

SUBJECT: Significant Tree Maintenance Rebate Program

TO: Committee of the Whole

FROM: Public Works
Roads, Parks and Forestry

Report Number: PWS-11-26

Wards Affected: All

Date to Committee: April 13, 2026

Date to Council: April 21, 2026

Recommendation

Approve the Significant Tree Maintenance Rebate Program; and

Direct the Chief Financial Officer to allocate funding of \$50,000 from the Tree Establishment & Enhancement Reserve Fund to cover the costs of the 2026 program; and

Approve the amendment to the Tree Establishment & Enhancement Reserve Fund By-law 55-2020, substantially in the form attached as Appendix A to public works report PWS-11-26.

Executive Summary

Purpose of report:

- The purpose of this report is to recommend that the Significant Tree Maintenance Rebate Pilot Program be converted into an ongoing permanent program, informed by pilot implementation outcomes, participation levels, and resident feedback. This report fulfills Council's direction under RPF-05-24 Significant Tree Review Update to evaluate the pilot's effectiveness and report back in Q2 2026 with recommendations.

Key findings:

- **Program Delivery and Uptake:**
 - Strong public interest resulted in applications exceeding available funding.
 - A total of 37 applicants were approved for a maintenance rebate.
 - Approximately one-third of surveyed applicants successfully received a rebate.

- The \$25,000 budget limited approvals, resulting in some eligible applicants being declined.
- The pilot successfully supported preventative maintenance, rather than reactive or emergency tree work.
- **Resident Experience:**
 - Most respondents rated City support for private tree maintenance as “very important” or “important.”
 - Nearly three-quarters of respondents believe the program encourages residents to maintain significant trees.
 - The online application process received mixed feedback:
 - Some residents found it straightforward
 - Others cited challenges with documentation, photo requirements, and eligibility clarity
- **Program Design Feedback**
 - Residents expressed strong support for:
 - Program continuation and expansion
 - Increased funding levels, improved clarity around eligibility and application requirements
 - Recurrent themes included:
 - Difficulty covering upfront costs
 - Desire for direct payment to arborists
 - Requests for support for seniors and low-income households

Without continued municipal support, some residents may defer necessary maintenance due to cost, increasing the likelihood of tree decline, removals, and associated safety risks. Converting the pilot into an ongoing permanent program would help protect mature tree canopy, support proactive stewardship, and advance the City’s long-term urban forest and climate objectives.

Implications:

- Converting the pilot into an ongoing permanent program would require a modest annual operating budget, subject to Council approval as part of the 2027 Budget and can be administered with existing Urban Forestry resources. This program would be recommended to be funded annually by the Tree Establishment & Enhancement Reserve Fund. The program supports proactive tree maintenance, canopy retention, and the City’s broader climate and environmental objectives.

Recommendation Report

Background

In 2024, Council approved a \$25,000 pilot fixed-fee maintenance subsidy program to support the care of significant trees on private residential properties. The pilot was designed to:

- Encourage proactive maintenance of significant trees (≥ 75 cm diameter)
- Reduce removals of mature trees
- Support canopy retention and the City's long-term goal of 35% canopy cover by 2060

The program launched with a phased approach in March 2025, allowing residents time to coordinate with qualified tree professionals prior to the application form launch on March 31, 2025. Applications were accepted on a first-come, first-served basis and were limited by available funding. A total of 37 applicants were approved for a maintenance rebate.

As committed, staff conducted a post-pilot survey in Fall 2025 to evaluate resident experience, program accessibility, and effectiveness.

Analysis

The pilot demonstrated that financial incentives are an effective tool for encouraging stewardship of significant trees on private property. The high level of interest, coupled with positive perceptions of program value, indicates unmet demand for tree maintenance support.

While administrative requirements were necessary to ensure accountability and compliance with the private tree by-law, feedback highlights opportunities to refine processes to improve accessibility and equity without compromising program integrity. This feedback will be used to enhance and streamline the ongoing program.

Importantly, the pilot supports a preventative approach to urban forest management by encouraging early intervention on private property. By shifting tree care from reactive to proactive maintenance, the program aligns with best practices in urban forestry and helps reduce future pressures related to hazardous trees, removals, by-law enforcement, and emergency response. This preventative approach supports long-term canopy retention, public safety and more efficient use of municipal resources.

Benefits:

Benefits of converting to a permanent program

Environmental Benefits

- Retention of large, mature trees with high ecological value

- Improved tree health and longevity
- Progress toward the City's 35% canopy cover target

Community and Safety Benefits

- Reduced risk of tree failure on private property
- Reduced risk of property damage and personal injury associated with unmanaged tree defects
- Increased resident awareness of proper tree care
- Support for homeowners unable to afford professional maintenance

Operational Benefits

- Proactive maintenance reduces long-term enforcement and emergency response costs
- Strengthens partnerships with local arborists
- Aligns private tree care with municipal forestry objectives

Survey Results – Significant Tree Maintenance Rebate Pilot Program

- 93 visitors accessed the survey, with 46 completed responses.
- Application outcomes:
 - **32.6%** of survey contributors successfully received the rebate
 - **41.3%** of survey contributors applied but were not approved
- Application experience:
 - **67.8%** had a very easy to neutral experience
 - **19.4%** found it difficult
- Program perception:
 - **73.7%** believe the program encourages tree maintenance on private property
 - **84.8%** expressed interest in applying in future program rounds

Considerations:

- **Equity & Fair Access:** Consider program design measures that aim to limit repeat participation in consecutive years, which allows first-time applicants to be prioritized and/or exploring mechanisms to distribute funding more broadly across neighbourhoods.
- **Accessibility:** Application simplification and assistance for seniors or residents with accessibility needs.
- **Program Scope:** Consider future expansion to allow more than one tree per property or shared property-line trees.
- **Program Timing:** Allow applications to start in January to take advantage of pre-spring tree work. Particularly for Oak trees.
- **Funding Stability:** Predictable annual funding would reduce the “lottery” perception identified by residents.

Financial Impact

The pilot was funded through a \$25,000 allocation from the Green Initiatives Reserve Fund. For the 2026 program, it is recommended that funding increase to \$50,000 and be funded from the Tree Establishment & Enhancement Reserve Fund. This reserve fund is supported by revenues collected under the Private Tree By-law, which aligns with the program's objectives of supporting tree planting and enhancement activities. As a result, the program would continue to be funded through reserve revenues and would not require property-tax supported funding.

To implement the program on an ongoing permanent basis, staff recommend:

- Establishing a dedicated annual contribution within the 2027 Budget from the Tree Establishment & Enhancement Reserve Fund of \$50,000.
- Funding level informed by program demand, with consideration for incremental increases in future years, subject to council approval.
- No new staffing resources required at current scale; administrative workload is manageable within existing Forestry resources

Final budget recommendations would be subject to Council approval as part of the 2027 Budget.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Completion of another post-program survey to assess resident experience after first year, and then every 3-5 years.
 - Tracking repeat applicants should limitations on consecutive year participation be implemented.
 - Integration with *Get Involved Burlington* for transparency and outreach.
 - Ongoing refinement based on data and resident feedback.
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Recommendation Details

That Council approve \$50,000 in funding for the 2026 program, and that consideration be given to transitioning this to ongoing permanent program, subject to 2027 Budget approval using the existing Tree Establishment and Enhancement Reserve Fund, with program refinements to:

1. Improve application clarity and accessibility
 2. Enhance equity considerations
 3. Support long-term canopy retention and urban forest health
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Key Dates & Milestones

- **2024:** Council approval of pilot under RPF-05-24
 - **March 2025:** Program launch and application intake
 - **Fall 2025:** Post-pilot resident survey conducted
 - **Q2 2026:** Staff report back to Council (this report)
 - **2026 onward:** Additional one-time funding provided for 2026 program with proposed transition to a permanent program, subject to approval in 2027
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Implications

Financial

An ongoing program would require an annual operating budget of approximately \$50,000, subject to Council approval. Proactive private tree maintenance may help reduce future costs associated with emergency response, enforcement, and tree removals.

Legal

The program operates within the existing private tree by-law framework. No new legal risks or regulatory changes have been identified.

Human Resources

Program administration can be accommodated within existing Forestry resources at the current program funding level.

Communications and Engagement

Clear communication regarding eligibility, application requirements, and funding limits will be important to manage expectations. Continued use of surveys and the Get Involved Burlington platform will support transparency and program refinement.

Climate and Environmental

The program supports canopy retention, climate resilience, and progress toward the City's 35% canopy cover target by encouraging proactive maintenance of mature trees.

References

Not applicable

Strategic Alignment

- Designing and delivering complete communities
 - Providing the best services and experiences
 - Protecting and improving the natural environment and taking action on climate change
 - Driving organizational performance
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Appendices:

A. Amending By-law Tree Establishment & Enhancement Reserve Fund

Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and approved by the Commissioner, Head of Corporate Affairs, Chief Financial Officer, and Commissioner of Legal and Legislative Services/City Solicitor.