

## **Bold Action Needed to Save Public Trees (789 words)**

The City of Winnipeg's budget is out, and I'm happy to say the financial news for trees marks a step in the right direction. The capital budget – that portion of the overall budget earmarked for big long term projects like canopy replacement, expansion and protection – has increased from \$6 million in 2022, to \$10.4 million this year.

So, why do I describe an overall operating and capital budget increase of 22% as a step in the right direction rather than a giant leap?

Well, here's the thing. A 22% increase will help get a more trees in the ground, but it won't fully address the reasons behind Winnipeg's staggering tree loss. Losses which, in some neighbourhoods are as high as 21%. Which means roughly 1 out of every four boulevard trees has been removed, most due to storm damage, disease or pests.

Now, 21% may not sound all that bad, but imagine how you'd feel if every fourth house on your street, including your own, had nothing but boulevard grass and big ugly stump in front of it.

Add to that the fact that most of the trees removed are mature Elm or Ash – trees that mitigate more heat, absorb more carbon, air pollution and stormwater runoff – and you begin to see the problem.

In fact, the protection and maintenance of our mature trees is just as important a goal as addressing the fact that our city is currently replacing less than 20% of the public trees lost.

And while additional money in the capital budget might be enough to catch up on tree replacements, there's still insufficient money to properly maintain our mature trees.

Which is a big problem, because our city doesn't just have an issue with getting trees in the ground. We also have a pruning and disease crisis which has significantly contributed to those losses.

Currently, we prune our trees every 25 to 31 years and that's just not good enough. All we need is another badly timed snow or ice storm to damage or kill another 30,000 unpruned trees, just as happened during the October 2019 snowstorm.

When you add to that insufficient funds for things like inoculating our mature elms against Dutch Elm Disease, you begin to see the depth of the problem.

Now, I'm not naïve enough to believe all of these goals could be met in a single year. Tree pruning is expensive as is disease mitigation. In fact, the reality is that protecting and maintaining our mature trees won't be achieved with an extra \$1 million here or there.

For that, the city needs to take bold action, first and foremost by classifying and accounting for trees as valuable infrastructure assets.

As Lisa Forbes, founding member of Trees Please Winnipeg observes: “I look forward to the day when the city adopts a new accounting system that adequately values natural infrastructure like the urban forest and concludes that an asset worth billions of dollars requires tens of millions per year to maintain and replenish.”

Those “\$10s of millions” won’t go to waste either because studies show that for every dollar invested, a tree returns between \$3 to \$5 in services ranging from carbon capture to heat mitigation. Which is a very high return on investment.

And don’t worry - that money won’t come out of your pocket, if our city boldly goes where other cities have gone before and establishes a sustainable budget with a dedicated funding source for urban forestry.

So what does that mean?

Well, the city could, for example, institute a storm water utility fee, one that dozens of other cities have adopted. Essentially, developers and owners pay for the privilege of covering the ground with impervious surfaces such as asphalt, by paying a fee that covers the cost of overloading our stormwater sewers with runoff.

Those fees then go toward maintaining our mature trees, which actually absorb water, to the tune of up to 3000 liters per tree, per year.

Additional options include dedicating a significant portion of the yearly Federal Gas Tax grant to urban forestry. The city might even consider a Tree Trust funded by corporate donations to help achieve a sustainable budget for urban forestry.

Needless to say, Trees Please would be happy to consult with the mayor on these and other options, so that he can fulfill the pledge he signed during the last election. A pledge to plant and properly maintain 2 trees for every tree lost, prune city trees on a 7 year cycle and enact bylaws to ensure mature trees are protected.

All he needs to do is give us a call.

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