**Showcasing the DNR: A celebrating tradition**

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It’s just after 5 p.m. on a Friday in Lansing. Streets are slushy, the wind is cold, and darkness is falling.

But the cluster of friends gathered in front of the Capitol discussing their evening plans don’t seem to notice – they talk cheerfully in the white, red and green glow of the state Christmas tree, a 62-foot spruce brought in from Alpena.

The tree – officially lit each year at the Silver Bells in the City event the Friday before Thanksgiving – is a beacon of holiday cheer throughout the season.

But it also serves as a Michigan icon.

The state has 20 million acres of forest, 4 million of those designated as state forests. Majestic spruces and firs like the state Capitol trees grow from the state’s southern border all the way to the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula.

And every year, just one of many nominated trees gets selected to grace the Capitol for the holiday season, just like many Michigan families choose their own trees at tree lots and you-cut farms.

Although the Capitol tree is the crown jewel of fresh Christmas trees in Michigan, the state’s tree growers send out 1.7 million fresh-cut firs, spruces, balsams and more each year to markets around the country.

You might think that the tradition of a Capitol tree would date back to when the building was inaugurated, in 1879. But the tradition is much newer than that, according to Capitol historian Valerie R. Marvin.

“There are trees that have been on Capitol Square since at least 1913, but those were considered city trees,” placed by City of Lansing workers, Marvin said.

The first official state tree went up in 1987, after then-governor James Blanchard visited New York City and liked the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. Michigan was celebrating its sesquicentennial, or 150th birthday, and the tree seemed like a festive addition to round out a year of celebrating.

In addition to the ceremonial tree-lighting in downtown Lansing, the City celebration includes an electric light parade, carolers, chestnuts, horse-drawn wagon rides and sometimes fireworks.

But it takes a statewide effort to get to the ceremonial lighting of the tree.

Marvin keeps a couple of folders full of clippings and correspondence about the tree, which reveals the nomination criteria, for one: The tree, procured each year by the state’s Department of Technology, Management and Budget, needs to be a spruce or fir, at least 55 feet tall with a maximum crown of 24 feet and maximum trunk diameter of 30 inches; within easy access to a road, with no interference from power lines and available at no cost.

The clippings contain a history of the controversy over calling the tree a “holiday tree” instead of a Christmas tree. The Senate voted to officially call it a “Christmas tree” in 2005. The Michigan Capitol Committee voted on Nov. 29, 2006 to rename it the “State of Michigan Christmas Tree.”

Marvin’s clippings also include letters to the editor of the Lansing State Journal criticizing the very idea of cutting down a new tree every year instead of leaving the trees to grow.

They tell the story of an Oneida Township woman who had originally planted the 1995 tree in 1957 at a home she later sold. To ease her distress, a wood carvers’ group got hold of part of the tree trunk and used it to carve a remembrance for her.

The clipping file also contains a memo from the late Jerry Lawler, former executive director of the Michigan Capitol Committee, admitting that a lot of effort goes into the tree.

“Quite frankly, the tree is a lot of work …,” Lawler wrote. “However, the thousands who come to see the lighting, and the thousands who view it during the season, make it worthwhile.”

Once identified, the tree is cut down with some pomp and circumstance.

A crane is put in place to keep the tree from crashing to the ground, which could break its branches. The tree is carefully laid onto the back of a flatbed truck provided by the Michigan Association of Timbermen, with stands supporting its trunk and branches trussed together with rope to keep it compact and reduce breakage.

After the tree arrives at the Capitol, local Boy Scouts practice their knife skills and cut the ropes that trussed the tree for travel. The tree is placed by crane into a permanent stand that goes 6 feet into the ground. (It looks like a manhole cover during the off-season).

Then City of Lansing workers use branches from the bottom of the tree or from other trees to fill in any gaps in the branches.

Lansing Board of Water and Light workers string the tree with thousands of lights. The 2011 tree, a 61-foot blue spruce from Houghton Lake, had 3,500 lights; last year’s tree, a 58-footer from the Upper Peninsula city of Stephenson, had more than 9,000.

Colors of the lights vary by year, and not every tree is a critical hit.

Matt White, assistant director of facility operations at the Capitol, recalls the 2012 tree, a 75-foot concolor fir from Jackson, which was done in a red-and-green-striped motif that some said resembled an ugly holiday sweater.

“There was a small percentage of people who liked it,” White said.

People also complained about the 54-foot tree from Sault Ste. Marie in 2016. That year, decorative barriers known as bollards were installed in front of the Capitol, moving the tree closer to the street, and although it bore more than 7,500 red, green, white, purple, blue and yellow lights, people perceived it as puny.

The work isn’t over once the tree is up and glowing. Squirrels sometimes gnaw the electrical wires, and strong winds can cause trouble, White said. Capitol grounds staff keeps an eye on the tree throughout the season.

White, in principle, agrees with Lawler’s 1994 memo: The tree is a lot of work. But, he said, totally worth it.

“I like the way the community comes together all over the state,” he said. “School bands show up when the tree is being harvested. We have big signs on the truck as it’s moving to Lansing. We’ve got the big ceremonial switch that is flipped when the tree comes on. It’s really quite the production.”

Learn more about trees and forestry in Michigan at [www.michigan.gov/forestry](http://www.michigan.gov/forestry).

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**/Note to editors:** Contact: [John Pepin](mailto:pepinj@michigan.gov), Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**2018**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119363/2018.jpg)**:** The 2018 Capitol tree stands tall in downtown Lansing. (Photo by David Marvin)

[**2006-01**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119359/2006-01.jpg), [**2006-02**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119360/2006-02.jpg), [**2006-03**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119361/2006-03.jpg) and [**2006-04**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119362/2006-04.jpg): Workers erect the state Christmas tree in Lansing in 2006.

[**Arrival**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119364/Arrival.jpg): The state Christmas tree after arrival in Lansing.

[**Crane-01**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119366/Crane-01.jpg) and [**Crane-02**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/12/06/file_attachments/1119367/Crane-02.jpg): A crane is used to lift the state Christmas tree off a flatbed truck.**/**