



City of Hamilton Report for Information

To: Chair and Members
Public Works Committee

Date: May 20, 2025

Report No: PW25035

Subject/Title: Street Tree Planting Program Improvements -
Lessons Learned

Ward(s) Affected: City Wide

Recommendations

- 1) That Report PW25035 respecting Street Tree Planting Program Improvements – Lessons Learned **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- This report provides an update on the Street Tree Planting Program, outlines lessons learned from recent implementation changes, and highlights minor adjustments made in response to resident concerns. It also reaffirms the City's commitment to achieving its Council-approved target of a 40% urban tree canopy by 2050.
- Street trees are recognized as critical green infrastructure in the City's Asset Management Plans, with a replacement value of approximately \$300 million. This definition helps ensure that street trees are systematically planned, prioritized, protected, and enhanced, as part of core municipal functions.
- In 2024, Report PW24022 (Street Tree Planting Program Improvements) introduced a key policy change: removing the option for property owners to refuse a street tree planted in the public right-of-way adjacent to their property. Initial implementation focused plantings in boulevard areas, where public opposition was minimal.
- Through all City programs - including community plantings, naturalization projects, facility plantings, and giveaways - 19,656 trees were planted in 2024, falling just 344 trees short of the 20,000 annual target.

- In 2025, with planting expanding into areas without boulevards, staff began receiving more feedback from residents and Ward Councillors, identifying concerns about site suitability, maintenance burden, and alignment with existing landscape designs. Though formal complaints represented less than 5% of proposed planting locations, they prompted a staff review of the program's approach.
- The program has since been refined to introduce a 3-year deferral option for cases where concerns cannot be resolved (e.g., property owners who identify legitimate concerns, such as upcoming construction, accessibility issues, or medical needs), while continuing to track the site for future planting. These refinements reflect the City's ongoing efforts to meet canopy goals, maintain public trust, and deliver environmentally sustainable infrastructure in a responsive and transparent way."

Financial Considerations

Report PW25035 does not present any negative financial implications. However, the introduction of a deferral option could affect the ability to meet annual street tree planting targets, potentially resulting in a positive variance in the Tree Planting Program 4450053001 Capital Budget.

Background

In June 2023, Council approved a 40% urban tree canopy target by 2050, including increasing annual tree planting targets for the Forestry Section from 12,000 to 20,000 trees per year. Report PED20173(a) provided urban tree canopy analysis as measured in May 2021. For full details, see Appendix "B" to Report PW25035 – Urban Boundary Canopy Coverage 2021, which shows the City's current tree canopy measuring:

- 31.7% on City lands (i.e., yards and facilities, etc.)
- 25.9% in the public right-of-way
- 16.2% on private property

This Report does not detail the actions to increase tree canopy on City lands or private property, however, staff are working on increasing these areas in collaboration with the public right-of-way. The Street Tree Planting Program is integral in increasing the urban canopy in the public right-of-way.

The Public Tree Preservation and Sustainability Policy, established in 2015, serves as a framework for administering the Street Tree Planting Program in both development-related and non-development-related contexts. It authorizes tree plantings within road allowances without requiring requests from adjacent property owners or occupants.

Report PW24022 Street Tree Planting Program Improvements reaffirmed this policy and introduced an implementation change: the removal of the opt-out options for property owners. This change was introduced to support the newly adopted 40% urban tree canopy target. Report PW24022 further clarified that staff did not intend to revise the Policy but instead emphasized its application. Under the Policy, staff would prioritize

street tree plantings in areas with low right-of-way tree canopy coverage, irrespective of requests from adjacent property owners, who would no longer have the option to deny tree planting activities. Starting in 2024, and continued in 2025, staff prioritized areas with low canopy, but also high levels of plantable space in the right-of-way.

Tree planting layout decisions are guided by the *Forestry and Horticulture Design and Preservation Manual for Assets on Public Property*, which includes details on setbacks from utilities, driveways, sidewalks, existing trees, property lines, buildings, and sightlines and minimum soil volumes. These guidelines help ensure trees are planted in suitable locations that minimize risk to surrounding infrastructure while supporting healthy growth and enhancing the City's urban forest.

Where suitable locations for new street trees are identified adjacent to residential properties, staff notify the property owner, leaving a pamphlet at the residence if the property owner is not present. This gives the owner the opportunity to reach out and ask questions or raise concerns. Feedback received to date include concerns about:

- Tax-payer funded trees being planted in areas where the tree is not requested
- Potential future issues with tree roots affecting lawns, sewers, driveways, or foundations
- Maintenance concerns, especially among seniors and residents with mobility issues (e.g., inability to complete future maintenance caused by leaf litter due to health-related concerns),
- Conflicts with existing landscape design, such as increased shade or interference with irrigation systems.

In most cases, staff are able to address concerns through adjustments such as:

- **Changing the planting location within the right-of-way space to:**
 - Accommodate a view;
 - Change exposure to shade on a garden; and
 - Accommodate existing landscape design or irrigation system.
- **Selecting a different tree species to:**
 - Reduce the size of the tree;
 - Reduce maintenance related to leaf, seeds and flower clean up;
 - Provide a smaller tree to reduce shade; and
 - Provide a specific aesthetic value like Fall colour, or a tree that flowers or provides Fall colour or grows slowly.
- **Delaying the planting to:**
 - Accommodate a planned construction project by the resident, including but not limited to sewer laterals and driveways.
- **Cancelling the planting with a note about rationale when:**
 - A mistake has been made and the site doesn't meet guidelines; and
 - Clay sewer pipes are a considerable concern, and a new tree would exacerbate sewer issues.

These options are already embedded in staff workflows to help resolve concerns raised by residents. Where concerns cannot be resolved, staff do their best to communicate with the concerned property owner to provide them with an understanding of the

importance of street trees and growing the urban tree canopy to meet the City's strategic goals, including Urban Forest Strategy, Biodiversity Action Plan, Climate Action Strategy, and Council priorities. Residents are also informed that newly planted trees typically require minimal maintenance during the first 10 to 20 years of growth, and that issues related to shade or leaf litter are usually negligible during this early stage.

Given the removal of the opt-out is a new change to the Program, and based on what staff are hearing from residents, this Information Report has been prepared to share some of the lessons learned and highlight refinements made to improve responsiveness and transparency in program delivery.

Analysis

Customer service remains a priority for the City. Engagement with residents about the Street Tree Planting Program in 2025 have provided valuable insights, particularly regarding personal circumstances that extend beyond the suitability of a tree planting location.

Feedback has highlighted concerns such as mobility limitations, physical and mental health-related stress associated with maintenance concerns, and broader frustration or mistrust of City programs and policies. These circumstances have, at times, placed strain on both residents and staff navigating a process that can seem inflexible with no room for nuance.

In response, and as part of the City's continuous improvement efforts, staff have introduced a minor but meaningful adjustment: a deferral option for locations where concerns cannot be resolved. This approach balances the City's long-term goals with a more compassionate and resident-centred delivery model.

The Street Tree Planting Program process remains consistent, with one key refinement:

- 1) Staff identify street tree planting opportunity.
- 2) Tree species are selected based on location, species diversity targets, and space.
- 3) Property owners receive Notice about the intended tree including, with contact information provided.
- 4) If residents have concerns, they can contact the Forestry team staff to discuss options, and a meeting is arranged to review.
- 5) Staff explore adjustments, such as alternative tree species offered based on the concerns heard.
- 6) **NEW STEP** – If concerns cannot be resolved or conditions are in place that would remove the spot from being eligible for a planting at this time, a 3-year deferral is applied to that location.
- 7) Trees are planted in eligible locations and maintenance is provided by the Forestry team, including 2 years of watering, and all required pruning.

The introduction of a deferral provides a defined window for follow-up and acknowledges that personal and property circumstances may evolve, including potential changes in ownership. It also reduces conflict and enhances trust by demonstrating that resident concerns are being heard and addressed.

Accepting permanent refusals, however, would impact the City's ability to meet its 40% urban tree canopy target by 2050. A minimum 30% canopy coverage is required to support biodiversity and ecological function in urban environments, as outlined in the Urban Forest Strategy.

The deferral option was developed following a review of resident complaints, feedback from field staff, and input from Forestry management. While most newly planted trees pose minimal maintenance burdens for their first 10–20 years, offering a short-term deferral reflects a compassionate, service-oriented response. It also enables the City to track potential future planting opportunities, ensuring long-term coverage goals remain within reach.

To protect resident privacy, deferrals will be offered to individuals who self-identify as needing a delay for medical or other reasons. Residents will be asked to complete a brief online form, avoiding the need for staff to collect or manage personal health information directly.

Alternatives

Alternative 1 - Reintroduce the opt-out option for property owners

Reinstating the ability for property owners to refuse a street tree in the public right-of-way was considered. However, this would significantly hinder progress toward the Council-approved 40% urban canopy target by 2050. It could also compromise equity and environmental outcomes, as high-canopy areas would continue to benefit disproportionately while under-canopied neighbourhoods fall further behind.

Alternative 2 - Implement a formal appeal process for tree planting objections

Another option would involve establishing a formal appeal process to evaluate objections to tree plantings. However, this approach would introduce administrative complexity, increase staff time and operational costs, and delay planting timelines, ultimately reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of the program.

Alternative 3 - Maintain the current process without deferral options

Maintaining the planting program without offering a deferral option would allow staff to meet planting targets more efficiently. However, it may increase resident dissatisfaction, particularly in cases involving accessibility or health-related concerns and could erode public trust or generate avoidable conflict.

Note: Introducing a deferral option strikes a practical balance between long-term urban canopy goals and compassionate, resident-focused service delivery. It allows staff to respond to legitimate concerns without compromising planting momentum and supports a transparent, trackable process for future engagement.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

Report PW25035 aligns with all 2022-2026 Council Priorities: Sustainable Economic & Ecological Development, Safe & Thriving Neighbourhoods, and Responsiveness & Transparency.

In response to Sustainable Economic & Ecological Development, enhanced street tree planting contributes to reducing the financial burden on residential taxpayers to maintain a private tree and utilizes the buying power and efficiencies of City programming to reduce the cost per tree, while ensuring trees are maintained to industry standards through proactive tree maintenance programs. Additionally, street trees contribute to the resilience of the City's response to climate change related to stormwater, heat island effect and air quality, and enhance public green infrastructure.

To address Safe & Thriving Neighbourhoods as it relates to providing vibrant public space, street trees are a core asset within green infrastructure and contribute significantly to planning complete streets.

To support Responsiveness & Transparency, Report PW25035 prioritizes customer service and involvement in decision making and problem solving.

Previous Reports Submitted

- [Report PW24022 Street Tree Planting Program Improvements](#), Public Works Committee, April 2, 2024
- [Report PED20173\(a\) Hamilton Urban Forest Strategy Final Report](#), Planning Committee, June 13, 2023

Consultation

- Shane Wagenaar, Urban Forestry Supervisor, Forestry, Environmental Services, Public Works
- Lorne McArthur, Forestry Superintendent, Forestry, Environmental Services, Public Works
- Various Ward Councillors
- Various property owners

Appendices and Schedules Attached

Appendix A: Public Tree Preservation and Sustainability Policy

Appendix B: Urban Boundary Canopy Coverage 2021 (previously included in Appendix "E" to Report PED20173(a))

Appendix C: Forestry and Horticulture Design and Preservation Manual for Assets on Public Property

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