

## JAMES: Tragic accident warrants tree bylaw review

North Shore News

October 14, 2015 02:28 PM

*"At night, what you see is a city because all you see is lights. By day, it doesn't look like a city at all. Trees out-number the houses... You can't quite tell: is it a city, is it a suburb, is it the forest growing back?"*

– Jonathan Raban

Author and journalistic tilt at all political windmills, Jonathan Raban was speaking about the city of Seattle but he might well have used the same words about the trees we all treasure on the North Shore.

And because I share that love of the trees that abound on our mountainsides and in our parks and gardens, I have resisted writing about some downsides that come from protecting them at all costs.

This is not to infer we should allow developers to clear cut, or that homeowners cut down healthy bird sanctuaries to create a million-dollar view of Vancouver's night-lights.

What I am talking about are nuisance trees and safety.

As you might have guessed, the trigger for today's column was the recent traumatic accident that happened to a five-year-old girl when part of a large hemlock fell on her as she was playing in the grounds of Highlands elementary.

Accident is the right word because, so far as I know, no one could have predicted the event in that particular place, at that particular time.

But as we wish that young girl and her family the best possible outcome, how many of you agree that now would be an appropriate time for the District of North Vancouver and its sister communities to review their tree bylaws?

Two examples illustrate my point:

The first was a conversation I had with a man and wife who were/are longtime residents in the district. Their Westlynn home abuts a narrow district easement which runs from their street down a steep embankment to the streets below.

One of the older trees clings to the embankment but tilts across the easement. Over a decade ago, the homeowner contacted the district to point out that, in the event the tree lost its hold on the ground – which would not be unexpected after the summer we've just had – it would crash down onto the home and cause a good deal of expensive damage. In short, the homeowner recommended the tree be proactively taken down.

District staff disagreed so, once a year, the homeowner wrote them a reminder letter so that, in the event damage occurred, the district could not say it was unaware of the danger.

Also in the district, there are homes that were built 60-70 years ago. Many have heavily treed lots. Whether those trees existed before the homes were built, or were planted as part of original landscaping that favoured native species isn't known.

What is known, is that there are 20-50 metre (60-150-foot), shallow-rooted trees sitting on district sidewalk allowances, many of which shed large branches in the slightest of storms.

Not only is the district aware, it felled one dead tree at the homeowners' request and was asked to proactively remove four nearby branch-shedding trees.

The response was that the homeowners could canvass neighbours for support and have the trees taken down at their own expense. Permits would be required, and the trees would need to be replaced – yes, on the municipal allowance – with species approved by the district.

The last I heard, the bill would run in the thousands; so the trees remain – still shedding branches, still heaving the homeowners' asphalt driveway and still strewing a regular mess of needles and debris over roofs, gardens and driveways.

The scene after the recent "big blow" was a sight to behold.

In self-defence, the homeowners assume the cost of regular cleanup – not just on their own property but up and down the street too.

Call them what you will, all these costs are hidden levies that bump the annual taxes well above the district's acknowledged rate.

It goes without saying that, if one of the branches were to fall on me, the cost to me and to the district would be a heck of a lot higher than the bill the district would incur if it changed its restrictive bylaws and tended its own trees.

These examples concern the District of North Vancouver but many conversations over the years suggest tree issues are a North Shore-wide problem.

Yes we want trees, they are one reason we live here; but municipalities should realize some tree species just aren't suitable for suburban gardens.

rimco@shaw.ca