adjusting Priorities

While the grounds present a fine campus-like appearance, all the needs observed and requested cannot always be accommodated immediately, for at least two reasons.

- Some work is seasonal in nature, and is best performed when contractor workforces are available.
- The Board is committed to balancing needs with maintaining reasonable maintenance fees.

Similarly, in the past several years, resources have been heavily focused on trimming and removing trees that had grown too close to buildings, and dealing with the tendency of mature pear trees used in many of the courts to be damaged by winds. We've been pursuing a successful program of thinning the branches on these trees, to reduce wind load.

That, of course, called for some dollars that might have been spent on lawn and shrub maintenance to be reallocated. As this special project reaches completion, we will be able to devote more resources to needy lawn areas.

### Grass

As indicated, while most of our lawn areas are in good order, periodic bare spots can be expected to develop. This is because of several factors:

- Effects of snow removal and deicing on nearby grass.
- Problems with dog waste not properly managed.
- Heavy shade and tree roots that gradually starve grass of water and

- light as the summer season wears on.
- Placement of trash bags or cars on grass between curb and sidewalk.
- Soil quality in some areas is not as good as in others for grass.



River Birch trees complement other specimen trees nicely.

Our strategy is to try to respond to individual requests for reseeding, especially where most visible, while pursuing a broader overall plan that involves sound turf management practices. For instance, while we have typically applied pre-emergent materials in the spring to block dandelions, this has been found to fight with new spring grass growth, so we're going to try knocking out these weeds with selective applications so that full chemical

applications won't be needed subsequently. That will give young grass a better chance then.

We're also planning to continue soil aeration with reseeding and adding some new soil. Sometimes this takes several seasons to be effective. It's also apparent that in some areas, for instance where sloped or shaded, groundcover may be a better solution than repeatedly applying seed.

And, as we'll see next, an emerging strategy has evolved to work with nature to a greater extent.

### Respecting Nature

People are increasingly concerned with the effects of heavy chemical use in agriculture and landscaping. Picture-perfect lawns come at an environmental price. The Board is committed to balancing the need for keeping a reasonable landscape appearance that is attractive and supports property values with the long-term goal of pursuing safe, sensible and sustainable practices.

This commitment is already evident in other areas, such as replacement of a number of outdoor lights with energy-saving compact fluorescents, but did you know that for several years we have been using only organic fertilizer on the lawns? It costs a bit more, but we're anticipating that this, coupled with leaving the mowing clippings in place, aeration and other techniques (see Coming Next section below), will gradually improve the soil over a period of years.

Other aspects of our approach to date have included:

- Using pesticides and weed killers at substantially reduced strengths, and more on a spot basis where needed, rather than wholesale applications. In some cases, materials such as insecticidal soaps, benign to animals and birds, are replacing chemicals.
- Practicing intelligent pest control practices that interrupt their life cycle at key points rather than simply blasting the visible problem

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- with strong chemicals, only to have to do it again.
- Avoiding applying chemicals near our waterways.
- Evaluating nature-friendly techniques and materials.

### Coming Next

The board expects to continue working to develop the most sensible, affordable methods to best serve our residents while respecting the environment, and is actively engaged in plans aimed at curtailing remaining chemical use.

Last year we had the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Service county horticulturist visit the grounds and provide a number of helpful suggestions. Also, we have met with the director of Sustainable Lawrence, a local organization devoted to applying practical methods of environmental responsibility to daily living here in Lawrence. We recommend their web site at [www.sustainablelawrence.org](http://www.sustainablelawrence.org) for those who wish to pursue other environmentally sound efforts.

The Board has recently engaged national radio host, author, and garden expert [Mike McGrath](#) to work with us to plan a more complete conversion to organic methods. McGrath brings outstanding credentials including being a former editor of Rodale Press's [Organic Gardening](#) magazine, hands-on experience and a very practical approach. His program is heard locally on Philadelphia's WHYY-FM Saturday mornings.

Implementation will be at the direction of the Board of Trustees, with timing and financing decisions anticipated to be made based on McGrath's expert recommendations.

This is a pioneering effort by a condominium association, and will require expert planning, challenging financial considerations, and multi-year transitional efforts. Residents will be apprised as this effort to curtail chemical applications and build stronger soil and grass moves forward.

~ ~ **Read the latest developments in our organic transition [here](#).** ~ ~

### What You Can Do

- Make sure that pet waste is properly removed and that the same spot is not repeatedly used. It really does hurt the grass!
- Avoid placing trash on the strip between the sidewalk and curb, and don't let your car's engine overhang the grass there either.
- Avoid using rock salt on sidewalks; other safer materials are available.
- When new shrubs or grass are planted, lend a hand during dry spells with a bucket of water, in case the irrigation system isn't reaching.
- Understand that our approach to landscaping is strategic, evolving, and takes time to fully implement.
- Most important, let us know if you see a



Jim Alexander serves on



problem or have a suggestion. We need your feedback, and all comments and requests are welcome and noted. Use our handy [online feedback page](#) to communicate any questions or requests you may have.

the Board of Trustees, and is webmaster of SHLtoday.org. His own web site is [here](#).

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