

The City of Calgary
Parks Urban Forestry

Tree Preservation Research

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Final Report

Weblink Portal Findings



CONTENTS

- 1 Context and objectives 1
- 2 Methodology..... 2
- 3 Summary of Results 3
 - 3.1 Awareness and Knowledge of Tree Preservation and Growth Initiatives: 3
 - 3.2 Perceived Benefits of Trees: 4
 - 3.3 Current Participation in Tree Preservation and Growth Initiatives: 4
 - 3.4 Challenges Related to Tree Preservation and Growth:..... 5
 - 3.5 Tree Preservation Legislation, Bylaws and Regulations:..... 5
 - 3.6 Future Participation in Tree Preservation and Growth Initiatives:..... 6
- 4 Summary 7

1 CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

Urban Forestry is a relatively new and still evolving field of study and can be defined as “The art, science and technology of managing trees and forest resources in and around urban community ecosystems for the physiological, sociological, economic, and aesthetic benefits trees provide society” Helms (1997). The City of Calgary’s urban forest includes trees along streets, in parks and on private land, vegetation in river valleys, and even on roof top gardens. The practice of urban forestry seeks to maintain and increase tree canopy cover and preserve trees in areas under development. According to Parks Urban Forest Strategic Plan (2007), the approach towards preservation and growth of trees is built around three areas: achieve and maintain healthy trees; collaborate with the community; and, resource to manage and measure the asset.

Over the years, The City’s urban forest has experienced many stresses such as rapid growth, harmful pests and diseases and unfavorable growing conditions in the urban environment. The general trend across many urban cities is that the urban forest is declining. The City of Calgary decided to review the potential impact of these pressures and investigate measures that would practically contribute to ensuring sustainable tree canopy for current and future generations.

City staff was asked to engage and report back on citizens’ views about encouraging the preservation of trees with the objectives of maintaining community character and preserving existing tree canopy coverage.

The City of Calgary sought to implement a research strategy, together with a broader citizen engagement process, to:

- Assess citizens’ awareness and opinions regarding Calgary’s urban forest;
- Evaluate the various initiatives involving tree preservation and growth with a focus on encouraging preservation on private properties; and,
- Explore and identify options for encouraging community participation in tree preservation and growth activities.

Administration’s summary of these findings will be presented to Council through the Standing Policy Committee on Community and Protective Services in early February 2012.

2 METHODOLOGY

On behalf of The City of Calgary, Leger Marketing conducted a three-phased research process to determine citizens' views about tree preservation and growth. The process included an initial qualitative phase of research including eight focus groups, followed by a quantitative survey phase and a weblink feedback portal embedded in The City's public website. This report includes the summary of findings from the qualitative self-selected weblink portal.

The rationale for including the weblink portal is to allow for The City of Calgary to provide an additional engagement opportunity for citizens to provide comments via the weblink feedback form found on The City of Calgary's website and hosted by Leger. This weblink feedback form contains the same survey questions as the online survey portion of this research. The weblink portal allowed citizens who were not necessarily invited to participate in the formal online survey to also participate and express their opinions about tree preservation and growth initiatives.

The reader should note, however, that a self-selection approach such as this weblink portal is not statistically reliable, as it is not representative of the population of Calgarians, but only of those who chose to participate. Here, the sample could include experts, City employees, concerned citizens, corporate representatives, special interest group representatives, or others. In addition, this approach does not allow for an opportunity to control the sample frame as respondents could have accessed the weblink portal on multiple occasions.

Thus, we can only report on these findings in a "qualitative" or directional nature. As such, quantitative findings (numbers and percentages) are not used in this report.

The weblink portal was available to Calgarians from November 2nd to 22nd and total of 638 citizens responded to this call for feedback.

3 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

3.1 AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE OF TREE PRESERVATION AND GROWTH INITIATIVES:

Approximately one-half of those who voluntarily gave feedback via the weblink portal believe they are knowledgeable about tree preservation and growth initiatives. The majority of these respondents consider themselves to be knowledgeable about how to effectively water trees, what time of year to prune branches, where to best plant trees, and about tree transplantation. In general, the weblink portal respondents are more knowledgeable about tree preservation and growth initiatives than are Calgarians as a whole.

A minority of weblink portal respondents are aware of The City of Calgary's overall tree preservation and growth initiatives, while almost all are interested in learning more. Awareness and interest in tree preservation and growth strategies are higher among respondents who voluntarily participated in providing feedback via the weblink portal versus online survey respondents representing the general Calgary population.

Further, as with online survey respondents, most weblink portal respondents overestimate the actual tree canopy coverage in Calgary. Notwithstanding this overestimation, the majority of voluntary participants think that The City of Calgary should increase its tree canopy coverage, similar to the opinions expressed by representatives of the general Calgary population.

Mirroring the online survey results, weblink portal feedback reveals that respondents have misperceptions regarding the presence of legislation, bylaws and regulations regarding the protection and preservation of trees on private and public properties.

3.2 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF TREES:

Without being prompted, weblink portal respondents are able to identify benefits from trees such as beautifying or adding character to The City, improving air quality, and the importance of trees to the ecosystem. The benefits identified are similar to those perceived by online survey respondents.

When prompted, almost all of the weblink portal respondents agree with the tree benefits listed, including enhancing the quality of life, ensuring the health of eco-systems, making people feel relaxed, contributing to the quality of air and providing monetary value by adding to the property values of homeowners. While weblink portal respondents recognize similar benefits as do online survey respondents, the strength or intensity of agreement with the tree benefits evaluated is substantially more prominent among voluntary participants in the weblink portal than among online survey respondents.

3.3 CURRENT PARTICIPATION IN TREE PRESERVATION AND GROWTH INITIATIVES:

The majority of those responding to the weblink portal indicate that they have watered trees within the past year. About one half say they have planted a tree on private property or assisted a family member or neighbor with their tree needs, and relatively lower proportions indicate that they have participated in other tree preservation and growth activities.

About one half of the weblink portal respondents report that they have participated in at least one City of Calgary “Green Initiative” program within the past year, with the most popular programs being healthy yards, pathway and river cleanup and community gardens.

Participation in personal tree preservation activities as well as The City of Calgary “Green Initiatives” programs is higher among voluntary weblink portal respondents compared to respondents of the online survey. This suggests that Calgarians providing feedback via the weblink portal have more interaction and perhaps even stronger vested interests in tree preservation and growth than do average Calgarians.

3.4 CHALLENGES RELATED TO TREE PRESERVATION AND GROWTH:

Weblink portal respondents demonstrate a lack of knowledge but a strong desire to learn more about their personal involvement with tree preservation and growth activities. In general these individuals are interested in learning more about how to properly take care of trees, properly plant trees, and save trees during land development. The majority would also volunteer to plant or help care for trees if they knew how to volunteer.

A small proportion of weblink portal respondents points to cost constraints, particularly in terms of buying trees, as a challenge facing participation in tree preservation and growth initiatives. Few weblink respondents mention that they hold a lack of interest in tree preservation and growth, and a minority mention that they do not have enough time to properly care for trees, or are not motivated enough to put time and effort into it.

Further, weblink portal respondents demonstrate stronger interest levels and stronger levels of motivation for learning more about tree preservation and growth activities than do online survey respondents representative of the broader Calgary population.

3.5 TREE PRESERVATION LEGISLATION, BYLAWS AND REGULATIONS:

The majority of respondents who voluntarily provide feedback via the weblink portal think that landowners should be allowed to remove a tree if it is diseased or dying of old age without prior permission from the municipality. Opinions are divided, however, when it comes to supporting legislation that would require homeowners to obtain permission to cut down healthy trees on private property. In general, views are split about whether or not The City should implement legislation to require homeowners to obtain permission to cut down trees on private property.

As well, weblink portal respondents express strong support for the implementation and monitoring of regulations for developers and new or 'infill' developments. Almost all of these respondents think that The City should be actively monitoring developers to make sure they plant what they promised, that fines should be imposed on developers who do not comply with tree guidelines, and that The City should mandate the number of trees on newly developed lots. A majority believe that The City should mandate that two to three trees be planted on new lots, that homeowners responsible for infill development should be mandated to replace trees removed for the development, and that new commercial and retail buildings should have guidelines mandating greenery on their rooftops.

These views are similar to those expressed by online survey respondents.

3.6 FUTURE PARTICIPATION IN TREE PRESERVATION AND GROWTH INITIATIVES:

Weblink portal respondents demonstrate a high propensity to participate in future tree preservation and growth initiatives. Specifically, a vast majority are likely to use an online resource for tree preservation and growth. A majority are also likely to plant a tree in a memorial, birthplace, or celebration forest, and most indicate that they would be likely to celebrate an annual “Tree Day”. In addition, the majority of these individuals say they would be likely to register the existing trees on their property, attend a free “trees for dummies” seminar, and adopt a tree and care for it for a set period of one to three years. Slightly less than one half of these respondents indicate that they would be likely to sponsor a heritage tree’s maintenance for a year and be publicly recognized for the contribution.

A vast majority of weblink portal respondents are very likely to participate in tree preservation and growth initiatives if The City offered tax benefits to plant trees on private property or if The City offered a rebate on the purchase of trees to plant on private property. Most of these respondents also support initiatives that would give tax benefits to developers who save trees during the development process.

Other incentives such as The City organizing contests through community associations wherein grants or prizes would be awarded, or offering public recognition for tree preservation and growth efforts do not receive strong support from weblink portal respondents.

In general, the likelihood of participation in tree preservation and growth strategies is higher among weblink portal respondents than among those responding to the representative online survey. However, both sets of respondents are similarly likely to participate in educational strategies and are supportive of incentives that provide tax benefits and rebates over grants and prizes and public recognition.

4 SUMMARY

Knowledge of tree preservation and growth strategies is found among just one-half of weblink portal respondents. Awareness of key tree preservation and growth initiatives among this respondent group is even lower. In comparison to responses collected via the online survey, weblink participants express higher knowledge and awareness levels about this topic than do Calgarians in general.

Similar to online survey responses, weblink portal respondents overestimate the tree canopy coverage in The City and are not clear about the existence of regulations, bylaws or legislation regarding tree preservation on private and public property. Almost all weblink portal respondents agree that the tree canopy coverage in Calgary should be increased.

While both respondent groups express a desire to explore the implementation of bylaws for developers in The City, support for such legislation is stronger among those who provided voluntary feedback via the weblink portal than is found among online survey respondents. As for legislation about removing trees from private property, weblink portal respondents are divided as to supporting or opposing such action, similar to results gleaned from online survey respondents.

Overall, weblink portal participants demonstrate more interest and stronger motivation levels for learning more about tree preservation and growth initiatives and activities than do representatives of the general Calgary population. Overall, respondents from either the weblink portal or online survey express a preference to use the web as a preferred information resource.

Incentives such as tax benefits to plant trees on private property, or a rebate on the purchase of trees are likely to motivate weblink portal respondents as well representatives of the broader Calgary population to participate in tree preservation and growth activities.

Finally, a campaign to educate Calgarians about tree preservation and growth activities is likely to encourage and stimulate increased participation in growing the tree canopy coverage in Calgary and maintaining healthy trees in Calgary communities, especially among individuals providing feedback via the weblink portal.