

## Another Chorus Of The City Budget Blues

I like to think of it as a country-blues hybrid, but whatever the genre, it's still the same old City of Winnipeg song. And the lyrics go something like this:

"Our tree are dyin,' our sewage is headin' for the river, but we got no money, for nothin' but roads."

Sound familiar? Well, if it does, that's because it pretty much sums up exactly where we've been for the last ten years, budget wise. And it's telling that in a budget document that runs to some X pages, the phrase climate change is not mentioned, even once.

At a time when we've lost 33,000 elms in just five years, and only 19% of the trees we cut down are replaced, urban forestry capital budget for 2022 stays pretty much the same. Yes, there's an additional \$2 million to the operating budget, but that doesn't get us very far. It certainly won't ensure that the 1000s of boulevard trees the city has already removed will be replaced within 2 years, nor will it get us anywhere near a best practice seven-year pruning cycle.

Meanwhile the road repair budget for 2022 continues to spiral upwards, from an unprecedented \$152 million to a staggering \$165 million.

Now I'm not saying that our streets don't need to be repaired – of course they do! - but how does the city justify a road maintenance budget that is 25Xs the urban forestry budget. Which doesn't even include the \$3 million dollars the city will spend this year on new roads, topped up by \$100s of millions from the Feds and Province. New roads that will burden the city with even more repair costs in the future.

In the meantime, our mature urban forest canopy – which, unlike roads, actually saves us \$53 million a year in services – falls to the ax due to pests, disease and extreme weather events.

Now, I know you've heard this before, but it really does bear repeating: this city needs to start spending more money on maintaining and replanting our public trees, or over the next ten years, we are going to be in serious trouble. And here's why:

If we don't spend more, those of you living in River Heights-Fort Garry, Daniel Mac, Mynarski and St Boniface are going to be very unhappy campers. Because in case you haven't noticed, you've already lost a ton of mature trees. To be specific, between 2016 and 2020, Daniel Mac lost 21% of its trees, Mynarski lost 15%, and St Boniface and River Heights-Fort Garry came in at a tree loss of between 10% and 15%.

In 2021, those numbers continued to climb.

In fact, almost every other neighbourhood in this city has a tree deficit, with the exception of Old Kildonan and Waverley West. The latter has experienced a 27% increase mainly because of new plantings.

So why does that matter? Well, as I've said before, trees appreciate in value over time – the older they are, the more services they provide in carbon capture, flood control and energy savings. Young trees don't offer much in the way of services until they mature. And that's assuming they survive, because recent studies suggest that only 1 in 3 newly planted city trees survives the first year.

And Winnipeg isn't even at a 1 to 1 replanting ratio! A situation that won't improve much, even with an extra \$2 million.

What we need is a sustainable long-term financial plan for our public trees that takes into account the impact of climate change and forecasts what will be needed over the next decade, budget wise, to ensure our public canopy survives. A plan that also identifies a specific and reliable revenue source that can be used to finance that long term plan.

Right now every Winnipegger spends about \$17 a year to maintain, protect and replant our much loved public trees. I'd bet that most of us would support spending another ten dollars a year, if the money were used to support of long term plan aimed at improving our pruning cycle, expand our public canopy and ensuring that every boulevard tree lost is replaced within 2 years.

And I'd also bet they'd be even more enthusiastic if they knew that their \$10 dollars could be matched by federal funds from the 2 billion tree initiative and Canada's new Natural Infrastructure Fund.

So, if council thinks we can take our time replanting our public trees, or worse, that urban forestry can effectively do its job with a \$2 million increase, they are completely and utterly deluded. Because thanks to climate change, we're looking at more extreme weather events, more drought and more pests and diseases. Which all spell more tree deaths.

And just to pre-empt the inevitable musing of some city councillors and administrators – no, the Mayor's One Million Tree Challenge is not a substitute for a well-funded urban forestry department. We simply cannot shift the burden for replacing or expanding our public canopy – an essential infrastructure asset which has never been as critical for the environmental, social and financial health of the city – solely onto residents. What we need is a department with a budget sufficient to institute best urban forestry practices: pruning on a seven-year cycle and replacing our public trees, promptly, preferably at a 2 to 1 ratio.

That's why Trees Please Winnipeg is strongly urging council to add, at minimum, an additional \$6 million to Urban Forestry's capital budget. That might just give us a running chance at saving or, at very least, quickly replacing our mature public trees.

So, do you think you should call your councillor and endorse that ask?

Well, take a minute and think about being trapped in a traffic jam, on a treeless boulevard, in 32 degree Celsius weather. Then decide what kind of future you want to pay for.