



**TREE FORCE: TAKING A STAND
TOGETHER**

Protecting Our Urban Forest

A Citizens' Report

**Tree Love Town Hall
April 26 2019**

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Acknowledgements

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What was the Town Hall?

A group of Saanich citizens organized a Tree Love Town Hall to discuss why trees are important to communities in Greater Victoria and to determine the challenges faced with protecting the urban forest. The outcomes were to be communicated to local government.

The Town Hall was held at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific on the evening of April 27, 2019. The forum was open to all citizens in the Greater Victoria region. Some 65 people attended; it was a mix of Saanich residents and those from other municipalities.

The Concern - Why was the Town Hall Convened?

There is a growing concern among citizens regarding the sustainability of the urban forest in the Saanich municipality and with the protection of the residual Garry oak forests throughout the Greater Victoria Region.

The continual cutting of mature trees as a consequence of municipal development approvals and infrastructure development disturbs many citizens in the community. The remaining residual areas of Garry oak ecosystems are under threat. In addition, this era of climate change has awakened a new concern for the protection and survival of the urban forest and a sense that its contribution to the urban environment warrants greater emphasis and attention from both the public and local governments.

Purpose

The forum was held in response to this growing concern from citizens regarding the sustainability of the urban forest in the Saanich municipality and with the protection of the residual Garry oak forests throughout the Greater Victoria Region.

Its purpose was to listen to alternative ways of protecting the urban forest and to advocate for the development of new municipal policies and approaches that will actively focus on maintaining our urban forests including the careful monitoring of development and rezoning and/or variance requests.

Format

The Town Hall was structured to be both informative and action-oriented. Four guest speakers were invited to provide a presentation relevant to the theme of protecting the urban forest. After each presentation an open question and answer discussion was held. Attendees were also encouraged to write down any additional thoughts and ideas for compilation after the forum. These are listed at the end of this report.

Presentation Topics

Summaries of the key messages made in the presentations are outlined below.

Ecosystems as our relatives

Tiffany Joseph Indigenous cultural revivalist

Tiffany gave an illuminative talk from the perspective of the indigenous people who have lived on the Saanich peninsula for generations. She described the importance of the Douglas fir and Garry oak ecosystems to the culture of the First Nations people and their dependence on the forest in their lifestyle. She described the special transformative relationship with the environment in which the First Nations live. This is based on respect and humility for the trees and the animals that live in them. She emphasized that the well being of the land and humans is intertwined.

Trees Please - Why We Need Trees Matter Network

Frances Litman Co-founder Community Trees

Frances subtitled her talk *“Empowering communities to take a stand for their trees.”* She described the purpose of the newly founded Community Trees Matter Network. She outlined some of the successes the organization has had in heightening awareness in both the public and Victoria City council on the importance of the urban forest to community well-being and citizens’ health. People have an intangible feeling about trees. Apart from being pretty to look at, the urban tree canopy is an essential part of the city.

The urban forest video ¹“*Tree of All Trades* “ produced by the Halifax Regional Municipality was played as part of her presentation. This is an impressive video highlighting that trees beautify our communities and bring many benefits to the community. They include energy moderation, temperature management, noise pollution, storm water reduction, wildlife habitat, property values, and physical and physiological well-being.

Ecological value of Garry oak forests

James Miskelly biologist/ecologist

James provided a historical context of Garry Oak ecosystems and the role this forest ecotype had in the environment of southeastern Vancouver Island. He described the various forest dependent communities such as insects, native birds and the supporting understory vegetation of shrubs, wild flowers, camas lily meadows, mosses, lichens and small mammals. He outlined the features of Garry oak that make it important for biodiversity and other trees that also stand out for habitat value. He highlighted the features of Garry oak that make it particularly good for wildlife. These features include co-evolution with local species, leaves that are highly edible for insects, furrowed bark, and rich moss and lichen communities.

Infrastructure of a Different Colour: Green Solutions

Ron Carter retired arborist

¹ www.halifax.ca/transportation/streets-sidewalks/urban-forestry

Ron began his presentation² by stating that throughout the world, cities are solving their climate change challenges with “Green Infrastructure”. Generally it is accepted that attaining an urban forest canopy of 40% has significant benefits. Despite thinking we have lots of trees, our municipalities fall short of this optimum target. The promise of planting trees by developers sell proposed developments at the application and approval stage yet often developers fail to follow through on their promises. Fill-in and density approvals continue to prevent achieving the forest canopy target. Loss of mature trees is negative in many ways. He made a strong argument for recognizing the value of urban forest trees and for continuing to plant the right trees for the future. The most effective location for trees is out on the boulevard.

Ron emphasized the importance of maintaining and expanding the urban forest by showing many photographs from around the streets of Victoria where trees had been saved during development and where new trees had been planted. He reviewed the opportunities for planting trees in residential areas with photographs of suitable species that have grown well in the region.

Discussion

The following thoughts and ideas from the forum are summarised below:

Saanich Council

Saanich Council and community have made a commitment to maintaining the urban forest. In 2011 Saanich Council adopted its Urban Forest Strategy. It states: “The purpose of the Urban Forest Strategy is to provide a comprehensive suite of strategies and actions - supported by the public - that will enhance the urban forest over time, and address the risk management and design issues that face the community. These policies provide a framework within which planning, design, budget and risk management decisions can be made”.

The Saanich Council website states “The Urban Forest Strategy provides a long-term plan for achieving a sustainable urban forest in Saanich. It is one of the tools that Council, staff and the community will be able to use in conjunction with the Sustainable Saanich Official Community Plan 2008 (OCP), Saanich Strategic Plan 2010, other municipal bylaws, plans and policies. ”

When completed in 2011 it was a forward thinking progressive strategy. It was done because Council recognized the need for protection. This concern is summarized in the following excerpt from the Urban Forest Strategy -

“The ratio of trees being removed to those successfully established each year is not equal, resulting in a continuous depletion of the urban forest. This is largely due to increased urbanization and development both in the Urban Containment Boundary and in Rural Saanich;

² Presentation is available on request

There is generally a lack of importance attributed to trees and associated ecosystems within the overall infrastructure due to conflicting demands for limited space. The retention of mature trees and the planting of trees in relation to layout of roads, bike lanes, and sidewalks needs to be made a priority in order to reduce conflict for space with underground utilities and overhead power lines”.

Saanich updated its Tree Protection Bylaw in 2014. It provides restrictions for cutting of protected (native) trees on private property and requires owners to obtain approval for a Tree Cutting Permit. Developers are commonly able to obtain approval for cutting trees down by obtaining Council approval for a rezoning change and a development permit application.

Council rescinded the EDPA Bylaw that supported private land stewardship of Environmentally Significant Areas in Saanich in November 2018. In its place Council committed to having staff prepare a Biodiversity Strategy. In the interim this has left a large hole in protecting significant areas of urban forest and left Garry oak and other protected trees vulnerable to being cut down.

What was learned

The discussions following the presentations were wide ranging. The points listed below reflect the concerns, opinions and perceptions expressed by the participants. A list of citizens action recommendations follows this section.

1. The (Saanich) Urban Forest Strategy is not well publicized. There is a general lack of awareness by the public of the Urban Forest Strategy. Defining a set of measurable goals and requiring annual progress reporting might strengthen the strategy.
2. There is uncertainty on how conversant the (new) Saanich Council is with the Urban Forest Strategy, as approving Development Applications involving the cutting of trees appear to negate the goals of the strategy. For example the goal on pg 15 states ***“Protect and Enhance the Urban Forest”*** *The urban forest should be protected from loss due to cumulative effects of tree removal during development, tree mortality (disease and old age) and land clearing. Trees should be planted and tended with a long-term vision of tree and ecosystem survival and a thriving population of established trees”.*
3. It was acknowledged that the (Saanich) Tree Protection Bylaw No.9272 is under review but nobody seems to know what this means or if there is a process for public input into the review. The fines (penalties) are not high enough for illegal cutting of Protected Trees. Also the requirement that developers plant two small trees as a trade off for the cutting of one large mature tree is an unequal replacement and is an unacceptable trade-off for many people.
4. The provincial Community Charter in section 50 (2) restricts Council’s ability to prevent developers from cutting down trees. Saanich Council accepts this restriction rather than lobbying the provincial government to change it. It is uncertain whether there is any appetite by Council to challenge this restrictive provision.

5. Recent approvals of Development Applications by Saanich Council appear to favour fill-in and increased density rather than protecting the urban forest tree canopy. This suggests a lack of commitment to the Urban Forest Strategy and that the council is pro-development.
6. There is widespread feeling that many, albeit not all, developers really only pay lip service to protecting trees on subject properties.
7. The public is generally unaware of the Saanich Significant Tree Program and how it works. The program may have stalled; there is a listing of 7 pages dated 2014.
8. The Saanich Boulevard Tree Program is not well known in the community despite being an excellent program.
9. Many people do not understand the concept of the urban forest and how it is defined. Many residents only “see” the trees on their property and do not think in terms of the contribution they make to the broader urban forest.
10. Saanich is blessed to have considerable natural forest and tree cover. Developers have been continually whittling away at these native trees and pockets of forest rather than protecting them. There is concern that we are losing tree cover rather than increasing it.
11. We take our natural forest for granted and don’t appreciate the value of the Garry oak forests. There is widespread concern for the future of our remnant Garry oak ecosystems and trees. The once expansive Garry oak forests have been reduced to scattered trees and isolated residual forest patches throughout the region. Few natural Garry oak ecosystems survive.
12. Most of the urban forest is on private property. Citizens need incentives to plant and protect trees.
13. When protecting the urban forest, municipalities need to think regionally as the urban forest is region-wide. Concerned citizens feel that Langford followed by Colwood Municipalities show the least respect for their forests and are butchering them.
14. The spiritual value of trees was universally recognized by participants who expressed an intrinsic connection with trees; they have the power to instil a sense of awe and calmness that assists with spiritual well-being and healing.
15. The contribution that urban forest makes to climate change through carbon sequestration and modification of climate is underappreciated.
16. The urban tree canopy delivers a wide range of economic, ecological and social benefits.

Citizens Action Recommendations

Participants provided some 37 action recommendations for discussion. These have been sorted into four categories; Saanich policies, Capital Regional District policies, Urban Forest Protection and Tree Protection tactics. These are listed below as Citizens' Recommendations. These are provided for consideration by local government and property owners.

a) Saanich policies

12 actions

Theme - strengthen commitment to maintaining and protecting the urban forest

b) Capital Regional District policies

5 actions

Theme - develop a CRD wide approach to protecting the urban forest

c) Urban Forest Maintenance

8 actions

Theme - foster a greater public awareness and appreciation of urban trees. (Many of these actions would apply region-wide)

d) Tree Protection

12 actions

Theme - encourage more planting and protection of trees

Summary

We learned that only 2% of the original Garry oak ecosystem remains in the CRD. Daily we hear that the climate is changing and that our environmental practices must change. Urgency is required from all levels of government, and that includes local governments.

Trees are one small, but incredibly important, part of the broader ecosystem. They define the backdrop to so much activity - by humans, animals, insects - they provide incredible benefits (as outlined in the Halifax video.) While the Town Hall discussion was about trees, it was really about the broader natural ecosystem. Saanich is right to focus on preparing a biodiversity strategy.

But there is also a more human domain that needs to be integrated into that biodiversity strategy. We need to recognize that the relationship that First Nations peoples had with nature and trees, characterized by humility and harmony, provides for us a model to emulate.

But in the meantime, action is required to immediately stop the loss of trees through urban development. The current Tree Protection Bylaw is deficient in many ways. It needs updating and Council should advance this process, which we understand is underway.

In the interim, Saanich Council should renew its commitment to the Urban Forest Strategy. It could strengthen the mandate on implementation by declaring a moratorium on cutting of mature protected trees, especially Garry oaks.

Citizens' Recommendations - Saanich Policies

1. Make 'good tree policy' part of Saanich's climate change strategy.
2. Carbon tax surcharge for developers and people cutting down trees to develop properties
3. Tax incentives for habitat preservation.
4. Develop a strategy to make the tree protection bylaw more effective? At the moment it seems complaint driven. This puts a lot of onus on neighbours to report on neighbours. Would more education increase awareness? Are residents aware of the tree bylaw? It is good for those of us who respect it, ineffective and distressing to see it disregarded.
5. Acknowledgment/tax break for urban forest maintainers or other incentives. For example install drip lines to trees as with climate change is threatening species especially cedars and firs/maples.
6. An awareness of how Saanich's policies on urban forest and tree protection bylaws will be impacted as amalgamation with Victoria is examined
7. Broader public education and outreach to teach more people to respect our environment, trees, and wildlife and to take better care (each one of us). Encourage citizen's to water their trees and hedges, reduce pavement in the proximity of root systems.
8. Let people know we can all propagate trees. We can learn on the Internet how to find and plant nuts and seeds. We can also start trees from cuttings. If we can't plant them we can offer them to friends or even the Parks department.
9. Increase fees and fines for tree removal.
10. Increase fees for neglected private properties (trees, hedges, etc.). Replacement trees must be cared for a much longer time.
11. Need discussions on how to protect the tree cover percentage – it continues to decrease. Council approved recently a subdivision which will remove large protected trees – review development decision Blue Ridge Place.
12. The bylaws for protective fencing (temporary) around trees during development can be ineffective. Protected trees often die once the development is done. So the protection zone around these trees is not large enough.

Citizens' Recommendations - CRD Policies/Strategies

1. Include the value/amount of carbon that trees absorb in the climate change plans across the

region. People will see how valuable they are.

2. Have tree protection-minded municipalities in the region educate municipalities that are taking down the forest at an alarming rate – such as Langford, Colwood who are destroying the forest for development. It started in the big way with the Bear Mountain development and continues. It is very disturbing.

3. Obviously joining to save Sooke Hills is necessary.

4. Work as a team with CRD to address tree stress (English ivy, etc.) in Elk Lake Beaver Lake Regional Park.

5. Develop guidelines for agroforestry in the region.

Citizens' Recommendations - Urban Forest Maintenance

1. Native trees have ecological value and are regionally adapted to the climate so require lower maintenance.

2. Undertake an inventory of different tree species – if a baseline is not done already then do an annual Greater Victoria Tree Count – like the annual bird count.

3. Send applications to BC Hydro to receive free trees for every municipality.

4. Community Trees Matter Network – participate in community networking to share events and any resources or information with the public.

5. Let's make trees a health and climate action issue.

6. Celebrate Tree Day – art show, musical theatrical performances, and recognition of significant trees, tree heroes, information sharing, community tree resource mapping, exchange of native tree plantings.

7. Tree Identification Network – trees identified, located through GPS, and mapped – information on tagged trees (page, species, historical and cultural information etc.) on a QR scannable tag attached to certain public access trees.

8. I would like to be able to walk through a park, or along a city street, and get to know my neighbourhood trees, much in the way one gets to know one's human neighbours – a tree map compendium online so I know where to find certain trees.

9. Invasive species removal in parks, other natural areas and along highway boulevards helps to create conditions that allow the natural regeneration of native trees

9. Put power lines underground so that the conflict is reduced -windfall, growth, etc. – much more aesthetic too.

10. Support Habitat Acquisition Trust that has already measured the urban forest and generated a report.
11. Create landscape corridors of trees and habitat so wildlife have travel routes between protected areas and to foster pollination.
12. Stop the loss of conversion of forested land for farming – tax incentive to farm destroys habitats in rural environments.

Citizens' Recommendations - Tree Protection

1. In parks and green spaces with blackberry patches/thickets consider mowing small sections and planting trees along the middle divider. Plant more trees in parks and verges with open space. Encourage citizens to plant trees.
2. In Japan they tie a label around trees to identify them. Maybe we could do something similar, even if not a Shinto thing.
3. Consider planting smaller trees and woody shrubs. These might be planted as hedges along boulevards that are currently in grass. It will certainly slow down traffic without needing to change speed limits. Treed streets with a large tree canopy growing over the pavement from deciduous trees planted close to the road and even in "planting bulbs" combined with bike lanes, all used to narrow the travelled portion of the road are very effective in slowing traffic. Care has to be taken not to block sightlines at driveways and intersections but well situated street trees often negate the need for dreaded speed humps.
4. Start replacing dead and dying cedars, birches and maples with Garry oaks, Douglas-firs, Black hawthorns and Bigleaf maples.
5. Allow "guerrilla" tree planting
7. Horse log to protect the land. This is a smaller footprint on a property.
8. Hold a property for at least one year before development. Inventory on properties natural history on land native flowers, trees.
9. Establish teams, including arborists, to identify stressed trees in neighbourhoods and work with neighbours to address mitigation efforts.
10. Perhaps start a gray water program – for tree watering – filters runoff.
11. Hold annual tree sales – of preferred species similar to library book sales.
12. Have teams of arborists and students visit homeowners to conduct a tree and pollination audit -like an energy audit – and to propose a planting strategy.