

Where's The Urban Forest Urgency?

Erna Buffie (788 words)

It's been almost a year since I wrote about Winnipeg's State of the Urban Forest Report, bemoaning the fact that the document didn't clearly lay out the massive threats to our urban canopy and the urgent need for action on the part of city council.

Now, with the recent publication of the much-awaited urban forest strategy, I'm left feeling much the same way.

Where is the urgent call to action? Where is the vision of the future needed to galvanize council and the public into action to do what needs to be done?

Yes, there are fantastic recommendations in this report, but where is the inspiration required to motivate city council and the public to follow through on those recommendations? Where is the description of the kind of future we're aiming for?

And where oh where, is the urgent message that the cost of doing nothing will far outweigh any costs associated with properly maintaining, protecting and expanding our urban canopy?

There is one brief reference to that in the report, but if you blinked you might have missed it

And that is no small thing. Because funding this strategy's recommendations will not happen if we don't share a common vision of what our future urban forest could be and why it is so important. Nor will council act decisively without a clear picture of what our canopy will look like in 30 years if they do little, or worse, nothing to change the status quo.

So let me be clear. We stand to lose 50% of our mature canopy - all of our elm and ash trees - over the next 10 to 20 years. That's the warning bell that should have been sounded, clearly and loudly, in this report.

By not sounding the alarm and providing an inspiring vision of a densely treed, more climate resilient future city, the report makes it too easy for council to ignore its essential recommendations.

Now I can certainly quibble with the details of some of those recommendations - a 43- year timeline to reach a 7% canopy increase is too long. And I'd also take issue with the suggestion that we can cover an 80% street tree replanting backlog, with a 1 to 1 planting ratio.

But the overriding aims: to expand the canopy; institute a seven-year pruning cycle for street trees and enact tree protection bylaws that preserve as many of our existing mature trees as possible, gets my 100% support.

But my support doesn't count for much when stacked up against the financial clout of other interests and lobbyists who will no doubt oppose regulating and enforcing bylaws on the removal, retention and planting of trees on private property. Nor does it guarantee that council will find the political will to negotiate a change to the city charter that would allow them to pass those bylaws.

And convincing the city to do both requires telling both mayoral and council candidates, in stark black and white terms, what our urban canopy will look like in the future, if we don't make the changes needed to stand up to those interests – whether they sit within government or the private sector.

Just look at what happened a month ago when the province razed some 4000 trees to build the new St Mary's Interchange. Or the 1000s of trees that have been mowed down in just last decade to make way for commercial and suburban construction projects?

I know we can't stop all construction, but surely to heaven council can find a way to reasonably regulate it to save what's left of our intact forests and the bulk of our mature canopy that currently sits on private land.

Action is needed now; not in 10 years or twenty years but now, to protect and expand an urban forest infrastructure that saves this city millions of dollars in services every single year. A canopy which is the only natural barrier standing between us and storm water flooding and blistering periods of drought

So please, councillors, listen to the more than 20 residential and neighbourhood groups that make up Trees Please Winnipeg: an organization that has been calling on you, for 2 long years now, to stop applying Band-Aids and urgently address this city's urban forest crisis.

And if you won't listen to us, at least listen and act on the recommendations that your own dedicated and highly skilled urban forestry team has made.

If you don't listen and act now, you'll be looking back in 2050 from a sparsely treed, overheated city, wondering why you didn't fully endorse the 2022 urban forest strategy when you had the chance.

Erna Buffie is Interim Chair of Trees Please Winnipeg. To learn more about TPW's response to urban forest strategy go to: <https://treespleasewinnipeg.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Trees-Please-Winnipeg-Coalition-Response-to-the-Draft-Urban-Forest-Strategy.pdf>

