

## **Urban Forest Deserves Multi-Layered Support**

You may not know this, but in the early 1900s, our city forefathers decided that their bald prairie town needed beautifying, so they shelled out the cash to transplant Elm seedlings from the riverbanks to city boulevards and parks.

Those trees now comprise one of the largest urban forests on the Canadian prairies and the biggest Elm canopy in North America. That forest has become an integral part of the city's identity - we Winnipeggers love our trees, and not just because they're beautiful and provide a safe and welcoming refuge during this horrendous pandemic.

Many of us know that that this extraordinary forest offers other, even more valuable services, from storing carbon and improving health to lowering energy costs. Just a few of the reasons why it's valued at more than \$3 billion.

But Winnipeggers, like me, are also becoming increasingly alarmed as we watch 1000s of mature Elm trees coming down – 8000 in total, just last year - and contemplate the loss of the city's 350,000 ash trees over the next decade, thanks to pests like the Emerald Ash Borer and Cottony Psyllid.

That sense of alarm is equally matched by feelings of anger and frustration at governments that continue to underfund or fail to fund urban forestry. A failure that contributed to the devastation we saw during "Treemagedon" in October 2019 and has resulted in a 60% backlog in tree replacement in Winnipeg.

Yes, that's correct. For every two trees removed, less than one is replaced thanks to inadequate funding. And with the recent resurgence in Dutch elm disease, not to mention climate change and unbridled urban development, we're looking at huge additional losses - a predicted 50-60% reduction in our mature canopy over the next 10 to 20 years.

But the city isn't the only level of government that's financially culpable here.

Canada is one of the few G7 members that has no policy or funding program aimed at the protection and preservation of mature urban forests.

The Manitoba government does provide assistance to research, monitor and slow the spread of pests and disease, and contributes some funds for Dutch elm tree removals. But it doesn't spend a penny on replacing the thousands of diseased trees that are cut down, nor does it finance efforts to diversify the forest – something that would prevent any one pest from wiping out huge swaths of our trees in the future.

In fact the only time the Feds and the Province dole out significant amounts of cash is when a tree disaster strikes, like the October 2019 storm. And herein lies the problem.

Had the \$10 million plus spent on storm clean up been spent, in advance, on urban forest maintenance like pruning, much of that disaster could have been avoided.

So what's the answer? Well, as the federal and provincial governments consult the public in preparation for their upcoming 2021 budgets, and Winnipeg puts the finishing touches on its 20 year Urban Forestry Strategy, they might want to consider this.

For the past 30 years, bio-economists have been trying to get our attention with a novel idea. Trees, they argue, are natural assets, with quantifiable value, and just like roads and bridges, should be seen as essential urban infrastructure eligible for ongoing sustainable investment.

And urban forests, unlike your average road, actually appreciate in value over time. The older the tree, the more carbon it sequesters, the more shade it provides to offset energy costs and the more rain water it drinks up, water that might otherwise overwhelm our storm sewer systems.

In other words, the older the tree, the more work it does. For us.

So if trees are infrastructure why don't urban forests qualify for the same level of multi-government investment as roads or sewers or even electric buses?

It's a good question, and one that needs to be answered quickly, because cities like Winnipeg can't go it alone in addressing these problems anymore. Our urban forest is reaching a tipping point, and in order to save what we can and replace what we can't, we need matching funds from all levels of government.

Because here's the thing - if 50% of our mature trees go then half of the more than \$3 billion dollars in benefits they represent will disappear along with them. Not to mention a much-loved asset that's taken us more than a 120 years to grow.

*Erna Buffie is a member of the Trees Please Winnipeg Coalition. To find out more about their "Trees Are Infrastructure" campaign please go to the Trees Please Winnipeg Facebook Page.*