



Allan Millora photo

Pete Largess of Largess Forestry takes in the view last week from the top of the tulip poplar at the National Museum of American Illustration in Newport.

CITY FOR THE TREES

Newport wants to be a 500-tree species arboretum setting

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

Newport is the only city in the country to have four arboretums accredited by a nationally recognized organization, but planners and volunteers are not resting on their laurels.

The Newport Tree Society is striving for the city to feature at least 500 different species or varieties of trees planted and growing in accordance with an arboretum plan, which would make Newport a Level III arboretum, the second highest category.

"No other city has more than two arboretums," said Helen Papp, project director of the Newport Tree

Society. "It's a testament to the quality of our Gilded Age forest and the commitment of the property owners to be good stewards of those trees."

The Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Ill., created the ArbNet Arboretum Accreditation Program to establish a widely recognized set of standards for the purpose of unifying the arboretum community and providing a mechanism for benchmarking arboretums.

Ben Boisclair, a landscape designer with Sasaki Associates Inc. of Watertown, Mass., told an audience of more than 75 people gathered in the Pell Elementary School cafeterium Monday night that Newport has 263 documented tree species so far, so it needs 237 more species to reach the next level. His

presentation was part of the third and final community meeting on the development of a Newport Tree, Park and Open Space Master Plan, for which Sasaki is the consultant.

A draft of the master plan is expected to be completed by August, said Jason S. Hellendrung, principal of Sasaki Associates. He and Jill Allen Dixon, an associate of the firm, also gave presentations on the work done on the plan so far. Members of the public were asked to fill out forms outlining priority items for the plan, what's missing and any changes they would like to see.

The arboretum push was just one element of many topics discussed, but it attracted attention.

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"Ultimately, our goal is to create a next generation urban forest even more spectacular than the Gilded Age forest," Papp said. "It's a tall order, but it gets people excited."

The city as a whole became one of the few communities in the country to be accredited as an arboretum in April 2014, thanks to a tree society initiative.

The grounds and landscapes of the mansions owned and cared for by the Preservation Society of Newport County were recognized in October 2015 as an official arboretum.

Salve Regina University's 80-acre oceanside campus, which features 1,200 trees of more than 100 different species, was recognized as an accredited arboretum in February of this year.

All three arboretums are Level II, which means they have a minimum number of 100 species or varieties of trees.

The Frederick Law Olmsted Park and Arboretum at the National Museum of American Illustration on Bellevue Avenue was recognized as a Level I Arboretum late last month, when a commemoration ceremony was held. Brian Maynard, professor of horticulture at the University of Rhode Island, presented Lawrence and Judy Cutler, owners of the museum and park, with the official Arboretum Certification from ArbNet and the Morton Register.

A Level I arboretum has at least 25 species of trees, but the Olmsted park boasts some spectacular trees. The Rhode Island Tree Council's technical director, John Campanini, said four of the trees have been designated as "State Champions."

The Cucumbertree Magnolia (*Magnolia acuminata*), Fernleaf beech (*Fagus sylvatica laciniata*), Japanese Zelkova (*Zelkova serrata*), and Yeddo Spruce (*Picea jezoensis*) on the grounds are the largest and oldest of their species in Rhode Island, he said. The Cucumbertree Magnolia, at 82 feet tall, is thought to be the largest of its kind in the world, Campanini said.

For the city to be able to reach its goal of 500 different species of trees, "we need more people propagating trees," Papp said at the meeting.

"We can't find these special trees in nurseries," she said. "We're already hitting a wall in the tri-state area," referring to Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

"URI is propagating trees for us," Papp said. Six have been planted at Pell School, she said.

Blenheim-Newport, an assisted living center in Middletown, has agreed to plant 24 special trees in three raised beds that will be transplanted later to Newport's parks and along city streets, Papp said.

The tree society's Living Collections Committee is overseeing the effort to find and grow a wide variety of trees.

"We especially want to protect endangered native trees," Papp said. "We need help propagating from a list of Rhody natives."

Level III may be as high as a community can go, as far as arboretums go.

Level IV arboretums, those at the highest level, "employ well-qualified tree scientists engaged in publishing sophisticated research, manage living tree collections for the purpose of conservation, and take an active role in supporting tree conservation through the Global Trees Campaign." The Polly Hill Arboretum on Martha's Vineyard, a horticultural and botanical landmark in West Tisbury, Mass., is the only Level IV arboretum in New England, according to the Arbnet website.

The ongoing effort to create an open space master plan, led by the Newport Open Space Partnership, began last summer. It gives residents the opportunity to help create a vision of parks and open space for the next century.

Organizers say this is the first citywide open space planning effort since Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. published "Proposed Improvements for Newport" in 1913, which led to the creation of Miantonomi Park, Almy Pond and other green spaces in the city.

Other initiatives call for a shared pedestrian and bike trail running next to the Old Colony railroad track, from the Fourth Street Diner to the Gateway Center. That would be the "First Mile" and could be critical to connecting the north end of Newport to the rest of the city for pedestrians and bicyclists. Eventually, the trail could be extended north to the Community College of Rhode Island's Newport campus, the planners say.

The plan also calls for improvements to Miantonomi Park, a redefined Harbor Walk and changes to King Park to make it more resilient to sea level rise and flooding, by creating storm buffers and planting salt-tolerant vegetation such as cord grass and spartina grass there.

Beginning later today, people will be able to view the PowerPoint presentation of the plan at newportopenspace.org.

The Newport Open Space Partnership, which is overseeing creation of the master plan, is a partnership of the city of Newport, the Newport Tree & Open Space Commission, the Aquidneck Land Trust, the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission and the Newport Tree Society. It is being funded through grants from the Alletta Morris McBean Charitable Trust and the van Beuren Charitable Foundation, with other grant awards pending.