

## Province Should Protect Urban Canopy

If there was ever a time to celebrate the benefits of trees, it's been the past few weeks. Trapped under a dome of blistering heat, those of us in densely treed neighbourhoods are enjoying the benefits of Winnipeg's shady canopy more than ever. Thanks to our mature trees, our streets and houses are cooler than the downtown concrete jungle, by 10 degrees or more.

And in a region where the number of 30+ degree days are expected to quadruple over the next few decades, thanks to climate change, these natural "cooling centers" will become increasingly important. Which makes the recent yearly loss of more than 8,000 mature elm trees and the threat of losing Winnipeg's entire ash canopy, even more alarming.

But there is good news. We don't have to accept the status quo. We can act now and demand that all levels of governments invest in urban forest infrastructure to ensure that future generations of Winnipeggers, in every area of the city, enjoy the benefits some of us currently enjoy.

And that includes our provincial government.

I won't bore you with the details of why the City of Winnipeg decided, years ago, to take on sole financial responsibility for its urban forest. Suffice it to say, with multiple threats now menacing our trees, that financial model simply isn't working, and more provincial support is needed. Especially now, given that the city is developing an ambitious 20-year urban forest strategy

Fortunately, our provincial government, unlike most, actually has an urban forestry department with a small but excellent staff that serves other municipalities across Manitoba. And the province does contribute some money to Winnipeg - a grant of \$1 million to the city's urban forestry department to fight Dutch elm disease as well as services like research, public education and disease identification.

That said, the provincial government could be doing a whole lot more. And there's a huge bonus for doing more, because in the long run, maintaining and expanding urban forest infrastructure will save the province money. Money that would otherwise be spent dealing with emergencies, from heat waves and superstorms to the public safety hazard posed by early snow fall and collapsing trees. Disasters that a large, well-maintained urban canopy can mitigate.

Even better, the government already has the legislation in place to act. Under the Forest Health Protection Act, the province could assist Winnipeg with the additional money needed to quickly remove and replace diseased trees and rapidly diversify its canopy, key strategies in disease prevention and urban forest health. Matched funds to improve the city's virtually nonexistent pruning cycle would not only slow down the spread of Dutch elm disease, but also prevent future tree disasters like the one that occurred during the October 2019 snowstorm.

The question is - does the provincial government have the will to act?

Sadly, past actions suggest that the current government has limited interest in investing in trees, even though urban forests are one of the few municipal assets that are guaranteed to appreciate in value. Something that should appeal to every fiscal conservative.

Few actions reveal that disinterest better than the decision to sell off Pineland, the province's publicly owned tree nursery. A nursery that could have become a cheap and reliable supply source for urban forest infrastructure, not only in Manitoba but across Canada. Instead, it is now being used to grow cannabis.

Some people might be delighted about that. I'm less enthusiastic, and here's why:

The decision to sell off an affordable, local and publicly owned tree supply simply makes no sense, whether you look at it from an economic or environmental point of view. And with the mounting threat of climate change and Canada's current tree supply shortage, it also shows a remarkable lack of foresight.

The province can't undo past decisions, but it can still correct course on several other fronts. Not only by leveraging the Forest Health Protection Act, but also by gearing up, to take full advantage of two new Federal programs that are being launched over the next few months: the Two Billion Tree Initiative and Canada's new Natural Infrastructure Fund, a program the Trees Please Winnipeg Coalition lobbied for in the last Federal budget.

Although details of the roll outs haven't been formally announced, it is our hope that the two funds could be used in tandem. Ideally, federal money made available via the Two Billion Tree Initiative could be accessed by the province, in collaboration with Winnipeg and other municipalities, to expand and diversify our public canopies. The same is true for the Natural Infrastructure Fund, which should provide additional money to adequately maintain and protect our mature urban trees.

By acting now to invest in urban forests, Manitoba could become a national leader in natural infrastructure planning and development. Even better, investing in urban trees will improve the climate resiliency of our cities and towns. It could also win a lot of votes.

Because Manitobans, like most Canadians, love their city trees. And they are increasingly aware of their value, not just as an aesthetic feature on the urban landscape, but as essential infrastructure. By simply doing what they do best – absorbing carbon, cleaning the air and cooling Manitoba cities and towns – they save us millions of dollars.

And investing in something that actually saves money should be a no brainer.

Now, rather than spending our tax dollars to grow our own trees, to supply our own urban and natural forests at cost, we pay private nurseries a premium for our tree stock.