

Schaefer delivers apology for chopping of trees

By H. Josef Hebert
Associated Press

BETHESDA — Gov. William Donald Schaefer apologized yesterday for a state work crew that mistakenly cut down seven trees bordering Arun Vohra's yard.

"We made a mistake, and we're going to do everything we can to rectify it," Mr. Schaefer said during a visit to Mr. Vohra's home in this Washington suburb.

The governor, accompanied by several aides, made the 40-mile trip from Annapolis to see Mr. Vohra and the stumps that remained along the highway outside his house after the saga known as the Bethesda Chain Saw Massacre.

One of the felled trees was a massive cedar 80 feet to 100 feet high. "That was a great tree," the governor admitted.

Mr. Schaefer called the tree-cutting incident a result of missed communications.

"We made a mistake . . . [and] we learned," he said.

The story of the seven destroyed trees — all on a state right of way — began last spring when Mr. Vohra notified the State Highway Administration about a diseased pine tree on state property in front of his house.

He came home a few days later and found the pine tree still standing. Six other "awesome" trees — two pines, three blooming dogwoods and a giant lilac — had been cut.

He complained, and soon another state official came to his house and was shown the suspect tree. Mr. Vohra said he marked the tree with a ribbon. But then, next time around, he returned from work and found the massive cedar a few feet from the

state and local advisory panels, including the Linowes commission set up by Gov. William Donald Schaefer, which released its recommendations in November.

A five-member spending affordability committee set up by the Baltimore County Council will examine ways to control spending so that it does not exceed the county's rate of economic growth. The group will hold its first session Jan. 3.

But Ms. Hirschburg said the work done by the executive's two committees would be a top priority for Mr. Hayden, who got an earful in his first bid for elective office last fall about spiraling costs of government and inequities in the state assessment system.

The GOP executive pledged during the race to organize both committees and to follow through on their recommendations.

"They are advisory committees, and maybe there have been advisory committees in the past. But I can tell you, these committees are going to be taken very seriously," Ms. Hirschburg said.

The tax committee will hold its first session Jan. 9 and is due to make its recommendations June 30. The costs committee has no deadline for final recommendations but will be studying each county department, she said.

The chairmen of the two groups were unavailable last night. But group members said their work would depend largely on what Mr. Hayden requested.

"I think a major problem is that the value of a property is no indication of that individual property owner's ability to pay," said Baltimore County District Judge John C. Coolahan, a member of the tax committee and a former state senator from Halethorpe. He said he was a long-

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the cold, and their heads down to avoid the thought that this could happen to anybody.

As you sifted through the big pile to look for traces of a life, you came upon a book. It is called "Poems of Faith." It lay there charred around the edges, and frozen into a weird contortion from the cold and the firefighters' hoses, but it was still readable.

And you remembered: This happened on Christmas Day, when some feel closest to their notion of God. Now three people lay in hospital rooms, and their home was gone. And so you stood in the little front yard and began sifting through the book and looking for wisdom beyond electrical wires and short circuits and the language of technicians.

There was a poem called "When Trouble Comes and Things Go Wrong," which read:

*"Let us go quietly to God
When trouble comes to us.
Let us never stop to whimper
Or complain and fret and fuss.
Someone inside the house might*

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THE SUN/AMY DAVIS

Arun Vohra watches as Mr. Schaefer gestures from a stump outside the Vohra home. O. James Lighthizer accompanies them at right.

"We made a mistake, and we're going to do everything we can to rectify it."

GOVERNOR SCHAEFER

pine tree had been cut. The pine tree, still, was untouched.

"I acted a little crazy," Mr. Vohra recalled. He called the governor's mansion in Annapolis, his state delegate, his congresswoman and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. And the story began to get some press.

Mr. Vohra was informed this week that the governor wanted to visit, so he made coffee and ordered extra food for his guests.

Upon the arrival of the entourage, which included O. James Lighthizer, who is to become state transportation secretary next month, Mr. Vohra expressed surprise at all the attention given his loss. "I had no idea this would ever happen," he said.

"We want to do the right thing," Mr. Schaefer said, and he promised the state would provide replacement trees chosen by Mr. Vohra.

"I'm tree-conscious," said the governor, reminding reporters he had vowed to plant 1 million trees in Maryland.

The two men posed atop the stump that once had been the massive cedar. Nearby was the pine that started all the trouble. State officials have since said it is not diseased at all but only the target of woodpeckers.