



## **Funding Trees for Health**

Did you know that trees in your neighbourhood and city help lower climate temperatures, improve air quality, and stabilize our water table? The advantages trees bring to our lives, and our lack of knowledge about them, is just one of the barriers that The Nature Conservancy points to in a new report as being part of the reason we need to begin advocating more fiercely for our urban environment. Citizens and municipal officers alike lack the information needed to make important decisions about city trees. How can we make decisions or establish priorities without proper knowledge about the true value of trees?

Trees bring many ecosystem services, or benefits, to our lives. For example, trees help reduce particulate matter (PM) in the air. PM is a dangerous source of harm in the air, responsible for more than 3 million deaths a year globally. Studies show increased tree plantings can reduce impacts on health care. Trees also have a positive effect on mental and physical health – not only can increased access to green spaces help decrease stress, improve

cardiovascular health, and improve focus, but it can also play a role in reducing obesity. Additionally, trees cool the air in cities, on a summer day the effect can be a 2-4 ° F difference in air temperatures. As climate change impacts increase, weather anomalies such as extreme heat waves become more prevalent, and the presence of urban trees could help to mitigate the effects by reducing air temperatures in urban areas.

Another barrier to the preservation of our cities' trees are the silos that have been created with respect to the responsibility for trees in our cities. Although responsibility for planting and maintenance of city trees usually falls to one municipal department, many municipal services are affected by the placement, maintenance, and condition of city trees. By increasing communication between departments by aligning mandates of departments where it pertains to trees, we could certainly optimize their use and existence and improve outcomes for all.

Additionally, decision makers could be unaware of the benefits of trees for public health, or how the benefits of urban trees could relate to the mission of their departments. A new suite of software tools is making it possible to evaluate and quantify the value of urban trees for its citizens, such as i-Tree in the United States, a software that can help estimate a value for the ecosystem services that urban trees provide. Furthermore, a centralized or coordinated planning structure with other relevant agencies could improve the situation. Fragmented decision-making during municipal regulation development can cause us to miss opportunities to increase tree planting and maintenance. One of the best solutions advocated for in the report by the Nature Conservancy is to break these silos by connecting the mandates of the health sector and environmental sectors. One way to do that is to promote public awareness and knowledge of the health benefits that arise from engaging with a thriving natural environment and public greenspace. Connecting the objectives and core values of the two sectors is the best way to promote and advocate for environmental protection(s).

There are, however, various financial and policy solutions at our fingertips that could go a long way to solving the problem. Breaking silos by engaging relevant municipal departments, as well as linking urban forestry to health care issues are two of the major solutions offered by The Nature Conservancy in this report. Both will accomplish the objective of better coordination between various municipal departments, because the creation of higher-level planning for a city can prevent silo-ing of department goals at different levels of decision making.

When it comes to finding funding for urban trees, the Trees for Health report does offer some solutions related to financial mechanisms: public funds, municipal codes and policies, and partnerships. Typically, in the U.S. three types of revenue sources are generally used to pay for parks and conservation: discretionary annual spending, the creation of dedicated funding streams, and debt financing – a practice not used at the municipal level in Canada.

Financial Mechanisms. Although general funding for trees already comes from broad-based taxes, some public funds could be dedicated to planting trees, for example, from land transfer taxes or building permits. The report states that in the U.S. “Less frequently used mechanisms include special assessment districts, real estate transfer taxes, impact fees, and income taxes.” (Trees for Health, Page 21) Municipal Codes and Policies could also provide a mechanism by which more trees could be planted, for example, altering zoning building codes, which would require tree planting as a condition of the development and construction of new buildings. New building codes could in effect ‘streamline the process’ of increasing urban tree plantings by requiring minimum tree coverage on a given lot.

As mentioned previously, partnerships are an excellent way to create progress with respect to increasing our urban forests. These partnerships are a result of creating a link between health funding and urban forestry, and are the foundation for another viable public sector model for funding, as this would also create new finance streams that would link nature and health. Linking funding for trees and parks to health goals and objectives seems like a natural progression, since the prevalence of urban trees does affect health outcomes for residents. Private sector partnerships would take the form of philanthropic donations, and are a viable financial mechanism for funding urban forests.

There are ways to create healthy urban forests, as The Nature Conservancy has demonstrated in their report ‘Funding Trees for Health’. We now know that trees are beneficial to our lives in cities, and it is up to us to drive the change that will make a difference for the health of not only ourselves, but also future generations of city-dwellers, by protecting and enhancing our valuable urban trees.