



Good Practice Story Title: Renovating the city's oldest park: how a 2-month job turned into a 15-year long process

Destination: Pärnumaa

Country: Estonia

Submitting Organization: Pärnu City Government

Category:

- ☐ Destination Management
- ☒ Nature & Scenery
- ☐ Environment & Climate
- ☐ Culture & Tradition
- ☐ Thriving Communities
- ☐ Business & Marketing

Destination description:

Pärnu has been a resort town with a rich culture and romantic streets since the 19th century, when the keyword “resort” changed the essence and image of the city. Since 1996, Pärnu has held the title of Estonia's summer capital and is the most popular holiday destination after the capital Tallinn. Lawns, alleys and shady parks were an integral part of the resort's development. As a result, parks and green spaces still cover 20% of the city's surface area, and their composition and preservation are a high priority in urban planning. Pärnu's oldest park, Vanapark, with an area of 3.27 ha, locates in the heritage protection area of the Old Town and the resort, close to the city center. Due mainly to its history and location, Vanapark has been a protected natural site since 1958.

All the gardens and parks built in the 17th and 18th centuries were privately owned. Vanapark was the first public park in Pärnu. Vanapark is made up of two blocks and an alley that borders them. The first lime trees, brought from Neatherland, were planted in 1831. In the middle of the 19th century, Vanapark became the focal point of Pärnu's summer life, with a saloon and a summer house with a historicist wooden decor in the centre of the park, as well as several arbours. Throughout the second

half of the 19th century, it was used for theatre performances, concerts and the reception of visitors. After the First World War, the salon remained in storage until it burnt down in 1917 and was never rebuilt. The park was partially reconstructed in the 1930s and again in the 1960s and 1970s, when the



old sound hall was demolished. During the Soviet era, a memorial to those who fought for the freedom was placed in the north-east of the park.

Currently, one of the central features of the park is the children's playground, which is located on the site of the original in-park field and near the destroyed sounding board and saloon. The rest of the park is used as a green area where you can walk and enjoy the view, spend time with your family and friends, have a picnic or rest your feet on the park bench. Historical groups of native trees and individual trees are clearly visible in the high greenery of the park. Vanapark is very/easily accessible to different age groups due to its location near to the city center. People can come to the park on foot or by bike. Next to the park are bus stops and parking places.

Summary of Good Practice Story:

As a resort town, it is important for us to keep healthy parks in the city area. The trees in Pärnu's oldest park, Vanapargi, were reaching the end of their biological life and posed a threat to both locals and visitors. However, due to the historical value of the park, the plan to renovate the park caused a lot of controversy in the local community, and as a result, the process of its implementation stalled more than 10 years due to disagreements between authorities and financial capacity. To avoid such situations in the future, a maintenance plan for Pärnu's protected alleys was drawn up, which included training and publicity as part of the process. This plan was coordinated with both the Environmental Board and the National Heritage Board, which helped to improve future maintenance. However, despite the felling plan established in the maintenance plan, the poor condition of the trees made it necessary to order additional assessments and to remove more trees than expected. By the end of the renovation work, 104 western heir "Pallida" had been planted in the alley of the park and 40 conifers, 164 medium-growing shrubs and 13 tall shrubs had been planted in the park. During the renewal of the park, the existing trees were replaced by conifers to increase the proportion of conifers in the city.

Issues faced:

As a resort town, it is important for us to keep healthy parks in the city area. The process of renewing Vanapark and its alley started already in 2007. Although the renewal process was written in the city's development plan, the more important reason was the condition of the trees. In Vanapark, the species richness of woody vegetation has been studied twice: the first time in 1996, the second time in 2007. As a result of the latest species richness survey, it can be stated that the number of species has not changed over time (11 domestic and 28 foreign species). The trees in Vanapark alley were reaching the limit of their biological lifespan. An expertise carried out in 2002-2003 showed that the trees were diseased and in danger of breaking. This posed a big danger to the visitors who were enjoying the park area that is located directly next to the city centre. As a result, the plan was to cut down 128 trees, leave some younger trees in the middle of the alley and plant 165 young lime trees from the Netherlands in their place.

However, the plan provoked much public debate and outrage, which was expressed in a picket in front of the city council. The felling of the trees was suspended on the day the work was scheduled to start, as it emerged that it had not been approved by the National Nature Conservation Centre. However,



they demanded a new expertise. The Estonian Dendrological Society started a new assessment of the alley the same month, which included an assessment of the health and mechanical resistance of each of the 155 trees which partly represented the flora of the local area. This assessment concluded that instead of 128 trees, the Estonian Dendrological Society would only allow 17 to be felled. In the spring, the city officials finally had three dendrological analyses on their table: one of declared 48 trees to be dangerous, another that 16 old lime trees needed felling, and a third that 33-55 trees could be replaced. Unexpectedly, it turned out that the trees did not belong to the city, and the Nature Conservation Centre, which had banned the felling, had to take care of them. They, however, backed out of this obligation when they discovered that Pärnu had applied for municipalisation of the park and alley. So, the park and its alley were left unattended. Not even the trees that were rate dangerous were replaced.

However, the Pärnu city government had already purchased 165 young lime trees with 16–18-centimetre trunks from the Netherlands in spring 2007 for the renovation of the Vanapark alley. Because they were not planted in the Old Park due to the opposition of nature conservationists, they were kept in another county (Jõgevamaa) over winter. However, the seedlings ordered were still growing in Jõgeva in 2009, but they were too big and needed to find suitable places to grow. It was not easy to find places to plant them in the city. By 2010, most of the Dutch Linden had been planted in the streets and on the Vallikäärü meadow, while some still overwintered in Jõgeva.

In 2009, two large trees fell in 5 days: one on a car, the other on a school. In the same year, funding was requested from the Environmental Investment Centre for the preparation of a maintenance plan for Pärnu's protected alleys, including the alley in the Old Park. It was proposed to invite specialists from Finland to carry out a survey of around 400 trees, including a tomographic survey and an expert opinion from an arborist, followed by the preparation of a maintenance plan, training and publicity of the plan. The municipality saw that the maintenance of parks and alleys would be made much easier if protected parks and alleys had a maintenance plan approved by the Environmental Board.

Solution:

In 2010, the project "Preparation of a maintenance plan for Pärnu's nature protected alleys" was started. The first activity was the tomographic examination of the trees, using for the first time in Estonia an X-ray tomograph. The completed maintenance plan was the basis for applying for funds from the Environmental Investment Centre for further work. The survey revealed that the trees in the alley of the Old Park had the worst condition comparing with other area trees in the city.

For 2013, apart from dendrological surveys and the preparation of a maintenance plan, nothing significant was undertaken due to lack of funds. In the autumn, another storm hit the park, which resulted in the breakage of seven lime trees and the loss of four willows. In the same year, a maintenance plan for Pärnu's protected alleys for the years 2014-2020 was sent to the National Heritage Board and the Environmental Board for approval, specifying exactly what work would be carried out and when. The maintenance plan was based on a study carried out by the Finns and was





based on a recommendation that the most appropriate way to renew the alleys of the Vanapark was to do it in different stages.

A dendrological assessment carried out in 2016 revealed that the Old Park area contains a total of 39 different tree species, 14 native and 25 alien species - a total of 434 different tree species units. On the basis of this, a maintenance plan for the park was drawn up for the period 2017-2026, based mainly on the plans of the park at the beginning of the 20th century, which are nowadays mostly recognisable in nature by the general free-form composition, structure and indigenous trees of the park. On the basis of the above-mentioned plans, the maintenance plan has been drawn up taking into account the existing heritage and nature conservation values, as well as the current use of the park and the need for mobility. The most important thing is to carry out tree felling, maintenance pruning and tying following the maintenance plan. Then, draw up a reconstruction project for the landscaping and improvement of the park (road surfaces, flower beds, shrubbery). Preserve and enhance the park's natural and heritage value and improve the aesthetics of the less-used areas of the park, as well as finding new uses for them.

The need for an additional assessment of the tall vegetation in Vanapark arose due to the advanced age of the trees and the fact that after higher winds, trees were more prone to windthrow and breakage of larger branches. As the Vanapark is in the centre of a densely populated and used area, and has a children's playground, the safety of the people using the park is of paramount importance. Before the additional assessment was ordered, 50 trees had already been removed according to the maintenance plan. In 2022, an additional arborist assessment was commissioned for the trees. The assessment was carried out using the VTA methodology, which helps to distinguish between trees that are presumed or suspected to be dangerous and those that are truly dangerous, ensuring safety and at the same time protection of the trees, based mainly on the knowledge of the mechanics of the trees and an understanding of their "body language". The thesis carried out a symptom inspection, a fault assessment and suggested further follow-up actions. As a result of the assessment, 46 trees were identified which, if broken, would cause significant damage. Unfortunately, due to the extent of the blight in the trunks and roots of the trees, the only solution was to fell all the trees that were assessed.

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:

The first major works started already in 2014 after the approval of the maintenance plan. The first maintenance work was to cut down individual trees assessed as at risk of breakage - 25 hazardous trees were removed. The remaining trees were to be pruned for maintenance, the shoots were rebalanced where necessary and the height of the crown at the base of the trunk was raised by pruning, and a stabilisation system was installed on three understorey trees to protect them against breakage.

The renovation of the park alley started in 2015 and ran until 2022. All the trees in the alley were removed during these years. After the stumps were uprooted, the amortised soil of the green strips had to be stripped and replaced by topsoil about 40 cm deep. The planting work planned for 2018 did not start before 2020 and were completed in 2022 for the alley and in 2023 for the old park.



A call for tenders was organised to draw up a post-clearing planting plan, where tenderers were provided with a base plan showing the locations of the trees to be removed. The selection of the new plantations were based on their height and their historical aspect. As the proportion of evergreen trees in Pärnu city is very low, it was decided to plant conifers instead of the trees to be removed to increase their proportion in the area. It was also important to provide biodiversity, as the historic trees (maples, heritage, islands) were in a sufficiently good state of health. Low vegetation was also planned for the park, with species richness, aesthetics and diversity of the park as important criteria for plant selection. According to the new planting plan, 40 conifers, 164 medium-growing shrubs and 13 high-growing shrubs were planned for the old park.

Vanapark is a protected park located in a heritage conservation area. Therefore, the reconstruction required the approval of the Environmental Board and the National Heritage Board. As this was a large-scale felling operation, a previously prepared and commissioned planting plan was immediately forwarded, based on previous experience. The Environmental Protection Agency and the National Heritage Board considered that this did not conflict with the historic environment. The coordination process went smoothly and was in place by early 2023. The Environment Agency considered that the felling of diseased and dangerous trees and the subsequent planting of new ones was necessary for the future conservation and sustainability of the park and in line with its conservation objectives. The Environment Board stated that up-to-date data on the distribution and breeding of spider cetaceans in Pärnu city parks is unknown, but given the proportion of old trees, it can be safely assumed that the Old Park is a summer habitat used by spider cetaceans. National Heritage Board made it a condition that the trees must not be uprooted and that the trunks and roots of the remaining trees must be protected during the works.

In September 2023, felling and stump grubbing took place in the dangerous assessed trees. In October, the planting of new seedling already started according to the planting plan. By 2024, the planting work was completed. The plants will be watered for up to 2 years after planting. During this period, their condition will be assessed on an ongoing basis and, if necessary, the plants will be replaced.

Due to the long process of the renovation of Vanapark, which started already in 2007 with the renovation of the alley, in 2023 the presentation of the renovation process between the public and the private sector was more active and open. This helped to ensure that citizens understood the need for the grubbing-up and that there was no opposition.

Achievements and Results:

By the end of the renovation, 104 western heather "Pallida" had been planted in the alley and 40 conifers, 164 medium shrubs and 13 tall shrubs in the park. The lower number of trees planted in the alley is mainly due to a change in the spacing between the trees - while the old trees were originally planted at 5m intervals, the current trees are planted at 7m intervals due to the need to increase the growing space, and a row of noble western heirlooms in the best condition between the pavement



and the green area was left to grow in one section. The works were partly funded by the Environmental Investment Centre.

During the renovation process throughout the years, the park has become more and more attractive area for locals and tourists. Due to its perfect location near the city centre it is accessible on foot, by bike and with public transportation and cars. People from different age groups are spending their time in the park and enjoying the atmosphere. Children playground that has been installed in the park, is the closest playground to the city centre. Because of that, it is very popular place for families to spend their time, for both locals and the visitors. They can enjoy the playground, explore the plants and trees that are growing around the park area. It is also one important stop for guides who are introducing the resort history of the city.

Lessons Learned and Advice:

The renovation of the old park and its alley has been a process that has taken more than 15 years, involving not only the different authorities but also the people who have held different posts. Along the way, it has been essential to maintain courage and determination and to remain consistent when various obstacles have arisen. This was borne out both by the desire to preserve the historical heritage and by the safety of people walking in the park. It was important not only to remove dangerous trees, but also to restore the natural diversity and preserve the park's special character. During the long process, the importance of communication was also recognised, particularly in the form of prevention.

Recognitions and Additional References

Pärnu City was nominated in the category "Local Municipality Valuing Heritage" at the 2023 annual awards of the National Heritage Board. When introducing the nominee, it was pointed out that Pärnu's historic environment and diverse urban space are equally inviting for both locals and visitors. It is noteworthy that the city government contributes to the preservation and development of this environment.