

Trees Fall as Bylaws Fail (797 words)

I was relieved when the city applied for and received money from the Federal Two Billion Tree Fund to catch up on our 80% tree replacement backlog. I was over the moon when I read that replanting public trees on a 2 to 1 ratio and pruning them on a 7 year cycle were part of the city's new strategic priorities.

That said, there's one issue that the mayor and council seem to be ignoring, which could ultimately undo all the good that federal money and strategic priorities might have done - the fact that thousands of trees in Winnipeg are being destroyed as a result of construction and development.

Let me give you an example:

A couple of months ago, a friend messaged me asking if I knew what was going on at the old Shriner's Hospital site on Wellington Crescent. Apparently some half a dozen mature trees had already been cut down by a developer, and the trees left standing were either damaged or badly protected.

My friend went on to say that when she called 311 to report the situation, she was informed that: "The City is not responsible for responding to issues on private trees. We advise you to contact the property owner directly."

So I contacted the councillor who oversees urban forestry, and he assured me he would look into it. What was done in response? Did a city forester rush to the site to stop the destruction? Was the contractor fined for mowing down all those trees?

Nope. Nothing was done, and in the end, virtually every tree on that large Wellington Crescent property – all of them valuable and mature - were cut down. Why? Well, one can only assume that the developer decided that all of those trees were an inconvenience he wasn't prepared to work around.

And we wonder why a house mover mowed down city trees on Roblin Boulevard to make way for a wide load. If developers can act with impunity, why not a house mover?

But here's the thing. While the developer got off scot-free, the house mover was arrested, charged with Mischief over \$5000.00 and required to pay a hefty sum for the trees he felled.

Why the difference? Turns out trees located on public land are protected by city bylaws while trees on a developer owned property are not. Which is a significant problem, because the vast majority of Winnipeg trees – some 2.7 million of them - sit on private land, without any protection, fair game for any builder with a chainsaw who wants to mow them down.

If you want to get a sense of what that looks like, talk to someone in Glenwood or River Heights. According to residents there, developers are not only knocking down trees on infill properties they're also killing city trees by rolling heavy machinery over boulevards and compacting the soil.

And it's not just builders knocking down trees. Some homeowners are cutting down their trees *before* their houses sell, to make the property more attractive to developers.

It's essentially a free for all, but why wouldn't it be when the province wiped out some 4,000 trees to make way for the new St. Mary's Interchange, with no demand from the city that they plant 8000 trees to replace the ones they bulldozed.

Sounds like a bit of a contradiction, doesn't it? A city which, on the one hand, has committed to replanting public trees at a 2 to 1 ratio, which then stands idly by while developers and heavy construction mow down mature trees and entire intact forests.

What's the solution? The city needs to establish reasonable bylaws and incentives for the retention, protection and replanting of trees on development properties and construction sites. To do that, the mayor and council need to negotiate a city charter change with the province. Not a simple process, perhaps, but isn't that what we pay them for? - to ensure the protection and renewal of the city's essential infrastructure, which includes heat-busting trees.

Look, I'm not saying every tree on every property can be saved, far from it. Nor am I anti infill. Why would I be against infill, when building up and in is environmentally preferable to building out and creating more roads and urban sprawl?

What concerns me is this - we're now losing more trees to construction than we are to disease and attrition combined. To reverse that trend, Winnipeg needs to follow other cities and enact sensible tree bylaws that guide what developers and builders can and cannot do on their land.

If you agree, call your councillor and let them know, because we need those bylaws. Now.

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