

The Choice Is Easy - Trees

A few months ago when the city's new 20 year Urban Forest Strategy came out I asked someone in the forestry department why the report aimed so low by suggesting a mere 1 to 1 planting ratio for our public canopy. "Where are the plans for expansion," I asked? "How can we increase the number of public trees, if we're only planting to replace the ones we lose?"

The answer I received came as a shock:

"The truth is there's no room left on city land to plant additional trees. The environment is just too hostile."

Too hostile? I hear you asking. What the devil does that mean?

Well, in a nutshell, it means that there's just too much asphalt and concrete in Winnipeg, so much so that trees planted on a large portion of city owned land simply can't survive. And that's because trees need room for their roots to grow and permeable ground that absorbs rainwater and runoff. Cutting a hole in concrete and sticking a tree in it simply doesn't work, because without ample space, loose soil and regular water, newly planted saplings die.

So what's the solution?

Well, here's where it gets interesting. Consider a scenario in which trees have been designated essential city infrastructure - as essential as, say, roads or housing. Now imagine there's a road renewal project being planned for, say, a major artery such as Kenaston Blvd.

Because trees are categorized as essential infrastructure, every effort would need to be made not only to protect the existing mature trees along that road during construction, but also to create the conditions needed to plant additional trees in areas where there are none.

Sadly, that won't happen if we continue to view trees, not as infrastructure, but as a largely dispensable aesthetic add-on to the city landscape. A view which, for various reasons, poses serious problems for the future of our city.

Chief among them is the fact that Winnipeg has an aging public tree canopy, one that has survived because it was planted and established more than a century ago, before the city became smothered in concrete. That canopy is reaching the end of its natural life, and if we have any hope of successfully replacing or expanding it, we need to be prepared to make some sacrifices.

Sacrifices that mean spending more to create planting environments that are less hostile to trees, which includes reducing the amount of asphalt and concrete that dominates our cityscape.

Which ultimately means less space for cars – both on the road and in parking lots – and a lot more space for trees.

Now, before you write an outraged letter to the editor, yes, I can already hear your complaints:

“Less space for cars,” you say. “Have you lost your mind? How dare you impinge on my rights as a motorist.”

“Are you crazy? A tree in front of my condo? It’ll block the light and reduce the resale value.”

To which I would respond as follows:

How would you feel if half of Winnipeg’s public tree canopy suddenly disappeared? How would you react if every tree on your block was cut down and not a single one was replaced, because there’s no room for them to grow?

And how would you cope on that treeless street, in 40-50 degree Celsius weather?

Not all that well, I would imagine. Although I suppose you could always go for a ride in your air conditioned car.

But if you do, remember this. What’s bad for trees is also bad for humans. Based on a recent Statistics Canada Greenness study, Winnipeg’s concrete shell now covers as much as 62% of the city. And as Los Angeles and Houston discovered during recent flooding events, if there are too few trees and permeable surfaces to absorb flood waters, homes, businesses and people can be swept away in the deluge.

So, there are good reasons why the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stated that more trees in cities are essential, not only because they absorb run off and carbon, but also mitigate heat island effect, reducing city temperatures by as much as 8 degrees. Not to mention the other benefits they provide, from cleaner air to improved mental and physical health.

Ultimately, we as a city, have a choice. Treat trees as essential infrastructure or continue to view them as an “extra” - a non-essential luxury that can be underfunded, mowed down or omitted for the sake of convenience. It’s a pretty clear choice, and for the sake of future generations, I sincerely, and somewhat anxiously hope, that our city council has the courage to choose wisely.

