



Staff Report

Operations – Sustainability & Solid Waste

Report To: COW-Operations_Planning_and_Development_Services
Meeting Date: December 10, 2024
Report Number: CSOPS.24.032
Title: Biodiversity and Urban Forestry Strategy
Prepared by: Jeffery Fletcher, Manager of Sustainability & Solid Waste

A. Recommendations

THAT Council receive Staff Report CSOPS.24.032, entitled “Biodiversity and Urban Forestry Strategy”;

AND THAT Council direct staff to develop a Terms of Reference for a Tree Task Force for initiation in 2025 to focus on the development of a tree protection and compensation policy for Town lead projects and Town owned property;

AND THAT Council allocates \$150,000 for the development of a Biodiversity and Urban Forestry Strategy as an addition to the 2026 Draft Budget.

B. Overview

Natural assets provide ecological services and contribute to the character of municipal streets and the broader landscape. If the Town endeavors to manage and protect trees as assets, a policy approach is required. The formation of a Tree Task Force can investigate and contribute to the development of a compensation policy and the associated instruments and resources required for consideration by Council.

C. Background

In 2023 Council was presented with a proposed new tree protection by-law ([PDS.23.048](#)) to increase the regulation of tree cutting in the settlement area for both development lands and lots 0.5 ha and over. However, the new by-law was not passed by Council.

An existing Tree Preservation By-law (2010-68) continues to be in effect that provides protection to development lands in the settlement area and Town/County owned lands. The new proposed by-law was intended to provide increased protection and a permitting process for tree cutting in the settlement area.

Following the consideration of the new by-law in 2023, numerous Council motions requested staff to provide reports back to Council regarding policy development and operational direction. The themes in these motions are outlined in the list below:

- Embed policy in the Official Plan Review;
- Address “Clear Cutting” on Development Lands;
- Tree Maintenance Program (Operationalizing trees);
- Develop a Tree Program and Comprehensive Tree Canopy Strategy; and
- Creation of a Tree Task Force.

Embed Policy – Official Plan Review

As a sub-study to the Official Plan Review, a Natural Heritage (NH) and Natural Asset Inventory (NAI) was completed in 2024. Staff Report [PDS.24.067](#) “Recommendation Report – Natural Asset Inventory and Natural Heritage Study” included recommendations adopted by Council that will orientate “natural heritage planning goals, objectives, policies and implementation toward a net gain target that includes more features.” It also supported “the development of an Ecological Offsetting Policy at the County of Grey that will align with the recommendations of the Natural Heritage Study”. Staff were also direct to advance near term measures including Official Plan Updates related to recommendations of the Natural Heritage Study.

The final report related to the Natural Asset Inventory portion of the project is being completed. The State of Infrastructure report will form a baseline of the extent, condition, value and vulnerability of public and private natural assets in the Town. This study will be presented in a separate report once complete. The report will highlight potential next steps and actions coming out of the study, Both of these projects will aim to apply a net-gain approach to tree canopy coverage.

These studies and the recommendations coming out of the NH and NAI project will be the foundation for increasing protection and even developing ecological compensation related to land development.

Address “Clear Cutting” on Development Lands

The existing Town Tree Preservation By-law does provide protection for trees on development projects once a Tree Protection Plan has been adopted as part of the development approval. Development projects must conform to existing natural heritage policies within the Official Plan and a tree preservation plan that is generally required as a condition of a development approval, which includes not cutting trees on lands dedicated to the Town. The existing by-law does include fines for cutting outside of the agreed areas and fines have been laid in the past on violations.

The existing by-law provides protection with some limitations. The gap, which the proposed tree by-law was trying to close, is protection of trees prior to the development application submission on lands within the settlement areas. If the land is outside of a designated significant woodland, there are no existing rules that would prevent a landowner from clearing land of trees prior to a development application.

A County by-law currently has protection in place for woodlands on lots 1 hectare or more. The other gap the proposed by-law was attempting to close was the protection of trees on smaller lot sizes within the settlement area. This remains a gap in the protection of trees.

The extent of permitted cutting within a development agreement is determined by existing policy and the site specific conditions (environmental hazard land, parkland dedication and significant woodland coverage or other protected lands). If the Town seeks to further strengthen protection or create newly protected features, related new policies and/or clarification and/or implementation of existing policies is advisable along with adoption of supporting guidelines. A new natural heritage system may need to be created including associated protection policies within the Official Plan and other guidelines. However, in the interim, the Town is able to rely on the County Natural Heritage System and seek to better coordinate and apply existing tools as supplemented by various near term measures.

In any case, clearing the land of trees in the areas intended for homes and roads is on some level necessary to provide space for homes, infrastructure and drainage. An impact of continued clearing is depletion of the settlement area tree canopy. As an alternative to continued depletion, additional supporting policies and mechanisms could be put into place along side existing policies that could target an eventual system wide net gain and/or an enhancement in the canopy system. These policies can come in the form of greening strategies or compensation plantings.

Tree Maintenance Program (Operationalizing Trees)

Trees can represent risks, potentially becoming hazardous if they grow poorly or become stressed or damaged; however, they also provide benefits and opportunities for communities. There is a link between urban forests and nature-based solutions that provide value to a community. Realizing the full value of trees and minimizing impacts requires a strategy that considers land development, asset management, infrastructure renewal, operations, private lands and targets.

The Town currently puts a considerable amount of resources towards tree management. The table below summarizes the status of active management programs and initiatives. The efforts of these programs are shared across multiple departments with Planning and Development Services, Operations, and Community Services all playing a role in coordinating an urban tree canopy.

	Functional Management		Maintenance	
Department	Tree Policy	Tree Programs	Tree Planting (2023)	Tree Maintenance
Community Services	<i>Excellent work being done to build tree canopy however there is a gap in written guiding policy</i>	Replacement of Georgian Trail Ash Trees Tree Nursery Memorial Trees program (past 20 years) Community Planting Events	350 seedlings ~ 10 Memorial Trees Transplanting of Town nursery trees to parks 20 plus Nipissing Ridge Park	Cutting and removal of hazard and Ash trees on Town lands, watering of new plantings
Planning and Development	Removal and Retention Plans associated with Town and Provincial Policies Replanting Plans in accordance with development landscaping plans	Official Plan policies are being updated with assistance from the Natural Heritage Study	~ 90 New Development Trees	<i>Gap in resources for maintenance of newly planted trees in Town boulevards</i>
Operations	Engineering Standards – Replanting at property boundary every 16 m were practical. <i>Recent redevelopment projects are revealing a gap between replanting policy and expectations</i>	Natural Asset Inventory Street Tree Inventory Community Planting Events	50 plus related to infrastructure projects <i>Gap in resources for replanting</i>	Cutting and removal of hazard and ash trees on streets ~ 60 tree related service requests in Operations per year

Establishment of a guiding philosophy and natural asset targets is required to evaluate efforts. Work has begun in the area of measuring the urban forest canopy and better understanding the

characteristics of the Town's street trees, but to complete an inventory more time and resources are required. Similarly, to build a long-term strategy and the policies and standards that will move the community in the direction of strategic targets, this process will require additional resources.

D. Analysis

Embed Policy in the Official Plan Review and Development Lands

The Planning and Development Department have consolidated the range of management and tree protection concepts presented in the related 2023 motions of Council. The Natural Heritage Study sets forth the vision for approaching future Official Plan Amendments and other mechanisms as set out in report PDS.24.067 to support the enhancement and protection of natural heritage systems.

Operationalizing Trees

As outlined in the above table, tree related management occurs within multiple Departments within the Town, including work that has been initiated to measure the municipal tree canopy and the status of individual trees. This work is being accomplished broadly through the Natural Asset Inventory and a separate volunteer effort to capture data on individual street trees. To date, the detailed inventory has assessed approximately 1,700 trees. This effort was initiated in 2023 by a summer student position. The Sustainability Division has continued the inventory efforts with the use of volunteers. The Natural Asset Inventory has identified that the Town has over 60,000 trees within Town owned lands and streets. This is an estimate based on the structure of the tree canopy.

The Natural Asset Inventory has also identified through a canopy assessment the percent canopy in the Town's settlement areas. The average urban (or settlement area) tree canopy in The Blue Mountains is just over 32%. The settlement areas have different percentages of canopy with a range between 15% and almost 50%. The Natural Asset Inventory has limitations in providing information on individual trees, LiDAR can effectively identify tree canopy. However, this level of surveying is not effective at identifying individual trees. For example, small newly planted trees may not be recognized, and multiple trees may be within one canopy area.

A key part of managing trees as assets involves understanding the conditions of Town-owned trees, similar to the condition assessments that may be conducted for conventional assets such as roads and buildings. The volunteer-supported tree inventory initiative involves residents in assessing individual tree characteristics and condition, including possible signs of deteriorating health or impact that a professional-led program could manage proactively, for example to help young trees grow properly or to better maintain mature trees.

The majority of the trees in the street tree inventory were catalogued by a dedicated summer student, with additional contributions from volunteers. While the volunteer program fosters interest in urban forestry, volunteer work can be inconsistent, and comprehensive inventorying

is time-consuming. Having dedicated staff would ensure a more reliable and efficient labour force for this process.

Both the street tree inventory and the Natural Assets Inventory will be used together for future analysis and planning. However, to achieve a full inventory on individual trees and to transition the inventory into practical use, more staff and budget resources will be needed.

Operational management is currently reactive, when a tree is reported damaged or hazardous, Town staff will respond and remove the hazard. A proactive approach (trimming young trees, fertilizing for better health, re-planting, watering, etc.) will require more financial and human resources. A forestry division is essential for proactively managing and establishing a comprehensive functional management program, including measuring, evaluating, and reporting, as well as conducting routine maintenance. Current operational budgets in Community Services and Operations already cover tree-related work. In 2024, the Roads and Drainage Division received a budget increase for limited contract tree maintenance amounting to \$75,000, aimed specifically at addressing damaged or hazardous trees.

The proposed 2024 Town Budget had allocated \$618,600 for the implementation of an urban forestry program; however, this program was deferred via Council motion (January 29, 2024) to be included as an addition to the 2025 Draft budget, for consideration. This program would provide staff and resources for pro-active planning and maintenance of the Town urban forest.

Develop a Tree Program and Comprehensive Tree Canopy Strategy

The Town lacks a formal strategy related to urban biodiversity which is often also centered around trees and canopy. Bold Action 6 of the Town Sustainability Plan, Future Story 2022, is to “develop a Biodiversity Strategy.” Beyond enhancing biodiversity, an urban tree strategy can strengthen the community's climate resilience, preserve the desired aesthetic of the built environment, and maintain the character of the growing community by integrating greenery that complements development. This helps ensure that new developments harmonize with natural elements, fostering a balanced and attractive environment as the Town expands.

Staff recommend that Council allocate \$150,000 for the development of a Biodiversity and Urban Forestry Strategy to be implemented in 2026 and managed under the proposed Strategic Initiatives Department. This Strategy will assist in developing targets, policy, and programs. The Strategy will also outline the required staff, time and financial resources to achieve the targets and build the structure to operationalize the policy and programs.

Creation of a Tree Task Force to Advance Town's Capital Infrastructure Projects

One area of concern the Town is facing and continues to impede urban redevelopment is removal of trees for street reconstruction. In all reconstruction projects existing trees become impacted. This situation has been shown to illustrate community members' high emotional attachment to trees but also conflicting stances on what necessitates a tree removal. Addressing this conundrum is critical to advancing urban infrastructure replacement and maintaining a healthy urban canopy.

Staff are recommending a multi-disciplined tree task force be created in 2025 that will focus exclusively on a corporate tree protection and compensation policy. This policy would be used to provide guidance and consistent implementation during reconstruction projects. It could also be leveraged in development-related projects to ensure a consistent standard throughout the community.

Without this type of policy in place, continued delays in reconstruction projects related to natural asset renewal will impact the Town's ability to replace end of life infrastructure and provide improved capacity.

Next Steps

If the associated recommendations are adopted by Council, Staff will develop a Tree Task Force terms of reference and proposed membership to be included in a future report to Council for review and approval. Implementation of the Task Force could begin in early 2025.

Staff will also work to support the budget items for an urban forestry program and a Biodiversity and Urban Forestry Strategy, in 2025 and 2026 respectively.

E. Strategic Priorities

1. Communication and Engagement

We will enhance communications and engagement between Town Staff, Town residents and stakeholders

2. Organizational Excellence

We will continually seek out ways to improve the internal organization of Town Staff and the management of Town assets.

3. Community

We will protect and enhance the community feel and the character of the Town, while ensuring the responsible use of resources and restoration of nature.

4. Quality of Life

We will foster a high quality of life for full-time and part-time residents of all ages and stages, while welcoming visitors.

F. Environmental Impacts

The benefit and ecological services provided to the community by trees are recognized and well understood by Staff. There is a link between urban forests and nature-based solutions that provides value to The Blue Mountains community. Realizing this value requires a strategy that considers land development, infrastructure renewal, operations, private lands and targets.

G. Financial Impacts

Financial resources will be proposed during the 2025 and 2026 budget processes. Resources to support the initiation of the proposed Tree Task Force will be supported by the existing Sustainability Strategy Implementation operations budget.

H. In Consultation With

Adam Smith, Director of Planning and Development Services

Adam Farr, Senior Planner

Nicholas Cloet, Sustainability Coordinator

Jim McCannell, Manager of Roads and Drainage

Ryan Gibbons, Director of Community Services.

I. Public Engagement

The topic of this Staff Report has not been the subject of a Public Meeting and/or a Public Information Centre as neither a Public Meeting nor a Public Information Centre are required. However, any comments regarding this report should be submitted to Jeffery Fletcher, Manager of Sustainability & Solid Waste managersolidwaste@thebluemountains.ca.

J. Attached

None

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffery Fletcher,
Manager of Sustainability & Solid Waste

For more information, please contact:
Jeffery Fletcher, Manager of Sustainability & Solid Waste
managersolidwaste@thebluemountains.ca
519-599-3131 extension 238

Report Approval Details

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Attachments:	
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This report and all of its attachments were approved and signed as outlined below:

Jeff Fletcher - Nov 28, 2024 - 10:54 AM

Alan Pacheco - Nov 28, 2024 - 11:01 AM