

Urban Canopy A Civic Election Priority

(780 words)

It's not often that environmental groups get to report good news. More frequently, it's a litany of frustration, complaint and anxiety over government inaction. And while Trees Please Winnipeg can't yet declare total victory, it can boast of a major first stage win in our fight to save and expand our urban canopy.

Why? Because thanks to the efforts of community groups and a dedicated team of committee members, virtually every mayoral and council candidate in the 2022 municipal election have signed the Trees Please Pledge.

That pledge commits them to take the following actions once in office: to plant and maintain 2 trees for every city tree removed; prune our public canopy on a 7-year-cycle and better protect our mature canopy during public and private construction projects.

Why is this important? Well, all you need to do is look at the evidence to see why protecting our mature canopy, keeping it healthy and planting 1000s of additional trees is critically important for the future of our city.

For one thing, urban trees mitigate heat island effect in a city that is going to see increasingly hot dry summers. Our canopy also has the capacity to absorb millions of gallons of storm water during what will likely be wetter Springs and Falls.

But perhaps the greatest benefit derived from expanding and protecting our urban canopy is the direct role it can play in fighting climate change. A role so powerful that the American Government has placed urban trees and natural forests at the heart of the climate action plan embedded in its recently passed Inflation Reduction Bill.

That's because trees can be deployed as allies in the fight against climate change. They are, in fact, the cheapest, most effective natural means of carbon removal we have at our disposal.

A recent study found that Canadian urban forests alone account for over 600 kilo-tonnes of carbon absorbed from the atmosphere every year.

Yet despite what we know about the role urban forests can play in GHG reduction and mitigating climate change impacts, Winnipeg is among the 78% of Canadian cities that continue to face significant canopy loss.

Part of that loss is due to invasive pests and disease combined with woefully inadequate budgets that made it impossible to keep up with disease prevention and tree replacements.

But the biggest contributor to urban canopy loss, according to Stats Canada, is new construction and development. And Winnipeg is no exception. In fact, we've lost more trees and green space than most other major cities.

Which is why our pledge includes a call for tree protection best practices to be incorporated into all construction projects, from public roads and buildings to private businesses and residential development.

What that requires are City bylaws aimed at tree protection on private and public land and an approval and monitoring process run by experts, who can evaluate building sites before and after construction, to assess the impact on existing natural infrastructure like trees. A system that would incentivize development projects that minimize those environmental impacts and preserve as many mature trees as possible.

And as cities like Washington DC have shown with LEED, a program that incentivizes green construction, it can be a win-win for everyone. A win for the environment and city residents and a big win for developers who not only build a reputation for sustainable construction, but also enhance their bottom line.

In fact numerous studies have shown that homeowners prefer properties where mature trees are retained and will pay a lot more for them.

But the bottom line is this – our city simply cannot continue to build roads or housing at the cost of further reducing our mature urban forest and amplifying an ongoing climate crisis. We need to do better. We can do better.

Better still, in the long run, protecting and expanding our canopy will save the city money, given that trees and greenspace infrastructure return between \$6 to \$8 for every tax dollar invested.

So head over to our website to see who has signed the Trees Please Pledge. Then check out the candidates' social media and websites to see if they've incorporated the pledge into their platforms. If they haven't, ask them why. If they have, let them know that you expect them to deliver on their pledge as soon as they take office.

Because the proof, as my mother used to say, is in the pudding. And Trees Please Winnipeg won't declare total victory until our three point pledge becomes a reality.

Erna Buffie is a science writer and filmmaker. For information on the Trees Please Pledge go to: <https://treespleasewinnipeg.com/trees-please-pledge-election-toolkit/>