

# Is it time for an urban forest bylaw?



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Winnipeggers take great pride in our urban forest. The city's tree canopy is one of its defining features. Visitors marvel at our tree-lined boulevards and "ribbons of green" along our rivers.

Every year, people express horror when forests are cut to build houses or condos. In 1992, outrage and passion led two conservationists to block bulldozers. Their heroic action saved one of the city's most significant natural forests, Bois-des-Esprits. Since then, many other Winnipeg forests have been bulldozed. Why does this keep happening?

During public consultations for OurWinnipeg, the City's overall plan, residents spoke passionately about the natural environment. They demanded decisive action to preserve urban forests, parks, boulevard trees, and natural riverbanks. The plan points out that Winnipeg's urban forest extends beyond City-owned parks. And therein lies the

rub.

Many trees and forests are not on City land. Private landowners may have treasured and protected forests for decades. When these properties are sold, the new owners are often more interested in development than forest stewardship.

OurWinnipeg makes many reassuring statements about urban forest protection. Few concrete mechanisms exist to ensure this happens. Winnipeg relies mainly on the goodwill of private landowners to conserve these important community assets.

A recent scan of Canadian cities revealed that Winnipeg can do much more to protect its urban forest.

Many cities, including Winnipeg, have bylaws to protect trees on City property. But "city trees" are just one part of the urban forest. Cities such as Kitchener, Oakville, Toronto, Vaughan, Ottawa, and Vancouver have gone even further. Twenty-eight Ontario municipalities had "private tree" bylaws by 2010. These bylaws restrict the removal of large trees on private property.

Guelph and Cambridge have bylaws designed to "maximize tree-saving potential" during all development. Guelph, Oakville, and St. Catharines have even set specific

targets to increase canopy coverage.

Cities such as Saskatoon and Toronto benefit from having conservation authorities. These agencies are partners in conservation. They share the responsibility and cost of protecting natural habitats along urban rivers and ravines.

Currently, Winnipeg does not protect trees on private land. It has no targets for canopy coverage. Winnipeg bylaws do not minimize tree removal during development. Nor does the city participate in Manitoba's conservation district program.

OurWinnipeg is up for its mandatory five-year review. Is it time for an urban forest bylaw? Or is relying on the goodwill of landowners enough to protect Winnipeg's much-loved urban forest?

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