



Nashville Symphony
Schermerhorn Symphony Center

Schermerhorn Symphony Center Response to Environmental/Landscaping/Wildlife Issues

Background

In July of 2020, shortly after the pandemic began, the Schermerhorn became home to a very large roost of what we believed at the time were European starlings. Only when we decided to have the trees on the property sprayed with grapeseed oil to drive the birds away (due to the damage they were causing) did we learn that they birds were, in fact, migratory Purple Martins.

We further learned at that time that the Purple Martins had chosen our site for their roost because: 1) the site of their previous roost had been disrupted by the removal of the trees, and 2) our site was ideal for the birds – though not for us – because of the type of trees, the amount of canopy, the proximity to the river and the abundance of light on our campus.

Since this phenomenon occurred during our COVID shutdown and did not, therefore, impact our business operations as it might have during more typical times, we worked with The Nature Conservancy and the Tennessee Wildlife Federation to make the best of the situation while they were on our property, understanding that we could not disrupt the roost while it was in progress without doing serious harm to the birds and their migration. The Nature Conservancy and TN Wildlife Federation raised funds to help with clean up after the birds departed for South America.

Though we had hoped that the roost would not return, the birds did return to our property in July of 2021 in even stronger numbers. We literally had more than 100,000 birds living in our trees for two solid months, indicating that we would likely have a long-term, and much more expensive, problem unless we effected a solution. Following the departure of the Purple Martins in each of the last two years, we have had to have our trees professionally pruned to deal with the extensive damage caused by the birds, and the cleanup of bird droppings across our entire campus and building has been an even greater task than we initially imagined. The arborist who pruned the trees also advised that the trees were in decline and would need to be replaced soon.

These and many other factors have led us to develop a plan for addressing the situation. Our plan involves removing and replacing all of the trees on our campus, but waiting for at least one – and preferably two – annual roost cycles between the removal and replanting of the trees. We have consulted with an arborist, a landscape architect, the Nature Conservancy, the Tennessee Wildlife Federation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the Metro Health Department, the Metro Water Department, and the Metro Codes Department's Urban Forester to develop our plan.

Rationale

Recognizing that we have welcomed the opportunity to learn about the Purple Martins and host them on our campus for the past two years, the following are facts and/or considerations important to the rationale for our plan:

- 1) We are a community-supported non-profit organization serving the Middle Tennessee region, and we must raise an enormous amount of money each year from the community in order to fulfill our mission. Any added costs for activities unrelated to our mission will detract from our ability to deliver on our primary mission.
- 2) This year, we were forced to spend more than \$60,000 just cleaning the building and plaza after the birds departed. We are tremendously grateful to the Tennessee Wildlife Federation and The Nature Conservancy for raising money to help cover these costs, but we must acknowledge that the expense has far exceeded what these organizations were able to raise.
- 3) We cannot clean the building every year – not just due to the cost, but because the limestone would be ruined within a very short period.
- 4) We cannot shut the building down for two months of the year while the bird roost occurs, nor can we engage in critical revenue-generating program activity with 100,000 birds flying over the entire front of the building and its main entrances. If we cannot get the roost to move, the annual cost to the Symphony of shutting down for two months of the year will exceed \$4 million a year and create an existential crisis.
- 5) The presence of the birds – especially given their numbers – creates a daily mess so enormous that it would require a full-time crew of five or six people working every day for two solid months just to keep the plaza clean, never mind the building.
- 6) The buildup of bird droppings is so great that we believe it poses a public health risk – especially since the roost is over concrete and stone pavers, and not over dirt where the droppings could be absorbed into the ground. Instead, the droppings get washed into the streets, sidewalks and storm sewers in the midst of heavily traveled tourist areas. Power-washing also has the potential to aerosolize the droppings, which can lead to a potentially even more unhealthy situation in a crowded area of downtown.
- 7) Our downtown neighbors have complained vociferously about the mess and the smell, which lingered for months after the birds departed. None of these parties understood why we could neither move the federally protected bird roost while it was occurring, nor commit bottomless resources to cleaning the mess up every day – even during the first year of the pandemic, when we were forced to furlough all but 20 employees. We also heard these complaints from the Downtown Partnership (who did at least offer some help), the CVC and the Chamber.
- 8) The trees on our campus have peaked, are in decline, and need to be replaced soon. They are root-bound, as the trees are 15 years old and were planted in concrete planters. In addition, the bird population has contributed to a rapid acceleration in their decline.
- 9) Tennessee Wildlife Federation and The Nature Conservancy confirmed that removing this roosting location should not be harmful to the migrating purple martin population, as they have found, and will find, new locations to roost over time.

Our Plan

- 1) Working with landscape architect Catalyst Design Group, we have developed a Landscape Plan for Schermerhorn Symphony Center to be implemented following the removal of the trees. This Landscape Plan has been approved by Urban Forester Stephan Kivett.
- 2) We have applied for and received a permit from Metro Codes to remove the trees from our property, and Stephan Kivett has issued the permit to the arborist we have selected to perform the work.
- 3) We are prepared to proceed with this first step of our plan no later than early April.
- 4) If we leave the trees out for at least one – but preferably two – annual roosting cycles, the birds will find a new place to roost. We would prefer two cycles to allow the birds to settle in at their new roost and minimize the chance that they will return to the Schermerhorn.
- 5) Please find attached the draft of our Landscape Plan currently under review. Our objective is to plant a diversity of species that will be attractive to downtown visitors and residents, while at the same time being affordable for us to maintain over time and less desirable to the birds as places to roost.
- 6) This plan consists of:
 - 15 Chinese Pistache trees
 - 8 Royal White Redbud trees
 - 6 Sweet Bay Magnolia trees
 - 17 Yoshino Cherry trees
- 7) We are currently in consultation with Metro Water Services, The Nature Conservancy and Tennessee Wildlife Federation regarding a mitigation plan that will help to address the environmental impact of removing the trees from the Schermerhorn Symphony Center campus. Our objective is to identify native species that can add to the tree canopy downtown and, with the right timing and placement, perhaps over time serve as a new roosting location for the Purple Martins.