

Council Member Motion

Meeting Date Tuesday, December 12, 2023
From Councillor Justice
Subject **Urban Forest Strategy**

Background

Policy Context

An urban forestry strategy was recommended in the 2021 Diamond Head Environmental Policy Review and was subsequently identified in the new Official Community Plan (OCP), and subsequently in the Official Community Plan Projects & Implementation report for possible consideration during business planning.

An Urban Forest Strategy would advance many of our strategic objectives, most directly those related to our Climate Action and Energy Plan and our Biodiversity Protection Policy. An Urban Forest Strategy would also provide context for the development of a possible tree clearing prevention bylaw and a way of addressing the many requests we have had from the public to regulate cutting of urban trees and to increase canopy cover.

This motion simply proposes Council request from staff a report exploring the feasibility, possible timing and resources necessary for developing an Urban Forest Strategy. This is a challenging tax year, and our staff capacity is stretched. However, much of the work would likely be done by outside consultants and there are possibilities to explore with respect to funding the project with external grants or with our CAEP reserve fund. One of the CAEP actions is increasing canopy cover, and it is widely understood that increasing canopy cover is one of the few actions we can take that is both a climate adaptation AND a climate mitigation measure making this a very appropriate use of CAEP funds and one which could be seen as more widely beneficial to the community.

Rationale

The term "urban forest" refers to all our trees and vegetation outside the MFR (parks, streets, existing forests and other ecosystems, agriculture lands, and other private property).

The urban forest is a crucial community asset, playing a significant role in our well-being. It provides cost-effective ecological services like capturing rainwater, managing stormwater, releasing oxygen, and improving overall air quality.

Enhancing the urban forest serves as a climate mitigation strategy by sequestering carbon through absorption by trees. Additionally, the shade provided by a robust tree canopy helps mitigate the heat island effect, reducing energy consumption for cooling and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions. Simultaneously, an expanded urban forest acts as an adaptive measure, fostering resilience against extreme weather events by offering natural buffers, absorbing excess rainfall, and providing cooling effects during heatwaves.

Implementing an urban forest strategy is critical for biodiversity protection. Our rarest ecosystems, such as the deep soil Garry oak savannah, were ideal for agriculture and residential development and consequently those ecosystems now exist mostly as remnants within the urban forest. Trees and vegetation in our community provide shelter, food, and breeding grounds for many rare and endangered species. A well-planned strategy can preserve and enhance those habitats as well as connect fragmented green spaces, facilitating the movement of species and promoting genetic diversity, essential for the resilience of urban ecosystems.

The presence of green spaces and lush urban forests also has a direct impact on the mental and physical health of our residents. It is widely understood that a healthy urban forest improves mental well-being, reduces stress, and encourages physical activity. So it is not hyperbole to say that by investing in our urban forests, we invest in the overall health and happiness of our community. Beyond the environmental and social benefits, urban forests have economic value. They enhance property values, attract tourists, and support local businesses.

The concept behind an urban forest *strategy* is to intentionally maximize the various benefits the urban forest offers. However, the urban forest is now confronted with challenges such as climate hazards, urbanization, invasive species, emerging plant diseases, and other factors threatening its health. Unlike in the past, we now need to actively protect our forest asset. For instance, in MNC, arbutus trees are succumbing to disease, cedars are suffering from drought, and invasive species like scotch broom are threatening our landscape.

An Urban Forest Strategy can help us minimize the challenges and maximise the opportunities of our urban forest by developing a long-term vision and goals for its management and growth. As we well know, we need to accommodate new population growth; trees and shrubs planted in yards and along streets will form the future forest canopy.

Given the benefits of and the threats to our urban forest, an Urban Forest Strategy is a responsibility we owe to our current and future generations. The benefits touch every aspect of our community, from environmental health to social well-being and economic prosperity. In many ways, it is a critical step in securing a sustainable, resilient, and beautiful future for our municipality.

There are several examples of the development of Urban Forest Strategies, including those of our neighbours in Parksville and Saanich. The line to the Saanich Urban Forest Strategy is below:

<https://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/community/natural-%2Ftrees/urban-forest-strategy.html&ved=2ahUKEwiTmY3FiOqCAXVILkQIHb5kByEQFnoECAoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3bdOBKuIw7xNCLOAKfzsHK>

Recommendation

THAT That Council direct staff to provide a report exploring the feasibility, possible timing and resources necessary for developing an Urban Forest Strategy (as described in the Official Community Plan Projects & Implementation report), considering both the potential for locating grant opportunities and paying for the project with funds from the CAEP reserve

Attachment: