




MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Kimberly A. McNeeley, M.Ed., CPRP, Director
Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

THROUGH: Stephanie Hayden Howard, LMSW, Assistant City Manager

DATE: September 8, 2023

SUBJECT: Barton Springs Tree Update

On July 6, 2023, Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PAR) staff, performed a regular inspection of iconic Barton Springs leaning pecan tree affectionately known as “Flo”, and noticed a fungal fruiting body at the base of the tree. A sample was sent to the plant diagnostic lab at Texas A&M for analysis. On August 15, 2023, PAR received results confirming the diagnosis of *Kretzschmaria deusta*, also known as brittle cinder fungus. Following the confirmed lab diagnosis, PAR contacted independent Certified Arborists to provide follow-up inspections and independent professional opinions to help guide management decisions. Brittle cinder fungus can cause wood to lose strength and break as a result. As a precautionary safety measure, an additional support rope was installed to and the area around the tree including areas within Barton Springs pool were blocked off from public access. [A press release was issued](#) on August 18, 2023 to communicate this with the public.

Outreach

Upon confirmation of the tree’s diagnosis, PAR staff [created a website](#) for updates on Flo’s status. The site includes background information, photos, and reports. Staff sent notifications to stakeholder groups, as well as a news release for the general public. Interviews were provided to several local media outlets. Additional updates have been shared across the Department’s social media channels and contact lists. PAR staff briefed the Parks and Recreation Board at their [August 28, 2023 meeting](#). Staff provided additional information on the initial diagnosis as well as the process for confirmation.

Findings:

Inspection of “Flo” is now complete. The Department has received three reports with one remaining report to be completed within the coming week. All reports, as well as background information about “Flo”, can be found online at austintexas.gov/BSPTree.

As seen in the reports, the independent Certified Arborists confirmed the diagnosis and provided recommendations. Unfortunately, there are no effective treatments for brittle cinder fungus. Because

the disease feeds on live tissue, it can cause otherwise healthy-looking trees to collapse under their own weight. Because of the lack of treatment options, each of the consulting arborists recommended removal to reduce the safety risk to visitors to Barton Springs.

The current safety precautions that restrict certain areas divides the pool and limits connectivity in the pool. This area limits ADA access as the ADA path goes directly under the tree. Additionally, if the tree were to come down naturally, there would likely be damage to the pool deck that would need to be addressed. Below are the tree risk assessments from the independent Certified Arborists.

Table 1. Summary of Tree Risk Assessments

<i>Company</i>	<i>Predicted Time-frame for risk rating*</i>	<i>Overall tree risk rating</i>	<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Mitigation Options</i>	<i>Residual Risk</i>
Austin Tree Experts	3-5 years	Imminent hazard	Tree Removal	Tree removal	None
Bartlett Tree Experts	3 years	High	Tree Removal	1) Tree removal	None
				2) Reduction of crown spread and height, removal of large-diameter branches	Not evaluated
				3) No action	High, likely to increase
Heritage Tree Care	1 year	Extreme/Imminent hazard	Tree Removal	1) Restrict access to target area, including wide area downstream	Low
				2) Tree removal	None

*Timeframes are assigned by the assessor to frame predicted likelihood of a failure within a specified window of time.

The City of Austin Arborist confirmed that the presence of *Kretzschmaria deusta* meets the dead, diseased, or imminent criteria for Protected trees (25-8-624) and Heritage trees under 25-8-642(A)(2)& (3)(a) of city code. There is no application fee and no mitigation required for a tree removal permit under subsection 25-8-642(A).

Upon receiving additional confirmation of Flo’s prognosis, the Department reached back out to the community and various stakeholder groups. This included sharing updated results as well as answering their questions.

Next Steps:

After evaluating all options and public safety risk, the Department sadly must remove the tree. The Department will host a ceremony honoring “Flo” on Wednesday, September 13th at 7:00 PM. The *Celebration of Life* will feature a water blessing and provide attendees with time to say farewell to this beloved old friend.

In addition, the Department is collecting stories, memories, and photos about “Flo”. The public is invited to share their remembrances at treestories@austintexas.gov. The collection will be shared online at austintexas.gov/BSPTree.

The Department cares for more than 300,000 trees on developed parkland, but few have stood witness and been a part of our shared history as much as “Flo” has. The Department recognizes the importance of this tree to many members of the community and welcomes them to visit “Flo” and attend the September 13th *Celebration of Life* event.

The tree removal is tentatively scheduled for Thursday September 14th during hours that the Barton Springs Pool is closed to allow for a safety work zone.

Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.

cc: Jesús Garza, Interim City Manager