

Nicolet Townhouse Cooperative Grounds Committee
Joliet Townhouse Cooperative Grounds Committee

May 13, 2025

Detroit Historic District Commission
Planning and Development Department
Coleman A. Young Municipal Center
2 Woodward Avenue, Suite 808
Detroit, MI 48226

Dear City of Detroit Historic District Commissioners,

Please accept this submission on behalf of the Grounds Committee of the Nicolet Townhouse Cooperative and the Grounds Committee of the Joliet Townhouse Cooperative. Our cooperatives are neighbors in the Lafayette Park Historic District. Our committees exist to oversee the caretaking of our respective portions of the Lafayette Park historic landscape.

Our committees have reviewed the plans submitted by Detroit Thermal and have consulted with a professional arborist to assess the effect of these plans on our historic landscape. The determination is clear: the plans proposed by Detroit Thermal would kill mature trees, shrubs, and planted beds that together make up our historic landscape. Ultimately, the plans would irrevocably damage our neighborhood's historic landscape, which is a central component of Lafayette Park's National Historic Landmark designation. The plans will destroy the historic landscape through three primary methods:

1. Excavation will destroy mature trees, shrubs, and planted beds that exist within the excavation sites.
2. Excavation will destroy mature trees and shrubs that have "Critical Root Zones" within the excavation sites.
3. Soil compaction will destroy mature trees and shrubs within the construction site.

Landscape Inventory

The historic landscape planned for construction by Detroit Thermal includes the following:

- More than 40 mature trees, including Honey Locust, Austrian Pine, Copper Beach, Crabapple, Easter Redbud, Siberian Elm, Star Magnolia, White Spruce, Cockspur Hawthorn, and Flowering Dogwood. An inventory of the landscape's largest and most mature trees is provided below.
- Dozens of mature shrubs, including Cotoneaster hedge, Yew, Oakleaf Hydrangea, Doublefile Viburnum, and Japanese Barberry.
- Countless perennial flowers and ground covers, including Pachysandra, Hosta, Ferns, and flowering bulbs.

Landscape Impact

Detroit Thermal's plans would destroy the historic landscape through three primary methods, as listed above and detailed below.

1. Excavation will destroy mature trees, shrubs, and planted beds that exist within the excavation sites.

Mature trees, shrubs and planted beds exist within the excavation sites. These components of the historic landscape will be destroyed at the onset of excavation.

2. Excavation will destroy mature trees and shrubs that have "Critical Root Zones" within the excavation sites.

The "Critical Root Zones" (CRZ) of many mature trees and shrubs exist within the excavation sites (see explanation below). While the trunks and foliage of these trees and shrubs do not sit within the excavation sites, their roots that are critical for their survival are located within the excavation sites. As excavation removes the critical roots of these trees and shrubs, they will be destroyed.

There are at least 12 mature trees with Critical Root Zones that would fall within Detroit Thermal's proposed excavation sites. As these trees die, they will be at great risk for their root systems to become unstable causing the trees to fall. Thus, in addition to the destruction of this natural and cultural resource, damage caused to these trees through excavation would create a safety hazard, risking lives, and increasing liability, resulting in increased costs for our co-op members.

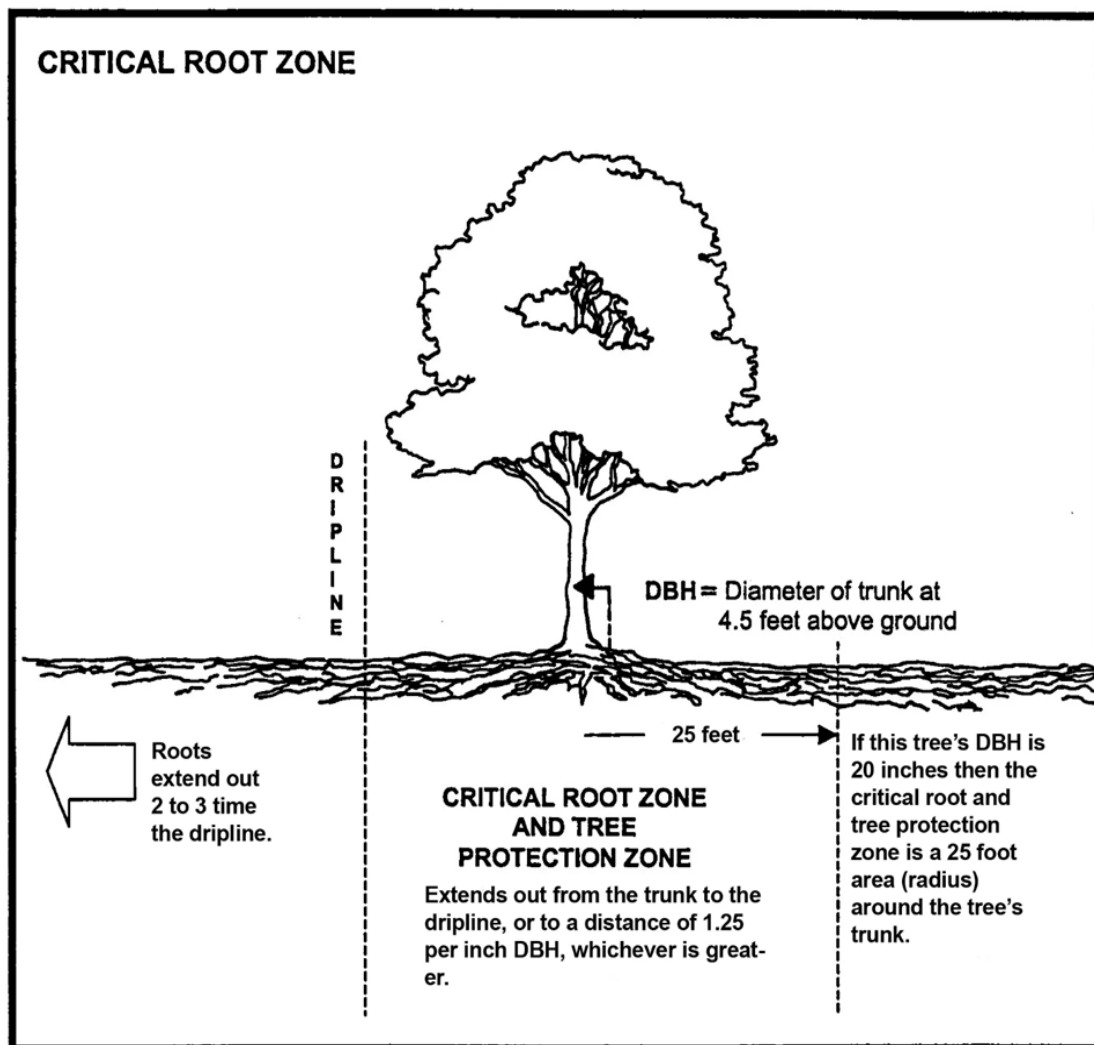
3. Soil compaction will destroy mature trees and shrubs within the construction site.

More than 40 mature trees, dozens of shrubs, and countless perennial flowers and ground coverings exist across Detroit Thermal's proposed construction area. Damage across the area is acknowledged with "restoration in-kind" planned by Detroit Thermal. In addition to planned destruction, soil compaction will destroy mature trees and shrubs within the construction site. Without tree preservation efforts that follow industry American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards and best management practices, the proposed location of equipment parking and access as well as work zones will most certainly compact the soil to the point of root suffocation. Soil compaction will destroy mature trees and shrubs through a process that will start at the time of soil compaction.

Critical Root Zones

Trees need roots in order to stay alive, remain upright, grow larger, and defend themselves from pests, pathogens, and decay. Roots do this by providing trees with stability, access to water, access to nutrients, and cultivating symbiotic relationships with beneficial soil biota. The minimum amount of roots trees need for survival are called the “critical roots.” These critical roots exist in the soil surrounding the tree, called the “Critical Root Zone,” or CRZ. The full root zone of the tree often extends 2-3 times beyond the distance of the Critical Root Zone.

The Critical Root Zone typically extends beyond the dripline of a tree, and is professionally, and often legally, defined as a circle with a 1.0 to 1.5-foot radius for each inch diameter of the trunk of a tree at breast height (DBH). That means, for a tree with a 20-inch diameter at breast height (DBH), (with a standard of 1.25 feet for each inch of trunk diameter) the Critical Root Zone would extend in a 25-foot radius from the trunk of the tree.



Detroit Thermal “Tree Protection” Plan

Detroit Thermal’s plans include a proposed “Tree Protection” plan that is inadequate in several respects.

The inventory of trees is incomplete as mature trees are missing from the plan and tree sizes are inaccurately identified. Detroit Thermal has failed to identify, locate, and mark on their plans at least 20 mature trees, including large canopy and understory trees which would be impacted within the construction area. When compared the tree survey completed by a professional arborist, Detroit Thermal’s plans underestimate the actual size of trees in our landscape. The tree size is underestimated and inaccurate for most of the trees shown on Detroit Thermal’s submitted plans.

Second, the plan seems to only pertain to the largest trees in the landscape, mature honey locust trees, and fails to provide any protection for other species of mature trees. No understory trees, shrubs, or perennial plant material are shown in Detroit Thermal’s plans. The existing landscape contains canopy trees, understory trees, as well as shrubs that are original to the initial landscape planting from the late 1950’s-early 1960s. This plant material is multiple generations old and is thus impossible to “restore” it “in-kind”. Some of the species are irreplaceable due to lack of commercial availability.

Third, the protection identified in the plan does not meet industry standards and thus fails to actually protect identified trees. It shows “tree protection” with a radius of 5-6 feet for trees with trunks of 20 inches in diameter. This level of protection would only be appropriate for trees with trunks ranging between four and five inches in diameter. As is, the Detroit Thermal plan provides no protection for the historic landscape’s mature trees.

Sincerely,

Nicolet Grounds Committee

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