

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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A New Look For Springfield

This autumn has been a season of spectacular foliage and mild sunny days. The last leaves are still drifting down from the oak trees. One traditional aspect of fall foliage is missing this year, an absence seen by anyone who drives through Springfield on the interstate highways. It is the lack of the brilliant red leaves of the sumac shrubs along the borders of those roadways. That loss is in actuality a long range gain for our region. With apologies to any readers who regret the change, let me explain the new look on the roads that are the gateway to Springfield.

Over the past summer I have been educated about the botany of highway beautification. At the time I-91 and I-291 were designed and built, sumac and other related plants were selected as the ideal border vegetation. They have an extensive root system that resists erosion, they are hardy and they look beautiful each autumn.

All of those factors seem positive, but consider this alternative point of view: They have an invasive root system that encroaches beyond any limit of the original designers. They are so hardy that they cannot be controlled. Their seasonal beauty is small compensation for 11 months of nuisance.

My introduction to the issue came when a motorist called me to complain about his inability to see oncoming cars because the foliage blocked the view at an entrance to the highway. When I transmitted his concern to the state highway department I was informed of the intra-stability of the vegetation. Pruning could not control the growth, and herbicides had been banned because of environmental concerns.

Then federal money arrived to save the day. As you know, Springfield is embarking on a period of renewal. Economic gains and cultural projects are improving the quality of life in the city Mayor Albano says has promised to make it "the comeback city of the '90s." The view of overgrown roadways that greets motorists as they approach the city detracts from the image. There might not be a federal program for every problem, but there is such a program to improve "gateways" to a city. That program has funded the work along our highway corridor.

Over the past summer, those invasive root systems have been pulled from the ground. New shrubs and saplings have been planted. The completed plan will include wildflowers and other additions that will be added in the spring. Landscape architects are using the latest botanical approaches to roadside plantings to provide attractive, low maintenance shrubbery along the gateways to Springfield.

I have watched the changes take place. The clear cutting, the stump removal and finally the setting out of new seedlings. It will take winter snows coming and going before we can see the full effect. Next year, as I start my daily commute to Boston, I will be watching for new flowers to emerge, for results of the efforts to enhance Springfield's new, welcoming gateways.