The End Approaches for an Anschutz Fixture

By Tyler Smith

It’s a straight-and-tall campus stalwart standing silently day and night as employees head to and from University of Colorado Hospital. Its roots run deep into the soil and into the history of the ground on which it stands.

“We decided there is nothing more that can be done to save the tree,” Davis said.

Cycle of life. Jones cited a lack of light and drainage difficulties as contributors to the tree’s decline after the hospital and Haselden Construction put in significant effort to work around it and save it during construction of the AIP 2 tower. But the biggest issue is one nobody can get around: age.

But as it must for all of us, the end has arrived for the aging blue spruce near the AIP 2 parking garage and the bridge that connects it to the hospital. It’s a shell of its former self, the needles dried and withered, the once-full body thin and shrunken.

“The tree has reached the end of its life span,” said Steve Jones, groundskeeping supervisor for UCH.

The cycle of the tree’s life now complete, the task at hand for hospital leaders is ending its life respectfully.

The spruce will be removed sometime during the next several months, said Tom Davis, senior director of facilities and security for University of Colorado Health. He said his team reached the decision after a series of consultations with Ironwood Earthcare in Aurora, a tree-care firm that advises the hospital on groundskeeping issues.

Derek Stroden, an arborist with Ironwood Earthcare who has advised the hospital’s groundskeepers for eight years, said the spruce is around 75 years old – “overmature,” in the parlance of his specialty.

The tree is probably as old as Building 500, which was built on the grounds of the Fitzsimons Army Hospital in 1941, said Stroden, who has worked with trees on what is now the Anschutz Medical
Campus since 1999. He said trees like the blue spruce are considered “mature” roughly between the ages of 20 to 70.

“Anything beyond that is living on borrowed time,” Stroden said.

The time ran out earlier for two blue spruces of comparable age on the grounds of the Center for Dependency, Addiction and Rehabilitation (CeDAR), Jones said. The trees stood on either side of the Lori Wolf House, west of the main CeDAR facility, Jones said.

Lifesaving efforts. The hospital took a number of steps to preserve the life of the popular spruce, but aside from age, various factors conspired to make it a difficult proposition. Before the AIP 2 construction began in 2011, the spruce stood in a 10-by-30-foot planter in what was a surface parking lot west of AIP 1. There, it enjoyed plenty of sunlight. The construction of the tower, the new employee/faculty garage, and a bridge connecting the two, however, blocked the tree’s light on all sides but the north.

Additionally, the tree stayed at its original grade while construction crews raised the ground around it for drainage. To keep the tree’s root system in place, Haselden crews built a pit around it. Grounds crews watered it twice a month, Jones said, and applied anti-desiccants to keep the needles from drying out. But heavy rains this summer and last sent too much water into the pit for the heavy clay soil around it to drain adequately. Jones said his team aerated the soil to help the roots get more oxygen, but to no avail.

“The roots were suffocated by too much moisture,” he said.

Jones said the tree’s rate of decline will determine when crews remove it. “For now, we think it could get through the winter,” he said, but stressed that could change depending on its condition.

Filling the void. As for what will take the tree’s place, Davis said the options include converting the area to a picnic space for employees, planting ground vegetation, or keeping the spruce tradition alive with a younger tree. The candidate stands ready for transplant: a robust, vividly blue spruce, nearly 30 feet tall, that now is part of a small stand east of the Rocky Mountain Lions Eye Institute building.

Stroden estimates that tree is 20 to 25 years old and that with the proper care, it could grow another 20 to 30 feet in height. “It’s a decent-size tree with plenty of life left,” he said.

If crews transplant the tree, they won’t return it to the same conditions the older tree endured, Davis emphasized. Crews would cart in tons of dirt to raise the pit about 3 feet so that it is on the same grade as the surrounding ground. As for the lack of light, the new tree’s age will work in its favor, Stroden said.

“It’s younger and more vigorous,” he said, giving it a better to chance to acclimate to its environment, including the amount of sun it receives. The transplant would occur in late winter or early spring when the tree is dormant, lessening the shock of the transfer.

The hospital has established a good tree-transplant track record, Jones said, with crews moving some 13 – all successfully – during
construction of the AIP 2 tower, the RMLEI building, and the driveway that enters hospital grounds from west-bound Colfax Avenue.

“Those trees have all been viable for [up to] three years,” he said.

Even in death, the grand old tree will foster life. When the time comes, crews will cut it down in sections, convert the wood to mulch, and use it promote the growth of thousands of trees and plants throughout the hospital’s grounds.

No decisions have been made, but a robust blue spruce (center) east of the RMLEI building could replace the old tree after it is removed.