

Dear Clayton,

Again, it was nice to meet you by chance immediate post Irma while volunteering after Irma.

Rarely do I have the time to write on matters that don't directly affect my work, but feel led to do so at the moment on two matters of concern: 1, the increasingly negative nature of the social media postings I've been observing since September of last year, post Irma, regarding issues that fall within the Tree Commission. And 2, social media posts and opinions voiced about the mayor's passionate effort to get the Royal Poinciana tree adopted as the "Official Tree of Key West" along with associated penalties and fees, as well as concerns rising out of observation of the recent Tree Commission meeting where this proposal was raised.

Regarding 2 which is of more immediate concern, given it will come before you tomorrow, I recommend (ask) that the City Commissioners respect the Tree Commission's wise action to postpone the Royal Poinciana proposal for further review, discussion and public comment, at the upcoming June 28<sup>th</sup> Tree Ordinance Workshop. That is a proper venue in which to obtain the greatest number of voices/opinions and for a more informed decision to be had. While it may ultimately be determined to be a good and fair-to-the-public proposal, it appears that the rush to gain approval is misguided and the City Commissions should at a minimum postpone a decision until you have the benefit of reviewing the outcomes of the Tree Ordinance Workshop and one would hope, subsequent Tree Commission action or recommendation.

While I am only once voice, I offer my opinions to you, from two perspectives. One from, what I had shared with you upon our chance meeting last September, that of having first come to the island when I was 16 and now at 64 being a property owner, having a home here. And the second perspective from entering early as a volunteer post Irma and how the damage to our island trees, even those unprotected, were responsibly and thoughtfully addressed.

Regarding the first perspective, I've watched all the many changes over some nearly 50 years. I've seen the city grow. Some of the changes very good. Some very unwise or unwelcome. Most have been OK. But throughout all those years, one consistent observation, be it a decision with which I agreed or disagreed, has been the dedication with which our city employees and elected officials approach their responsibilities.

That expressed however, being a leadership coach and strategic partner to CEO's of major multinationals, I was deeply disappointed to observe on video Mayor Cates' public negative comments at the most recent Tree Commission meeting, regarding Karen DeMaria's expert comments and opinion. It was a classic example of failure of leadership in that moment and indicates to me perhaps a blind passion to get the proposal approved, via, in that moment, dismissal, minimization and disapproval of expert staff opinion. I believe our Mayor would be wise to step back from this proposal and allow it to proceed and be processed on its own merits after careful consideration of expert comment from all possible sources and public opinion.

Further discouraging was our Mayor's implication that Ms. DeMaria acted inappropriately to offer her opinion, that she is there, as are other city staff to just blindly "implement", is not only misguided, but goes against what I have observed in my applications, specifically a category for and welcoming of "staff comments". And for sure it goes against the foundation of leadership. Good and effective leadership welcomes staff comments. More often than not, being in the trenches, they have a more informed perspective. Leaders can learn much from them. Ms. DeMaria has every right to offer her opinion as our Urban Forestry Manager, and I would

venture to say, given what she shared she found in her previous experience and research project, her opinion in this matter should weigh more heavily on the outcome. Still further, she and Mr. Ken King were the only two I observed who offered expert opinion on the matter which was not based in passion, but rather in fact, experience and/or research.

Specifically to the matter of adoption of the Royal Poinciana as our Official Tree, Ms. DeMaria's comment regarding her experience that older life-long residents, old-timers and Conchs here viewed other trees such as Spanish Lime with more favor and memories, and never once opinioned on Royal Poinciana is rather significant. That fact demands further consideration and reflection. Again, the upcoming ordinance workshop is the proper venue for such. It would be wise for both the Tree Commission and The City Commission to listen to the wisdom of these opinions from her, Mr. King, other tree experts, and one would hope, a balanced population of the public.

Specifically with respect to both the Tree Commission and the Royal Poinciana proposal, the various social media posts are concerning, calling into question or critical of the fulfillment of responsibility of Ms. DeMaria, or the Tree Commission or both. Passion and negativity should not be the drivers of decisions. From my observation the Tree Commission to date has done well to exclude those drivers from their decisions.

Most revealing are the social media posts regarding Mayor Cates effort to gain approval of the Royal Poinciana resolution. A question was asked in the last Tree Commission meeting as to what is the rush. The Mayor's answer at that time, that the proposal has been in the works a long time does not align with the social media posts praising his commitment to individuals to get it done prior to expiration of his term in office. It is important to keep in mind that the social media posts may not be true, but if they are, it would seem from them that a more accurate answer might include that this expiration of office is the reason for the timing.

Further, regarding posts on various social media platforms regarding the Tree Commission, they are not only revealing, but more often than not, overly critical, or overly passionate, and at times demonstrate to me more a blind passion of saving every living tree on the island, rather than a proper balance between historical data, property owner's rights, preservation, safety, and other important considerations. My concern is if these voices are the only voices present in meetings there is a lack of balance of input for the commission.

In closing, I offer my perspective and experience. Not all that long ago, I needed to apply and seek the guidance of the Tree Commission staff to remove trees on my property, so as to be able to build a structure. It also was convenient that the tree which precluded construction, an avocado, was horribly infested with termites. At first my request to take it down was denied. Later, with the help of tree commission staff, I reapplied and with the additional information regarding the dangerous state of the tree, my request was approved. My project has been delayed, mostly due to Irma, I have just now begun to build. But in retrospect, taking that avocado tree down was profoundly fortunate. When we cut it down, nearly 70 percent of the center of the base of the trunk was destroyed by termites, and surely given the prevailing winds from the Northeast during Irma, it would have landed and crushed my home. And thus, I have been increasingly thankful for the help and guidance the Tree Commission staff provided.

Also, upon purchase of my home, I needed to close a permit that was never closed prior to my purchase. The commission staff were most helpful in doing this. I've still the need to close the permit for which I applied and can do so once my building is complete and I can know for certain where I can plant replacements and not unfortunately kill the replacements during construction.

While I do not know Ms. DeMaria and the staff personally, I am confident I can look to them professionally for that guidance and help not just to close a permit, but more importantly to determine what trees would best work and be most attractive in the space where I am able to plant.

Finally speaking separately to my entire experience not just with the Tree Commission staff, but throughout, the entire process of obtaining a permit to build, starting with Tree Commission to HARC/Planning, and finally Building Department it has been a pleasure. I express this genuinely. From entry clerks, Forestry Manager, Building, Inspectors, and Code Officials, I've found all to be friendly, reasonable, helpful and most of all, solution-minded. I genuinely value and welcome their opinions and guidance.

Respectfully expressed, I believe our Mayor should do likewise, valuing and welcoming staff and expert opinion on this proposal of appointing an official tree. Nothing is lost in a delay. The proposal may in fact on the merits, be a very good proposal, but at the moment, it begs for the application of additional expert information, historical reference and greater public input. That and nothing else, (be it passion, or promises, or politics, emotion or beautiful flowers), should be the basis upon which this important public policy decision should be made.

Again I encourage you and the other commissioners to follow the Tree Commission's wise lead and postpone any action until you have the benefits of the outcomes of the June 28th Tree Ordinance Workshop and subsequent Tree Commission action and/or recommendations.

Thank you and the other Commissioners for the service and leadership you provide.

Kindest regards,  
Rob

P.S. Please feel free to include this as public comment, if you believe doing so is appropriate and helpful and I hope you don't mind that I cc'd the other commissioners to share with them my thoughts and perspective. I don't envy the decisions you all have to make.

Robert Schrull