

KEY ISSUE

Victoria's Urban Forest

Protecting mature trees, biodiversity and growing space as the city changes

Key Messages

- Victoria cannot meet its climate, biodiversity and reconciliation goals if mature trees, functioning soils and urban ecosystems are lost as the city grows.
- The new OCP land-use framework was developed without a city-wide biodiversity assessment of private land, even though 75% of Victoria's remaining urban forest and Garry oak habitat occurs outside parks.
- Reduced setbacks and plantable space make it increasingly difficult to retain existing mature trees or provide sufficient soil for new large-canopy trees to reach maturity.
- The Tree Protection Bylaw does not ensure protection of existing trees located within permitted building envelopes.
- Mature trees are essential climate infrastructure. Their established canopies provide immediate shade and cooling during extreme heat, helping reduce the urban heat-island effect. Newly planted trees cannot provide the same level of cooling for decades.
- While Victoria's overall canopy has increased, the rate of city-wide canopy growth fell by more than 50%, from 2.37% between 2013–2019 to 1.08% between 2019–2023. City-wide totals also do not tell us where canopy gains and losses are occurring.
- Planting saplings cannot compensate for the immediate loss of mature trees. Canopy targets must be supported by mature-tree retention, adequate growing space and protection of existing ecological assets.

A Change in City Council's Approach

FROM	TO
Trees fitted around development	Development designed around significant trees
Mature-tree removal and replacement planting	Mature-tree retention as the first priority
Shrinking setbacks and plantable space	Sufficient soil and space for replanting large-canopy trees on site
Planning without city-wide biodiversity data	Biodiversity-informed land-use planning
Measuring success by city-wide canopy alone	Measuring what we retain, lose and grow

Problem, Solution & Benefits

The following five priorities connect land-use planning, mature-tree retention, plantable space, measurable accountability and climate resilience.

1. Biodiversity & Ecological Planning

PROBLEM	SOLUTION	BENEFITS
The OCP's new land-use framework was developed without a city-wide biodiversity assessment of private land. • Victoria lies within the Coastal Douglas-fir biogeoclimatic zone, one of B.C.'s most at-risk biogeoclimatic zones. • The Kwetlal food system, colonially known as the Garry oak ecosystem, developed through millennia of Lekwungen agroecological management. • Garry oak is a long-lived keystone species supporting a complex community of associated plants, insects, birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles. • 75% of Victoria's Garry oak population and modified ecosystem occurs on private land, outside protected natural areas. • Ecological networks do not stop at park boundaries. Trees, soils, yards and spaces between buildings provide habitat and connectivity across neighbourhoods. • Yet the OCP land-use framework was developed without a comprehensive assessment identifying these ecological assets across private land.	• Undertake and maintain a city-wide biodiversity assessment, including private land. • Adopt a city-wide Garry oak species-detection tool as part of ongoing urban forest remote sensing. • Establish an Urban Forest Technical Advisory Group, as recommended in the City's 2012 Urban Forest Master Plan, incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, ecologists, biologists, environmental organizations and urban forestry expertise. • Update OCP language to recognize modified Garry oak ecosystems and individual Garry oak trees, not only relatively "intact" remnants.	• Evidence-based land-use planning. • Better identification and protection of biodiversity. • Stronger protection of Garry oak ecosystems. • Integration of Indigenous knowledge systems and scientific expertise. • Better alignment between reconciliation, climate and land-use objectives.

2. Mature Trees & Tree Protection

PROBLEM	SOLUTION	BENEFITS
The Tree Protection Bylaw does not ensure that existing mature trees are retained when land is redeveloped. - The Tree Protection Bylaw has not been updated to fully address land-use changes resulting from provincial housing legislation and the new OCP. - Existing protected trees located within permitted building envelopes may have little practical protection from removal. - Mature trees provide canopy, shade, habitat, stormwater interception and established root and soil systems that replacement saplings cannot immediately reproduce. - Some Garry oaks in Victoria are centuries old. Once mature trees and their ecological functions are removed, those values cannot simply be recreated through replacement planting.	- Review and strengthen the Tree Protection Bylaw in response to the new OCP and provincial housing legislation. - Make retention of healthy mature trees the first priority in site planning, with removal considered only after reasonable design alternatives have been examined. - Require significant trees and their root zones to be incorporated at the beginning of site design rather than after the building envelope has been established. - Require meaningful replacement planting where removal cannot reasonably be avoided, with sufficient soil and growing space for large replacement trees to reach maturity.	- Retains existing canopy while replacement trees mature. - Protects wildlife habitat and biodiversity. - Reduces unnecessary mature-tree loss. - Maintains cooling, shade and stormwater-management benefits. - Creates a more resilient urban forest.

3. Setbacks & Plantable Space

PROBLEM	SOLUTION	BENEFITS
Reduced setbacks and plantable space reduce the physical capacity to retain and grow large trees. - Setbacks determine how much soil and rooting area remains available around buildings. - Large, long-lived trees require substantial volumes of contiguous, uncompacted soil. - Reduced setbacks make retaining existing large trees increasingly difficult and reduce opportunities to establish future canopy trees. - Plantable space in Priority Growth and Residential Infill areas has been reduced from 9% to 6%. - Small landscaped areas may satisfy planting requirements without providing sufficient soil volume for meaningful future canopy. - Ecological networks rely on yards and spaces between buildings to provide habitat and movement corridors.	- Recognize contiguous plantable space as a leading indicator of future canopy success. - Restore landscape-area minimums from 6% to 9% in Priority Growth and Residential Infill areas. - Provide setbacks sufficient to retain mature trees and create contiguous plantable areas. - Require adequate soil volume for large, long-lived canopy trees, rather than relying primarily on small ornamental species. - Incorporate tree retention and future canopy requirements before building footprints are finalized.	- Makes canopy targets achievable. - Provides space for existing mature trees. - Allows replacement trees to reach maturity. - Supports biodiversity and ecological connectivity. - Improves stormwater absorption and reduces urban heat. - Enables housing and healthy urban canopy to coexist.

4. Canopy Targets & Accountability

PROBLEM	SOLUTION	BENEFITS
City-wide canopy gains do not tell us where canopy is increasing or where mature trees are being lost. - The rate of city-wide canopy growth fell by more than 50%, from 2.37% between 2013–2019 to 1.08% between 2019–2023. - A slowing growth rate indicates that future canopy gains may be increasingly difficult to achieve. - City-wide figures can conceal differences between parks, institutional lands, boulevards and private properties. - If gains are concentrated in parks or natural areas, they do not necessarily compensate for mature-tree losses in neighbourhoods experiencing redevelopment. - Neighbourhood canopy provides shade, supports biodiversity, reduces urban heat and manages stormwater where people live. - Replacement planting will not provide future canopy without sufficient contiguous plantable space and soil volume for large trees. - Urban forest success is not measured by isolated gains, but by whether mature trees can be retained where they already exist. - When required replacement trees cannot be accommodated on a development site, the current bylaw allows a \$2,000-per-tree payment into the Tree Reserve Fund for planting on public land. This shifts canopy replacement away from the private property where the loss occurred and may not cover the full cost of planting, establishing and maintaining replacement trees on public land.	- Continue regular city-wide LiDAR and remote-sensing analysis. - Report canopy gains and losses by land ownership and land use: parks/natural areas, institutional lands, boulevards/public rights-of-way, private residential and private commercial/development properties. - Report neighbourhood-level canopy change. - Track mature-tree retention and loss, plantable-space change, species composition and replacement-tree survival. - Report annually, by development and civic address: the number of trees approved for removal; the number of replacement trees required; and the amount of cash-in-lieu collected where replacement requirements are not met at the development site. - Use these results to evaluate whether the OCP, development standards and Tree Protection Bylaw are achieving urban forest and canopy objectives. - Update cash-in-lieu fees to reflect the actual cost of planting, establishing and maintaining replacement canopy on public land, and regularly adjust the amount as costs increase. On-site replacement and mature-tree retention must remain the first priorities. - Report annually on the Tree Reserve Fund's opening balance, contributions, interest, expenditures, number and location of trees planted, replacement-tree survival and closing balance.	- Shows whether canopy is improving where residents need it most. - Identifies neighbourhoods experiencing canopy and mature-tree loss. - Makes the cumulative impact of development on the urban forest measurable. - Shows whether removals are offset by on-site replacement or cash-in-lieu. - Provides greater accountability for OCP and development outcomes. - Provides better evidence for evaluating progress toward canopy targets. - Creates a meaningful incentive to meet tree minimums on development sites. - Prevents the public from subsidizing tree deficits created by private development. - Shows whether Tree Reserve Fund payments are producing healthy, lasting canopy.

Sources: [City of Victoria - Tree Protection Bylaw](#); [Council Member Motion - Urban Forest Canopy](#)

5. Climate Resilience & Livability

PROBLEM	SOLUTION	BENEFITS
Trees and growing space are essential green infrastructure, not decorative amenities. • Mature trees provide immediate shade and cooling during extreme heat, helping reduce the urban heat-island effect, while also intercepting rainfall and providing wildlife habitat. • Garry oaks are naturally adapted to the region's seasonal drought and climate. • Loss of mature trees and permeable soil increases vulnerability to heat and stormwater impacts. • Reduced setbacks can reduce light, air circulation, privacy and access to green space. • Housing and urban-forest protection should not be treated as competing objectives. Development can accommodate both when sufficient growing space is incorporated into site design.	• Treat urban forest, soils and plantable space as essential green infrastructure in land-use planning. • Integrate urban forest objectives into housing, stormwater, climate adaptation and neighbourhood planning. • Require every development to provide sufficient contiguous plantable space and soil volume for large, long-lived trees. • Evaluate development not simply by the number of replacement trees planted, or offset by cash-in-lieu, but by whether each development site can sustain healthy mature canopy over generations.	• Greater resilience to extreme heat and drought. • Improved stormwater management. • Healthier and more livable neighbourhoods. • Improved biodiversity and wildlife habitat. • Long-term protection of Victoria's urban forest. • Accommodates housing growth while retaining the natural assets that make Victoria resilient and distinctive.