



**Winnipeg State of the Urban Forest Report (May 10, 2021)**  
*Response from Trees Please Winnipeg Coalition*

On May 10, 2021, the City of Winnipeg released its State of the Urban Forest Report<sup>1</sup>, one critical step in the process of developing a 20-year Urban Forest Strategy.

Our coalition members have pored over the report and agree it was very well produced; it is easy to read and navigate, and generally covers all the key points we were hoping it would.

We are pleased to see such clear statements on trees as assets and the need to include trees as infrastructure in asset management plans. We are thrilled that trees are explicitly recognized as essential assets but differentiated from hard assets because they appreciate in value and deliver more in services as they grow. Having the replacement and vacant site inventory for public tree plantings is fantastic. The overall snapshot of urban forest created by the sustainability report card is helpful.

On the whole, there were no huge surprises in the report, but we were left with some questions, which we outline in this report.

More troubling to us is that the report missed a big opportunity to paint a clear picture of “how we got here.” The report fails to explicitly connect the dots to explain how we got to the point where we are so behind on pruning and replanting. It also fails to capture the scale of imminent potential canopy loss that Winnipeg faces.

### The quest for canopy cover

Winnipeg has 17% canopy cover, while Saskatoon only has 9%, and Calgary has 10%. As a prairie city, this high canopy cover makes our City unique on the prairies, and it is something we are very proud of. It is wonderful to see it documented and compared in the report.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://engage.winnipeg.ca/urbanforest/widgets/67282/documents>

## Canopy cover targets

Other cities are setting targets to increase their canopy cover. We would have liked to see data on targets for comparable cities. Industry standards suggest a 30 to 40% tree cover for urban centers. We feel that should have been included in the report as a point of comparison. We'd like to know: should we have a canopy cover target? If so, on what timeline? If not, why not?

## Only a 1% canopy cover decrease?

According to the report, canopy cover dropped by only 1% in 20 years from 18% to 17%. This sounds like good news, but it feels far worse in mature neighbourhoods that have experienced heavy tree loss. Is tree loss in central Winnipeg neighbourhoods, specifically the loss of mature trees in mature areas, greater than 1%? If so, why was that not noted in the report, especially given the high asset value of mature trees?

How do we explain a 1% drop in canopy cover, when it is clearly higher in mature neighbourhoods?

## Tree loss projections

Obviously, tree loss is the driving force behind our coalition, so we want to better understand this issue.

With the Urban Forestry department currently in a 60% backlog on replanting, the current battle against Dutch Elm Disease (DED) and the cottony ash psyllid, and the looming threat of Emerald Ash Borer (EAB), we'd like to see some authoritative modeling for tree loss rates over the next two decades, taking into account different conditions and factors (budgets, disease spread, climate, etc.).

With the threats of DED, EAB and cottony ash psyllid, how much of our tree canopy is projected to be lost over the next 10-20 years? We estimate about a 30% loss. If we will suffer a 30% loss in our total tree canopy, will this equate to a loss of \$1.5 billion in terms of benefits and services?

48% of overall tree benefits calculated are directly related to elm and ash trees, which make up 58% of the urban canopy.

## Naming and quantifying health benefits

In this report, while avoided runoff, carbon storage, pollution removal and oxygen production are quantified and given a dollar value, health services are categorized as merely "cultural" services.

Health is not a cultural service. Society benefits from reduced health care costs when people live close to trees and people benefit from improved personal health when close to trees. The benefits go in two directions. Referring to health as a “cultural” service decreases the importance of the benefits that both governments and residents gain from trees.

We realize this may be a limitation of the iTree software that was used to estimate service values, but we hope to see more research into this realm, and to see health services given more weight in future reporting.

## Mammoth pruning backlog

It’s an understatement to say that Winnipeg is very behind on pruning--an essential part of keeping trees healthy, safe and strong. This is a direct result of resources being re-allocated to DED, priority tree removal and emergency response.

Best practice for pruning is every 5-7 years, but in 2020, we pruned every 31 years. In fact, the rate has been worsening for at least 7 years; in 2013 it was every 13 years. All other cities the report compares prune boulevard trees at least every 7 years.

Of the more than 10,000 Urban Forestry-related requests made to 311 in 2020, more than half were about pruning, hazard, sick or dead trees.

Why is it so far behind and getting worse over time? What can be done to change this trajectory?

## Private trees, public benefits

This report primarily examines Winnipeg’s 300,000 public trees. But 10 times that number of trees within Winnipeg are on private land!

Given that 90% of our urban forest is on private land, Winnipeg desperately needs to develop policies and by-laws for tree protection.

## Comparatively low spending per tree

Based on the statistics in the report, Winnipeg spends roughly 50% less on tree maintenance than any of the other Canadian cities listed, including those cities that are also fighting DED. Is the city willing to make a commitment to increase the maintenance budget or work with other levels of government to increase available funds to ensure tree health?

## Not all tree loss is equal

Poorer, high-density neighbourhoods have fewer trees, and the trees that are there are more mature and of fewer species. This makes these neighbourhoods' canopies more vulnerable to loss.

We'd like to better understand which areas of Winnipeg will be hardest hit over the next 10-20 years by DED, EAB and cottony ash psyllid. Of those neighbourhoods, which will suffer the impacts of tree loss (e.g., increased heating & cooling costs, lack of shade) disproportionately compared to wealthier neighbourhoods.

The report card rates "Citizen Involvement and Neighbourhood Action" as "Optimal". However, the neighbourhoods that are active in tree stewardship are almost exclusively wealthier riverside neighbourhoods (Crescentwood, Glenelm, Kingston Cres, Armstrong's Point). Without discounting the efforts of these groups, it must be said that from an equity perspective, the neighbourhoods who need trees the most have the fewest resources to take action. We can't overlook that fact, and we need to address it with priority planting criteria and extra community outreach and support.

## A plan for vacant and replacement sites

One hopeful part of this report is the identification of approximately 26,000 vacant sites available for planting. We would like to see a dedicated program for planting in these vacant sites.

There are also 4,500 replacement sites awaiting trees--a fact that's disturbing, but at least it's measured. Winnipeggers want to understand how decisions are made about where replacement tree planting takes place. What would it take (more money? More staff?) to catch up on the backlog and to get to a point where we are replanting 100% as we go.

We hope to see these answers in the Urban Forest Strategy.