First step toward replacing historic oaks set for April

After two years of unsuccessful efforts to save the poisoned historic Auburn Oaks at Toomer’s Corner, Auburn University is preparing for the now-skeletal trees to be taken down on April 23, weather permitting.

“The university’s Tree Preservation Committee does not believe the trees will survive despite the extensive work the university and others have done to keep them alive,” said Ron Booth, director of project management in Auburn University Facilities Management. “The decaying wood is a safety issue, and the only option we have at this point is to remove them.

Meanwhile, former Tallapoosa County resident Harvey Updyke pleaded guilty in Lee County Circuit Court on March 22 to a charge related to poisoning the oaks in December 2010.

Following the plea on a charge of criminal damage to an agricultural facility, Circuit Court Judge Jacob Walker sentenced Updyke to a three-year split sentence of six months in jail and the remainder on supervised probation. Updyke received credit for time served awaiting trial and, at sentencing, had 76 days jail time remaining.

Under terms of Updyke’s probation, the self-described University of Alabama football fan is forbidden from attending any collegiate athletic event or to speak to the media, must abide by a 7 p.m. daily curfew and is banned from any property belonging to Auburn University. The University of Alabama has also banned Updyke from its campus.

The final opportunity for fans and residents to roll the Auburn Oaks will follow the A-Day football game April 20, when the university and City of Auburn will host a “Celebrate the Tradition” block party.

The “Celebrate the Tradition” event will begin at 5 p.m. in the College Street and Magnolia Avenue intersection. The event will feature well-known Auburn speakers, a spirit rally, music from the band Kidd Blue and one final rolling of the iconic oaks.

The event is open to everyone.

Auburn University is working with two firms – Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects and jB+a – to develop a landscape master plan for potential redevelopment of Samford Park at Toomer’s Corner. The firms

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New faculty officers

The Auburn University Faculty and its representative body, the University Senate, will have a change of leadership on July 1. New and outgoing officers for 2013-14 are, from left, Gisela Buschle-Diller, secretary-elect; Patricia Duffy, chair-elect; Judy Sheppard, secretary; Larry Crowley, chair; Robin Jaffe, outgoing secretary; and Bill Sauser, outgoing chair. Upon leaving office, Sauser will serve for a year as faculty adviser to the Board of Trustees. Buschle-Diller and Duffy were chosen for their posts in faculty elections earlier this month.

Campus planning offices merged into Office of University Architect

Facilities Management at Auburn University has merged the University Architect and Campus Planning and Space Management organizations, forming the Office of the University Architect.

The reorganization is precipitated in part by the impending retirement of Tom Tillman, the director of university planning. First as a student and later as a staff professional, Tillman has been associated with Auburn University for more than 50 years.

Tillman will serve as special assistant to the assistant vice president for facilities management during the finalization of the Comprehensive Campus Master Plan 2012 Update, which is planned for summer 2013.

The newly combined organization will come under the direction of University Architect Greg Parsons, who has been with the university for more than 20 years.

Under Parsons, the Office of the University Architect will be responsible for the design of major campus buildings, the Comprehensive Campus Master Plan and the Landscape Master Plan. The office will manage the planning and review process for property, infrastructure, buildings and space requirements in support of the university’s academic and non-academic missions. The unit also will develop plans in support of capital investment decisions.

Capital Project Program Architect Jim Carroll will manage the design phase of capital projects that are directed by the Office of the University Architect. Capital projects typically exceed $750,000 and are approved by the Board of Trustees. Carroll is also serving as the university design project manager for the Central Classroom Facility.

As part of the reorganization, Jeffrey Dumars has been named assistant director for campus planning and space management. In this capacity, he will be responsible for the assessment of the land, building, and space needs of the University and oversight of the comprehensive campus and landscape master plans.
Auburn gets silver rating for sustainability efforts

Auburn University recently received a STARS Silver Rating in recognition of sustainability achievements from the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. STARS, the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System, is a new program that measures sustainability performance and encourages sustainability in all aspects of higher education.

Auburn’s Office of Sustainability collaborated with Academic Sustainability Programs to conduct the comprehensive self-assessment throughout 2012 and submitted findings to STARS in early 2013. Representatives from several areas on campus participated in gathering and providing data.

“Sustainability improves our ability to make sound decisions for good reasons, and Auburn’s commitment to sustainability has been growing for nearly ten years,” said Mike Kensing, director of the Office of Sustainability. “The STARS initiative provides an important benchmark of current sustainability performance. We learned a tremendous amount and have been able to catalog what we are doing well, where we have opportunities for progress and how we can best move forward.”

Achievements noted in the findings include: 58 percent of Auburn students use some form of sustainable transportation like Tiger Transit, carpools, biking or walking to commute to campus with 27 percent choosing non-motorized options as their primary mode of commuting; more than two million square feet of building space has been added to Auburn’s campus in the last three years, and 36 percent of that is certified LEED Silver or Gold; and 55 percent of the academic departments on campus offer at least one sustainability course.

“We are proud to have achieved a STARS Silver Rating for our sustainability accomplishments, which motivate us to accomplish more,” said Nanette Chadwick, director of Academic Sustainability Programs. “Auburn has a growing portfolio of sustainability-related research. We are working also to increase sustainability content in our courses so that we can better prepare our graduates for their roles as leaders of tomorrow. We are confident that our sustainability efforts will grow and increase in impact as a result of our participation in the STARS program.”

The STARS program is the only one of its kind that involves publicly reporting comprehensive information related to a college or university’s sustainability performance. Participants report achievements in three overall areas: education and research, operations and planning, and administration and engagement.

“STARS was developed by the campus sustainability community to provide high standards for recognizing campus sustainability efforts,” said Paul Rowland, executive director of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. “Auburn University has demonstrated a substantial commitment to sustainability by achieving a STARS Silver Rating and is to be congratulated for their efforts.”

The program is open to all institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada. Because STARS is a program based on credits earned, it allows for both internal comparisons as well as comparisons with similar institutions.

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have received significant input from Auburn students, alumni, employees and others. The final design will be unveiled at the block party on April 20. Horticulture specialists say the site may need up to four years to be free of herbicide, making it suitable for new trees.

To enable the rolling of Toomer’s Corner after football victories this fall, the city has announced plans for poles to be erected on three sites at the intersection with two sets of wires stretched between the poles. The poles and wires will return the tradition of rolling the corner to the practice that was followed until the 1970s, when utility lines were removed and placed underground.

Updates about the oaks and redevelopment of Toomer’s Corner are available online at www.auburn.edu/oaks/oaks.
Visiting Colombian diplomat

Andrés Vargas, center, Atlanta-based consul general of Colombia, met with Auburn University President Jay Gogue during the South American diplomat’s recent visit to campus. Assisted in the visit by Bob McGinnis, left, senior counsel to the Auburn president, Vargas spoke to classes and met with students and faculty as part of a program to increase international exposure for Auburn students.

Biological Sciences professor discovers new species of spiders, gives them names people will remember

What do President Obama, Bono, Cesar Chavez and a creature from Star Wars have in common? They all now have a previously unknown breed of spiders named for them.

Biological Sciences Professor Jason Bond has discovered 33 new trapdoor spider species from the American Southwest. These newly described species all belong to the genus Aptostichus that now contains 40 species, two of which are already famous – Aptostichus stephencolberti and Aptostichus angelinajolieae.

Bond, who is also curator for the Auburn University Museum of Natural History, has named one of the newly discovered spiders Aptostichus barackobamaei, in honor of Barack Obama, 44th president of the United States and reputed fan of Spiderman comics. Another species was named Aptostichus bonoi from Joshua Tree National Park, named for the lead singer of the Irish rock band U2. The genus also now includes other notable names such as: Aptostichus sarlacc from the Mojave Desert, named for George Lucas’ Star Wars creature, the Sarlacc from the fictional desert planet Tatooine; Aptostichus edwardabbeyi, named for environmentalist and author Edward Abbey (1927-89); Aptostichus pennjillettei, named for illusionist and intellectual Penn Jillette; and Aptostichus chavezi, named for Mexican American civil rights and labor activist Cesar Chavez (1927-93).

Bond, a trapdoor spider expert, said he was excited at the prospect of such a remarkable and large find of new species in the United States and particularly California. “California is characterized as a ‘biodiversity hotspot,’” Bond said. “Although this designation is primarily based on plant diversity, the region is clearly very rich in its animal diversity as well. While it is absolutely remarkable that a large number of species from such a heavily populated area have gone unnoticed, it clearly speaks volumes to how little we know of the biodiversity around us and that many more species on the planet await discovery.”

Like other trapdoor spider species, individuals are rarely seen because they live in below-ground burrows that are covered by trapdoors, made by the spider using mixtures of soil, sand and/or plant material and silk. The trapdoor serves to hide the spider when it forages for meals at the burrow entrance, usually at night. Aptostichus species are found in an amazing number of Californian habitats to include coastal sand dunes, chaparral, desert, oak woodland forests and at high altitudes in the alpine habitats of the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

“This particular group of trapdoor spiders is among some of the most beautiful with which I have worked,” Bond said. “Species often have gorgeous tiger-stripping on their abdomens. Aptostichus, to my mind, represents a true adaptive radiation – a classical situation in evolutionary biology where diversification, or speciation, has occurred such that a large number of species occupy a wide range of different habitats.”

Bond also noted that while a number of the species have rather fanciful names, his favorite is the one named for his daughter Elisabeth.

“Elisabeth’s spider is from an incredibly extreme desert environment out near Barstow, Calif., that is the site of a relatively young volcanic cinder cone,” he said. “The spiders make their burrows among the lava tubes that extend out from the cone. It is a spectacular place to visit but the species is very difficult to collect because the spiders build rather deep burrows among the rocks.”

Auburn Journalism Awards to honor professor, editor, reporters, author

Auburn University Journalism Professor Ed Williams is one of five honorees who will receive a 2013 Auburn Journalism Award. The other honorees are editor and publisher Guy N. Rhodes of The Tuskegee News, sports columnist Mike Easterling, formerly of The Huntsville Times, veteran Associated Press Montgomery reporter Phillip Rawls and best-selling detective novelist Ace Atkins.

The Auburn University Journalism Advisory Council presents the annual awards “to recognize and honor the best professional performers in our field with Alabama roots,” said Roy Bain, Auburn Journalism Awards committee chairman. Honorees will accept their awards during a luncheon ceremony at The Hotel at Auburn University and Dixon Conference Center on April 19.

Williams will receive the Distinguished Special Achievement in Journalism Award after teaching journalism at Auburn University for 30 years. He plans to retire in June. Besides his classroom duties, Williams served as adviser to The Auburn Plainsman for 23 years. The campus newspaper was awarded 13 Pacemaker awards in those years, the highest national honor in student journalism. He stepped down as Plainsman adviser in 2008 to continue his teaching role. He has endowed the Ed Williams Scholarship to be awarded to journalism students who work at The Plainsman.

Rhodes is to receive the Distinguished Alabama Community Journalist Award. Rhodes served as executive sports editor and managing editor of the Opelika-Auburn News from 1973-90 before joining the Auburn Bulletin and The Tuskegee News in 1990. The News has received nearly three dozen Alabama Press Association Better Newspaper awards since Rhodes joined its staff.

Easterling will be presented the Distinguished Alabama Community Sports Journalist Award. The former prep sports editor of The Huntsville Times, Easterling received more than a dozen awards for his sports writing.

Rawls will receive the Distinguished Mass Media Achievement Award. The Alabama statehouse reporter for the Associated Press, he has covered Alabama politics and government for almost 35 years.

Atkins will be presented the Distinguished Auburn University Alumnus in Journalism Achievement Award. He followed his father, the late Billy Atkins, as a member of the Auburn football team. He worked as a crime reporter at the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times and The Tampa Tribune before publishing his first novel, “Crossroad Blues.” He has written more than a dozen novels about hard-bitten characters and in 2011 was selected by the Robert B. Parker estate as the writer to continue Parker’s Spenser series of novels, the first of which is “Lullaby.”
Melissa Baumann named an assistant provost and director of Honors College

Melissa J. Baumann has been named Auburn’s assistant provost for undergraduate studies and director of the Honors College, effective in June.

Baumann is coming to Auburn from Michigan State University, where she is associate dean of the Honors College at Michigan State University and a faculty member in the Department of Chemical Engineering and Materials Science. At Auburn, she will be a professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering.

Marghitu awarded grant to establish ‘Computer Science for All Girls’ program

Daniela Marghitu, who is Auburn’s AccessComputing coordinator and a faculty member in the Department of Computer Science and Software Engineering, has been awarded an Academic Alliance Seed Fund grant from the National Center for Women and Information Technology and Microsoft Research to establish “Computer Science for All Girls.”

The program works to recruit and retain female middle and high school students in computing disciplines. The first camp will be in June.

Several Auburn graduate programs achieve high U.S. News rankings

U.S. News and World Report’s “Best Graduate Schools 2014” publication contains several Auburn programs among its national rankings.

Graduate program rankings updated this year include those in Computing and Marketing at Au...