

"Business As Usual" Winnipeg Budget Spells Disaster

I've been reading about the city's budget announcements with a growing sense of alarm. While I sympathize with the fiscal restraints the city faces, current budget projections seem to suggest that Mayor Bowman and a number of councillors are either in denial, or simply don't grasp the fact that climate change is real and that its early effects are already bearing down upon us.

Predictions of another spring "flood of the century," drought conditions in several Manitoba municipalities and new and mounting threats to our urban canopy - they all speak to a growing climate crisis.

But instead of a budget that prioritizes what is best for the city in a climate change context, it appears to be business as usual at city hall. Evidenced in a suggested 28% increase in the capital roads budget and capital cuts to those services that might actually help to offset the worst effects of climate change – public transit and urban forestry being just two such services.

So let's take a closer look at trees. It turns out that our urban forest doesn't just help to mitigate the worst effects of climate change. Trees offset energy costs, helping to cool our houses during heat waves. They help to defend the city against floods and riverbank erosion, and if that wasn't enough, they also take pressure off a city storm sewer system that's struggling to keep up with the superstorms that are becoming the norm in this region.

The urban forest is also a city asset worth more than \$5 billion. And unlike roads, it's an asset that actually appreciates over time.

What's more, tree lined streets increase property values, which means more money to the city of Winnipeg in the form of property taxes. In short, our city trees more than pay us back, *in services*, for every cent the City's Urban Forestry Department spends on maintaining and defending them.

Recent scientific evidence also suggests that healthy forests, both urban and wild, may be our most efficient, inexpensive, and natural systems to combat climate change. Urban trees located in close proximity to two of the primary sources of fossil fuel emissions – gas burning vehicles and industrial activity – turn out to be particularly effective. According to researchers in the UK, urban trees store as much carbon per hectare as tropical rainforests.

But let's be clear. Urban forests are not the same as wild forests. They don't just grow on their own. Nor do they replant themselves. They need to be protected, maintained and replanted, and to do that we need a properly funded Urban Forestry Department.

Yet for decades, that city department has received insufficient funds to meet its most critical goals, whether fighting disease and pests, pruning, cutting down diseased or dying trees or replanting. And if the city has its way, the projected forestry budget will leave the department with a \$7.61 million shortfall every year, for the next four years. Which, in turn, will mean less tree maintenance, the loss of more trees, and I suspect, more city-wide state of emergency declarations like the one we saw during the 2019 October snowstorm, which was largely due to tree and branch collapse. Which was, in part, the result of a lack of pruning.

Pruning, or cutting dead, diseased or excess branches from new and mature trees, is a key part of urban forest maintenance, but Winnipeg's chronically underfunded forestry department has all too often been forced to neglect this critical activity.

In fact, the city's tree pruning record ranks somewhere between inadequate and dismal. Best practices dictate that urban trees be pruned every seven or eight years. We prune ours, on average, once every 26 years. Which is a good part of the reason why the city was forced to declare a state of emergency in October. Urban trees that grow in open spaces produce too many branches, and if they aren't properly pruned and maintained, it results in the kind of destruction we saw during the October storm.

Yet when questioned about the cuts to urban forestry, and their implications, Mayor Bowman proudly points to his One Million Trees Campaign, an effort designed to encourage Winnipeg businesses, non profits and private citizens to plant more trees. I

t's a good idea, no doubt, but let's be honest. The Mayor's campaign is no substitute for the skill, expertise and critical work that can only be done by a trained forestry department, like the one led by Winnipeg's Chief Forester, Martha Barwinsky. It is Barwinsky and her underfunded team, who are fighting to save, maintain and replace the 280,000 boulevard trees we already have, and who will be on the frontline when we lose some 30% of our canopy over the next ten years as a result of the Emerald Ash Borer.

Yes, that's correct. Some 350,000 ash trees, 100,000 of them on public land, will be scheduled for the axe over the next ten years.

So what does Winnipeg really need? Do we need another new road, leading to yet another new subdivision? Or do we need a properly funded urban forestry department?

Before answering that question, you might want to consider a proposal being put forward by a city wide coalition of resident and community groups in a campaign they're calling, "Trees Please." The coalition points out that if the city took just 5% of the 28% capital budget increase promised to roads – a total of \$7.6 million

- and invested it in Barwinsky's department, urban forestry's budget would increase by almost 200%.

In road terms, \$7.6 million buys you just 1500 meters of paved road. In tree terms, it buys urban forestry a running chance at actually meeting some of its goals and securing a future for our trees. And with the remaining 23% increase, there would be sufficient money in the road budget to repair existing streets and fill all the potholes we currently dodge around.

So what will it be, Mayor Bowman? A well-maintained tree canopy to bequeath to our grandchildren? Or 1500 meters of paved road? It's up to you, and city council, to decide