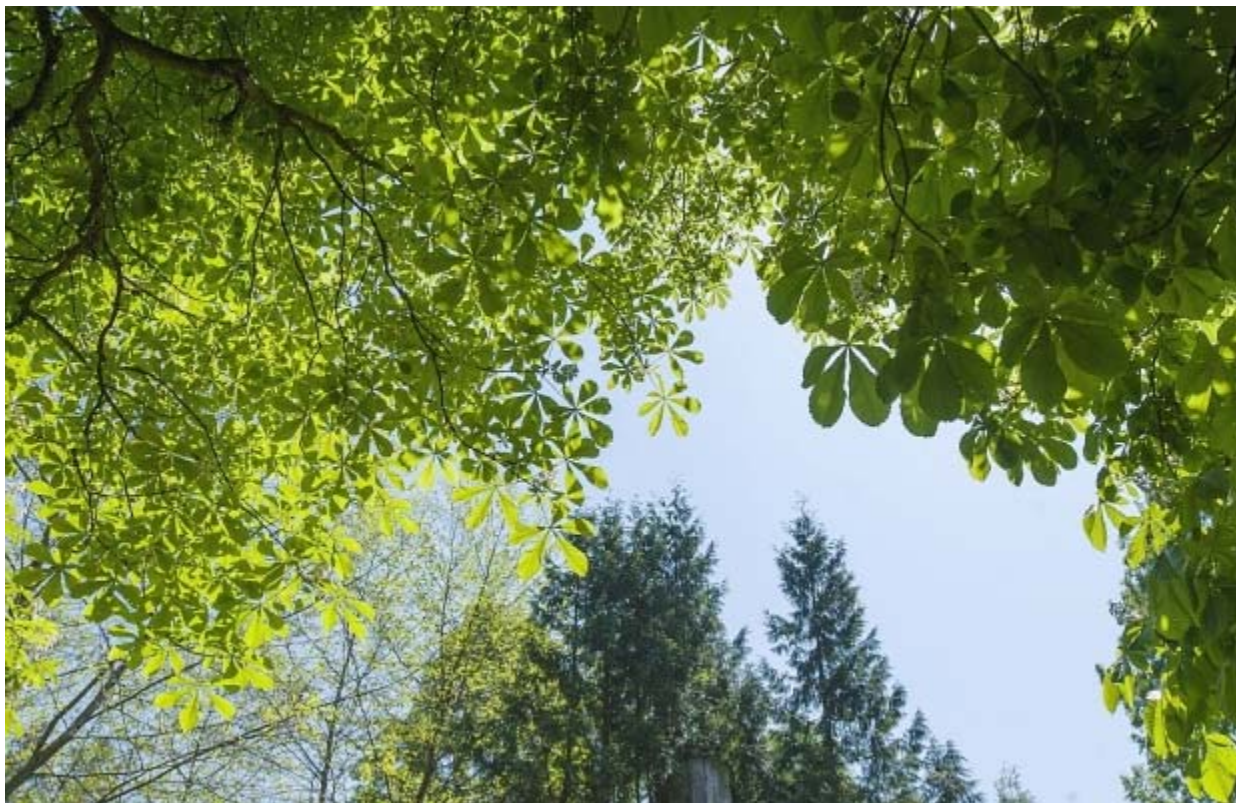


Vancouver looks to ban unwarranted tree removals on private property

City staff recommend getting in line with other municipalities

BY GERRY BELLETT AND MATTHEW ROBINSON, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 11, 2014



Vancouver's tree canopy covered 22.5 per cent of the city in 1996 but has dropped to about 18 per cent today. (File photo)

Photograph by: Ward Perrin Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun

What do you think of this idea? [Tell us on Facebook.](#)

===

Vancouver city council will consider tightening its tree removal bylaw to prevent property owners from removing even one healthy tree without first seeking permission from the city.

Under the current Protection of Trees bylaw, property owners are allowed to cut down one healthy tree per year with no justification needed.

But city staff are recommending council axe that entitlement.

If approved, the change would bring Vancouver in line with tree protection measures in surrounding municipalities.

"We are doing this because since 1996 over 23,000 healthy trees — at least eight inches in diameter at chest height — have been removed, which isn't helping our objective of stopping the decline in the tree (canopy) and of growing an urban forest in Vancouver," said Malcolm Bromley, the city's general manager of parks.

According to a report to council, there has been a drastic decline in the city's forest canopy since 1996, with most of the decline occurring on private property.

"While Vancouver possesses a magnificent urban forest and has seen thousands of new trees planted since the approval of the Greenest City Action Plan, Vancouver's city-wide canopy cover has been declining over the past few decades," said the report.

Bromley said the tree canopy covered 22.5 per cent of the city in 1996 but has dropped to about 18 per cent today.

"Every modern city measures its canopy and we are down to 18 per cent and it's reducing every year. This is the first step in trying to stem that tide while we start to plant more trees and allow the urban forest to regenerate," Bromley said.

He estimates it could take about 40 years before the city gets its tree canopy back to 1996 levels.

Property owners are required to plant a replacement tree if they remove one under the existing policy. But those trees just don't cut it, according to the report to council.

"Replacement trees are valuable but they do not substitute for the benefits of mature healthy trees," reads the report. The city measures its canopy from the air, according to a draft urban forest strategy that will be presented to council along with the proposed bylaw change on April 15, and canopy decline in the city is visible despite the one-for-one trade.

The policy change would mean property owners could only get a permit to remove a tree for a small set of reasons. If the tree is too close to a building, interferes with a sewer, drainage system or utility wires, and pruning is not an option, it could be chopped down. It could also be removed if it is causing damage to property or is hazardous, or if it is badly damaged or likely to be dead.

But if you've gone ahead and planted a tree that has grown too big for your taste, blocks your view or sheds too many leaves in fall, that's just too bad under the proposed policy, which would make tree planting a serious decision.

Judith Blake Reeve, a landscape architect with CWMM Consulting Engineers, said it does happen sometimes that people plant a tree that they realize just doesn't work in the chosen space. But it needn't.

"I think that it's almost like unjustifiable arboristic homicide to plant a tree and then decide two years later that you'd like to cut it down," Reeve said.

"I spoke to some people yesterday who said, 'Well, we had a lovely tree, but it grew straight up into hydro wires,'" she said, adding that these things tend to occur when people don't know what it is they want or need and decide against bringing in someone to help with site analysis.

"There's more to it than just saying, 'Do I have enough space to get the hole in the ground?'" she said.

Reeve said she thought it was appropriate that people ask before they go ahead and remove certain trees, adding that the "landscape ethic of British Columbia" was once large Douglas firs, cedar trees and other trees that grew on the margins of the forest.

"A lot of the wonderful big old conifers are disappearing and what we seem to be planting is deciduous trees because we like the flowers and we like the fall colour and we like to have the light in the winter time," she said.

The report to council showed that in 1996 there were 470 trees removed under permit with 84 being cut down using section 4.5 of the bylaw, which allows property owners the one-tree per year provision.

By 2013 the number of trees removed under permit had increased tenfold with 4,925 trees being cut down of which 1,805 were felled under section 4.5.

Of the 49,593 trees removed by permit since 1996, 23,492 — or 47 per cent — were felled under section 4.5.

Council is now being asked to repeal that section — a type of provision that Bromley said exists nowhere else in the

Lower Mainland.

Park Board Commissioner John Coupar said while he valued trees in the city it seemed like the process to remove a tree could "become a little onerous."

He said he had experienced the city's existing process firsthand when he applied to remove a large tree from a property he once owned in the Dunbar neighbourhood and found the steps "pretty reasonable."

But Coupar noted the decision on whether to change the policy is up to council.

Councillor Andrea Reimer said she will support the recommendation.

In September 2012, Reimer pushed for a staff report on the impact of private property tree removal.

"We have a goal of planting 150,000 trees on public property but we wanted to have a better sense of what was happening on private property," she said.

"Now we have a report saying we've lost close to 50,000 trees since this bylaw was brought in and the rate is accelerating every year," she said.

gbellett@vancouversun.com

mrobinson@vancouversun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun