

# ***Staff Report***



*Infrastructure Services Department*

*www.kitchener.ca*

**REPORT TO:** Planning and Strategic Initiatives Committee

**DATE OF MEETING:** January 10, 2022

**SUBMITTED BY:** Niall Loble, Director, Parks & Cemeteries 519-741-2600 ext. 4518

**PREPARED BY:** Josh Shea, Manager, Natural Areas Management, 519-741-2600 ext.

**WARD(S) INVOLVED:** ALL

**DATE OF REPORT:** December 15, 2021

**REPORT NO.:** INS-2022-002

**SUBJECT:** Tree Canopy Target for Kitchener

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## **RECOMMENDATION:**

**That a tree canopy target of 30 per cent by 2050 be established for each of the 10 Wards in the City of Kitchener together with an overall City-wide canopy target of 33 per cent% by 2070, and,**

**That staff be directed to develop ward (and where appropriate, neighbourhood), specific action plans that focus on planting, maintaining and protecting trees in consideration of local pressures on canopy and,**

**That these action plans inform future budget requests beginning in 2022 for the 2023 financial year and,**

**That staff be directed to initiate a review of existing tree protective processes in the City, including a review of existing protection bylaws and policies, and requirements for tree planting contained within the Development Manual, and report back to Council with preliminary findings by the end of 2022, and,**

**That staff report back in 2025 and on five-yearly intervals thereafter, with an update on Kitchener's Urban Forest Canopy**

## **REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:**

- The report provides a policy framework for implementing ward and city-wide urban canopy targets that focus on planting and maintenance and continued support of Kitchener's forestry programs and outlines action items across the City of Kitchener
- The development of the Tree Canopy Cover Target supports the theme of Environmental Leadership within the City of Kitchener Strategic Plan 2019 – 2022. Specifically, it delivers on a commitment to "Implement the Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy with a focus on establishing a tree canopy target"

- Financial impacts will be defined through implementation plans and identified through future reporting and budget processes.
- Development of a Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy and the Tree Canopy Target has been informed by more than 2,500 community members. More than 2,000 community members participated in in person and online engagements leading to the development of the SUFS and more than 600 people have shared thoughts on how a tree canopy target can be achieved

## **BACKGROUND:**

The City of Kitchener adopted the Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy (SUFS), in 2019 which articulated and affirmed the City's commitment to supporting the multiple benefits of a diverse, well maintained and sustainably managed urban forest to community and residents in the City. The SUFS responded to Council priorities under the strategic theme of Environmental Leadership and helped to provide direction to investments into the urban forest in 2019, 2020 and 2021. Notable among these:

- Council supported establishing a pilot partnership with REEP Green Solutions that has enabled the appropriate planting of many 100's of trees across the City on private property with support provided for species selection, site location and maintenance.
- 1000's of residents have been supported in education and stewardship activities since 2019 that have provided advice, information and education on stewardship for trees on private property
- Investments into operating budget have supported the development and implementation of a street tree raising program that, by the end of 2021 will have seen proactive maintenance undertaken on almost 60 streets where street raising work was of highest need
- In 2021, street tree structural pruning was undertaken on several streets to promote healthy and vigorous growth of younger trees
- The backlog of trees left unreplaced on City streets and boulevards by the impacts of Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) at the end of the EAB program in 2018 has been eliminated, and we have a sustained replacement for trees removed on City streets of between two and three years
- Staff have submitted a Request for Information in response to a call from the Federal Government in respect to the Billion Tree Program which could further build and enhance City tree planting program

In addition Council has invested in 2022 in implementing the SUFS by:

- Responding to the pilot private tree planting and stewardship program by implementing this for ten years and doubling funding toward the enhancement, growth and maintenance of the private tree canopy
- Providing initial funding to support the replacement of lost trees in public parks and open spaces
- Providing sustained funding for future canopy assessments to track canopy changes over time

The SUFS articulated the importance of the need to Plan first and Engage widely in its Five Branches of activity<sup>1</sup>. Developing a clear direction urban forest management activities through developing a tree canopy goal is driven by the need to ensure that action is informed by planning and engagement. These early activities have provided significant benefit to the urban canopy; through adopting a target, staff will be able to bring forward a comprehensive strategy to address that target.

## REPORT:

The development of Kitchener's tree canopy target is driven by seeking to **provide greater equity** in canopy, and **targeting improvements to canopy** ensuring actions that address local pressures are implemented.

It is considered likely that over the next 50 years, the City will experience fluctuations, including reductions, in overall canopy cover as the effects of aging trees, climate change and the need to accommodate more of the City's growth in already developed areas to meet provincially mandated growth targets, impact the existing canopy. It is unlikely that a sustained, straight line growth in canopy can be achieved and that there will be fluctuations in canopy over coming decades; however, staff hope that with targeted approach specific to the needs of each community across the City, local enhancements can be made as well as an overall growth on canopy over the 50 year horizon.

The development of, and implementation of actions towards meeting a tree canopy target contributes toward equity by seeking to address environmental inequities across communities in Kitchener, and climate and sustainability objectives, such as helping to mitigate and manage the impacts of climate change. Likewise, the development of the target helps affirm Kitchener's commitment to action under the declaration of a Climate Emergency.

Canopy cover varies dramatically across the City with the least well served communities seeing less than 12% canopy, and the best served neighbourhoods seeing more than 40% canopy. It is clear from studies across the globe, and by looking at least and best served neighbourhoods, that areas with lowest canopy often correlate strongly with rental and apartment style buildings, less access to greenspace and higher populations of equity deserving communities; communities that often see the greatest societal value of enhanced canopy.

Action on tree canopy is proposed across all areas of the City; aligned with feedback from community engagement and an increasing recognition of the potential that canopy has to help toward addressing equity issues, this will be targeted by seeking to ensure all wards have 30% canopy by 2050. In some neighbourhoods, this work will be extensive and will see a trebling of canopy over the next 30 years; in other wards, work will be just as challenging as the pressure of growing or maintaining existing canopy against a backdrop of aging trees and development will be equally challenging.

Cities across southern Ontario have over the past decade, established long term goals for tree canopy in urban areas. Oakville, Toronto and London have established targets between 30% and 40% over 50 year timelines, whereas cities like Cambridge have established lower targets

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<sup>1</sup> Pages 13-15 [Kitchener's Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy](#)

over shorter, 20 year timeframes. Other cities such as Guelph and Hamilton have established targets, but without timeframes associated to them<sup>2</sup>. 50 years may seem like a significant timeline for improvements; trees planted today will only start to have a significant bearing on canopy in 50 years and so actions today will really become reflected in the canopy present in 50 years time.

Kitchener fares well for existing urban canopy, having seen this increase in recent years to 27%. However, staff recognize that this canopy is heavily reliant on existing, mature trees. In many areas of the City, these trees are in less-than-optimal condition and health and in other areas planned growth over coming decades, may result in some tree loss. The City is rapidly changing and, alongside other communities, is facing the pressure of a changing climate, which, while perhaps favouring some species, is negatively impacting existing species across the City.

More than 50% of the existing tree canopy is on private property and community partnership in delivering on both ward and neighbourhood level objectives will be essential in achieving both local community increases in canopy and in sustaining and growing canopy across the City as a whole.

Given the extensive differences across the City, any one action alone will not be sufficient to address a canopy target and staff plan to implement actions to meet a canopy target that include:



- Planting correctly and deliberately – selecting the right trees for the right locations with a focus on native species that will add value to future canopy
- Protecting prudently – seek to building on existing policies and protection for trees where appropriate
- Maintaining proactively – ensure that trees are maintained from planting throughout their lives to offer maximum opportunity to support mature trees that provide highest benefit.

A balanced approach of actions that address both short-term demand and pressures on canopy, and actions that support long term, sustainable change are required. Actions are required that are implemented to, and impact on, both publicly owned property and privately owned property. Across the City, some neighbourhoods may see a focus on tree planting, others will see greatest value from protection, and in many, deliberative maintenance programs to sustain growing trees to maturity will be required.

Reflecting on the needs above and the dramatic differences in existing canopy will require a considered approach to management. Based on the direction received by Council through this report, staff will develop a comprehensive implementation strategy that will include a future capital and operating budget requests.

<sup>2</sup> Page 15 - [Kitchener Urban Forest Canopy Technical Report](#)

## **Private property tree management tools**

Staff are aware that there is high public interest in tree protection driven by development applications where trees have been or are proposed to be removed. This has led to a heightened call for 'a tree bylaw'. Despite a high public awareness of this issue, feedback from the recently concluded engagement on tree canopy does not see bylaws as the highest priority, with a focus on tree planting (public and private) and tree care and maintenance being higher priorities. This reflects feedback received during engagement on the Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy as well.

Kitchener currently has the following tools which are used to manage trees on private property:

- Tree Conservation Bylaw – requires a permit to be issued for tree removal on properties that are greater than 1 acre in size for trees that are greater than 10 centimeters in depth at breast height (DBH)
- Tree Management Policy – applies where a development is proposed that requires a Planning Act application (e.g. subdivision, Official Plan and Zoning Bylaw amendments, site plans, and committee of adjustment applications). As part of these applications, studies will be used to evaluate trees greater than 10 centimeters DBH to identify which are appropriate for removal and which are required to be retained and protected through construction and beyond
- Kitchener's natural heritage system – Kitchener's Official Plan includes policies, land use and mapping that identify its natural heritage system. Kitchener's natural heritage system includes, among other things, regionally significant and locally significant woodlands. These woodlands are identified in the Official Plan as areas where development is not appropriate. The Official Plan natural heritage system land use is currently being implemented in its new Zoning Bylaw through the application of a natural heritage conservation zone. The purpose of this zone is to protect and conserve these identified woodlands on private and public property in the future.

Staff are recommending a review of the existing bylaw protection and other protective measures through the balance of 2022. While the scope of this work has yet to be determined, it is important to understand at the outset that should the scope of protective/management tools on private properties be increased this may have a permitting, review, approval and enforcement impact to it which may be unreflective of the overall impact to tree canopy (i.e. a disproportionate effort/staff time may be required to protect a relatively small percentage of the overall canopy). Staff will seek to understand better the amount of currently 'unprotected' canopy as part of this review.

## **STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:**

The development of the Tree Canopy Cover Target supports the theme of Environmental Leadership within the City of Kitchener Strategic Plan 2019 – 2022.

Specifically, it delivers on a commitment to:

Implement the Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy with a focus on establishing a tree canopy target

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:**

There are no financial implications at this time. Short term priorities of the SUFS which will help support a tree canopy target have been implemented in budgets in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

On the basis of the target adopted, staff will develop a comprehensive implementation plan that will inform future budget cycles beginning in 2023.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:**

Development of a Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy and the Tree Canopy Target has been informed by more than 2,500 community members. More than 2,000 community members participated in in person and online engagements leading to the development of the SUFS and more than 600 people have shared thoughts on how a tree canopy target can be achieved.

Through community engagement, staff have adopted a broad approach to the management of the urban forest through: Planning First, Engaging Widely and then implementing actions that include Planting Deliberately, Protecting Prudently and Maintaining trees through establishment, adolescent and into maturity. These actions were informed by, and confirmed through, public engagement and consultation.

Over the course of October and November, 2021, staff sought to better understand feedback from the community on actions that they would like to see the City undertake in respect to trees to inform the development of a target. This engagement included seeking feedback from members of Council, which is included in the summary below.

Key highlights of this engagement are:

- Almost 80% of respondents favour a balanced approach to urban tree management that incorporates both short term measures and long term sustained approaches
- Two thirds of respondents support activities in all areas of the City with a third of respondents seeking to target activity only to lower cover wards
- More than 85% of respondents favour an approach that includes support for stewardship and planting on private property, with 61% preferring that this be resident led with City support

On the basis of engagement, community has indicated that the top three things that can be done to support private tree planting and maintenance are:

1. Technical support,
2. Financial support and,
3. Education,

with information on the right type of tree and how to maintain being cited as the number one incentive to help plant a tree on private property.

245 comments were received as part of the survey response that provided further insight into community feelings.

- 72 comments related specifically to the need to plant trees within existing public properties
- 39 comments related specifically to the need to maintain trees on public property
- 39 comments related to the need to protect trees either through protective bylaws for private trees or public trees, or to protect through development work, retaining healthy trees alongside development, or through compelling developers to plant trees
- 36 comments related to private tree planting, education, stewardship and awareness, subsidizing trees planting and including schools in tree planting
- 57 comments fell into a number of other areas including:
  - Planting native species, managing invasive species
  - Planting fruit trees
  - Proposing that less trees are planted and advocating for tree removals along streets
  - Asking that trees not be planted where there are overhead wires or lights
  - Avoid planting tree to avoid leaves in fall
  - Advocating against any municipal lead work on private property for example tree planting subsidy or private tree protection
  - Financial support for residents in managing and removing large trees on private property

Many comments in this category were supportive of the SUFS and ongoing dedication toward maintaining urban tree canopy

In addition to the feedback on Engage Kitchener, Building Parks Together, an equity focussed volunteer group, that seeks to share feedback on Parks and Open Space matters, were asked in a forum setting to share ideas.

Through this forum, the following themes emerged as priorities:

- Overall concern for maintaining canopy cover in the City, particularly in areas of established canopy which may be subject to future intensification
- The need to increase tree stewardship and care led by the City on existing publicly owned trees to care for what we have first and foremost, and to provide access to resources and education to encourage community to do likewise on privately owned trees. The City should show leadership in maintaining existing trees.
- Capitalize on enthusiasm of young people to be active in climate and forestry programs – the City could facilitate youth led programs to support urban forestry and climate change programs in the City;
  - Partnerships between school board and City to encourage tree education and stewardship by students
  - Explore establishing youth led urban forest programs
  - Explore potential for a tree ambassador program to support neighbourhood trees
- Appreciate that not everyone loves trees
- Engage community through outreach and engagement activities; support National Tree Week, provide information at community events and festivals on trees and tree management, work with schools

- Protect trees – ensure trees are protected as development and construction occurs, implement bylaws to manage tree removal especially of larger healthy trees, but recognize that protecting trees through bylaw will result in neighbour disputes and that bylaws are limited by the ability to monitor and enforce compliance.

Staff shared draft recommendations and details of the proposed Tree Canopy Target with the Environment Committee at their meeting on November 18 2021. Environment Committee was supportive of both the approach taken in developing a target and the nature of the recommendations that have been suggested. Environment Committee endorsed the recommendations included within this report.

Staff believe that the proposed Tree Canopy Target and Recommendations of this report reflect the sentiments expressed by community through engagement. Staff will consider comments received as they move toward developing approaches to deliver on a tree canopy target over coming months.

INFORM – This report has been posted to the City’s website with the agenda in advance of the council / committee meeting.

**PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:**

INS-10-008 – Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy  
INS-20-018 – Setting an Urban Forest Canopy Cover Target

**APPROVED BY:** Denise McGoldrick, General Manager, Infrastructure Services

**ATTACHMENTS:**

Attachment A - [Kitchener’s Sustainable Urban Forest Strategy](#)  
Attachment B - [Tree Canopy Background Information](#)  
Attachment C - [Tree Canopy Technical Report](#)