

Response to the Draft Urban Forest Strategy

Trees Please Winnipeg Coalition | June 13, 2022

“This report is aimed at damage control. It’s not a statement of a vision of a better city, but one of survival.”

“Too technical & too timid.”

“A bureaucratic report on what is possible given existing constraints.”

These are just some of the reactions that Trees Please Winnipeg Coalition members had after reviewing this long-awaited, much anticipated draft strategy. Our consensus is that while there’s much to applaud in this document, the goal is survival in spite of disease and development, the approach is too technical for a public/councilor audience and recommendations read like a “try to do everything” wish list, rather than being prioritized and set up to achieve desirable change.

The Urban Forest Strategy is our opportunity to provide all citizens with a clear and compelling vision of what our future urban forest could be for everyone’s benefit. We see the expansion of the urban forest as a critical and urgent action that must be taken *today*, so that in 30 years, our city can benefit from having a full urban canopy.

Imagine in 2050 that all Winnipeggers live in cool, tree-lined neighbourhoods, with plentiful shade in parks and at public transit stops, with full-grown trees helping to lessen pollution and run-off, providing a better quality of life for every citizen no matter where they live.

If we don’t do the right job now, Winnipeggers will look back in 2050 from an overheated city and wonder why we didn’t plant and protect more trees in 2022 when we had the chance.

Best time to plant a tree? 20 years ago. Second best time? Now.

We want this Strategy to provide the motivation for **urgent, decisive and immediate action** by citizens, the private sector and especially our City Council to protect and expand our urban forest starting today.

Our recommendations fall into five areas:

1. **Make the “Canopy Vision” the heart of the strategy**
2. **Take bolder action on goals**
3. **Strengthen by-laws and ensure enforcement**
4. **Prioritize actions that lead to successful urban tree canopy expansion**
5. **Develop a financial plan**

1. Make the “Canopy Vision” the heart of the strategy

The importance of improving our urban tree canopy should be at the heart of the strategy. Our hope is for the strategy to clearly lay out how a healthy, expanded urban tree canopy will benefit and delight all Winnipeg residents. Those benefits will drive buy-in for the prioritized, recommended actions.

The strategy must contrast a clear picture of what the City will look like in 30 years if we don’t act today to a picture of how much better it could be. A central, clear goal of expanding the tree canopy for all can be the guiding principle to determine which actions should be prioritized. Expanding our tree canopy is a measurable goal that citizens, business and governments can work toward.

Many of the recommendations are in line with this vision, and we applaud the strategists for being very specific, but worry the ideas will be lost in the detail of the strategy. For example, Action 7A would see *“A cool streets network through neighborhoods, to schools and institutions, between transit hubs, and in alignment with existing and future active transportation routes”*. Action 8B recommends we *“Develop successional planting plans for neighbourhoods with high proportions of ash and elm trees”*.

Good ideas - but these projects will not go forward without funding. Funding will not come if people do not share a vision for the future.

We recommend:

- **Paint an emphatic, urgent picture** of what the city will look like if we don’t act now. Literally half of our city’s trees could be gone in 20 years, yet that fact is not communicated with any emphasis, visuals, or urgency. The reader must come away from reading the executive summary with an unequivocal sense of what’s at stake.
- Explain how and why **other cities** are investing in their canopies.
- **Strengthen the Strategy Vision** by changing the wording to “An abundant, healthy, diverse, and resilient urban forest that is **essential to** the health and wellbeing of all residents and communities”
- Stronger framing of urban forest investment through a **climate action lens**. An expanded and healthy urban forest is necessary to mitigate the effects of climate change that are already here, as well as the catastrophic and irreversible impacts forecast by the IPCC. Trees (in particular native species) play a key role in **biodiversity**, which is an essential tool in our fight against climate change and needs to be given more prominence in this strategy.

2. Take bolder action on goals

2065 is a very long time-horizon. It creates the appearance that time is on our side. It is not. We need urgent action.

We believe that the canopy goal needs to be achieved in 20 years rather than 40, because 50% of the canopy is “at risk,” and at the present rate of tree loss, we stand to lose many of the mature tree benefits we currently enjoy.

Other cities facing similar issues are being much more ambitious in their canopy target goals and timelines:

- Montreal - 25% canopy cover target by 2025 and 500,000 additional trees planted by 2030
- Toronto - 40% canopy cover by 2050
- Vancouver - 30% by 2050
- Calgary-doubling the size of its canopy to 16% by 2060;

Moreover, there is no contingency plan for the impact of Emerald Ash Borer and what may be a sudden loss of 350,000 trees. The Draft points out the damage that will occur if EAB takes hold in Winnipeg and indicates that targets will not be met if that happens. So essentially the strategy’s goals go off the rails if and when EAB hits, which is not an unlikely event. This is not acceptable planning.

The Draft Strategy’s replanting target of 1-to-1 is inadequate. We strongly recommend a minimum 2-1 ratio for the following reasons:

1. The 1-to-1 target does not consider the public tree replacement backlog. The Draft states that 14,500 trees have been removed and not replaced. How and when do those holes get filled planting on a 1:1 basis?
2. A 1:1 planting ratio will not result in a 1:1 replacement ratio. It is difficult to estimate how many newly planted urban trees will survive – some studies ([Ontario](#)) indicate newly planted street tree mortality rates as low as 6.7% to 13%. Other studies indicate that this number can be as high as 30%. ([USA Literature Review](#)).

While we are thrilled to see the recommendation of a 7-year pruning cycle for street trees, the suggested 12-year pruning cycle for park trees requires explanation, given that a 7-year cycle is cited in most sources as urban forestry best practice.

We recommend:

- Aim to achieve a 24% canopy cover (or higher) in a **shorter time frame** (by 2040), similar to other cities.

- **Re-plant 2 trees for every public tree lost**, rather than aiming to only plant 1 tree for every public tree lost.
- Improve pruning timelines for **both boulevard and park trees** to 7% to better maintain the trees we have.

3. Strengthen tree protection bylaws and ensure enforcement

The strategy does not prioritize the most important recommendations pertaining to bylaws and enforcement of bylaws to protect trees on public and private property. Nor does it provide sufficient context as to why these bylaws must be enacted immediately to protect our mature trees and reach the canopy goal.

Winnipeg has much work to do to catch up to more tree-focused cities to develop and implement by-laws to protect existing trees and expand our future tree canopy on both public and private land.

Trees Please has asked Council to require that tree protection best practices be incorporated into all construction projects to prevent damage and loss of trees, and are pleased to see the many detailed suggested changes to by-laws for consideration by Council related to this call for action.

While the report is clear that the bulk of Winnipeg's canopy is on private land, it does not clearly deal with the main threats to that canopy, which include construction, pests, disease and climate change.

Where, for example, is the data on tree loss due to commercial and city/provincial construction projects? The impact of tree loss due to construction should be clearly stated as context for the urgent need to enact the bylaws that protect the city's mature trees and enable us to reach the canopy goal.

Policies must incentivize tree retention within new developments and changes to existing properties. Enforcement of by-laws will also be critical for them to be effective, as will be increased collaboration between City departments.

We recommend:

- The creation of a **Development Arborist position** in Planning, Property & Development to administer the regulatory components for trees in the zoning bylaws

and receive referrals on all tree issues related to development.

- The creation of a **tree bylaw and accompanying enforcement program** to regulate and incentivize the retention of healthy trees on private property.
- A requirement for **arborist reporting** for all development projects, with clear mechanisms for compliance and enforcement.
- Implementation of **tree bonding/securities** to deter forfeiture of planting obligations.

4. Prioritize actions that lead to successful canopy expansion

The current layout of 10 plus pages of unprioritized recommended actions makes it hard for the public, and most importantly councilors, to clearly see which recommendations are “do it right now!” bottom-line essential and which might be delayed.

All actions must describe their role in expanding our urban tree canopy. We ask that the City prioritize their list of “must do” recommendations that lead to increased canopy expansion, achieving the projected canopy target of 24% sooner than 2065.

The use of language such as “consider”, “review”, and “explore the possibility”, weakens many recommendations and makes them seem optional. As a Strategy, we want to know what **MUST** be done and in what order to reach the tree canopy goal.

We recommend:

- List actions **in order of priority** to clarify which are essential, urgent, and list why they will have significant impact toward the urban tree canopy goal.
- **Use imperatives** like “requirement”, “shall”, and “must” for the actions that are a priority, to be clear about what needs to be done.

5. Develop a financial plan

The Urban Forest Strategy needs a financial strategy to attract the investment needed to implement the key priority actions in the strategy. This must be laid out in the actual Strategy.

The dollar sign scale used to show relative costs of actions items compared to others contribute to the sense that this is all theoretical, not really a plan.

The section on Urban Forest Program Sustainability (page 41-46) is excellent. However, it should have been given much more prominence and emphasis.

Without more funding, this strategy is doomed to fail. Yet this reality is only bluntly stated once (see page 46). And the harsh reality—that failing to act will cost us much more in the long run—should be more prominent.

The city has many major strategic plans. They cost a lot of money and time to produce, and say all the right things—and some that have even won awards!—and yet, because there is no plan to actually fund and implement many parts of them, they never realize their potential. We don't want to see that happening here.

Overall, this draft strategy does not identify any means of significantly increasing investment in our urban forest. In fact, the draft seems to assume that there is not enough money available in Winnipeg to do what it would take to make the canopy flourish. This may be true – unless there is a plan to access funds from other levels of government as other cities do, in order to invest in their key infrastructure.

While the report does urge the development of an asset management plan for the urban forest it does not clearly lay out why the urban forest is essential urban infrastructure. Reframe trees as infrastructure. By classifying urban forests as “natural infrastructure” within the infrastructure management system, governments can assign infrastructure funds for protection, maintenance and replacement of existing trees as well as to expand our urban canopy as a long term, renewable infrastructure investment. Assigning an asset value to public trees, and including urban forests in asset management plans encourages long-term investment.

We recommend:

- The City declare urban forests essential municipal infrastructure, classify urban forests as “assets” and include urban forests in the City’s asset management plan, **funding trees as “infrastructure”**.
- Actions be assigned hard cost ranges and time frames, rather than a relative dollar sign cost in order to develop a **clearer financial plan**.
- A plan to **build medium-term capacity** within the Urban Forestry department and their suppliers so that they are able to pursue every possible federal and provincial natural infrastructure and forest health protection funding source that will contribute to better urban forest maintenance, replanting, canopy expansion and protection.