



Winnipeg Regional Health Authority
Caring for Health
Office régional de la santé de Winnipeg
À l'écoute de notre santé

2-490 Hargrave Street
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3B 2J7 CANADA
TEL: 204| 940-3607
FAX: 204| 956-4494
www.wrha.mb.ca

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R3B 2J7 CANADA
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TÉLÉC: 204| 956-4494
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December 11, 2023

Mayor Gillingham- Chair
City Council
City of Winnipeg
510 Main St.
Winnipeg, MB R3B 1B9

Dear Mayor Gillingham and Council,

On behalf of the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority's Population and Public Health Program, I commend the City of Winnipeg for the development of the *Winnipeg Comprehensive Urban Forest Strategy*. We support the document as written, as well as the implementation plan.

Trees do more than add beauty to our community. They also provide us with many direct and indirect health benefits, which also have the added benefit of contributing savings to our health-care system. Direct health benefits from trees include cleaner air for our respiratory health, protection from the sun's heat and UV rays to prevent skin damage (including cancers), and the positive mental health effects associated with the proximity to natural environments. Indirect benefits include being supportive of a more active lifestyle linked to increased outdoor activity. Both the direct and indirect benefits are realized on hot summer days when people take refuge under our urban tree canopy, seeking shade and cooler temperatures, where light physical activity is still tolerable.

Health Canada estimates that air pollution contributes to over 15,000 premature deaths per year in Canada. Urban forests improve air quality by absorbing pollutants, intercepting particulate matter (e.g. dust, ash, pollen, smoke) and releasing oxygen through photosynthesis. In general, the more trees there are in an area, the more pollution those trees remove. Where population density is high, the health value derived from pollution removal for our respiratory and overall health is unparalleled.

Overexposure to ultraviolet radiation (UVR) from the sun leads to skin damage (including cancers) and has been linked to cataracts and suppression of our immune system. In addition to protecting us from UVR, trees also help keep us cooler in the summer and serve as a protective factor for heat stroke and other heat effects. Urban areas devoid of trees are typically hotter than those with them, and this phenomenon is known as the "urban heat island effect." Essentially, trees help keep us cooler by providing shade and releasing moisture into the atmosphere through a process called evapotranspiration.

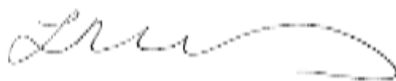
There is also a growing interest in the physical and mental health benefits from the presence of trees in our urban environment, and from our spending time in nature. Research shows that urban forests create spaces for active and passive recreation, decrease physical and emotional stress, and reduce the prevalence of violence. Urban trees are associated with improved social connectedness, belonging, and trust in communities. The greater the tree cover, the higher the association with walking for pleasure or commuting purposes, cycling, play and overall free-time physical activity spent outdoors. In one study, patients who were recovering from gall bladder surgery in a Pennsylvania hospital did so more quickly in rooms that had a view of trees than those looking out at a building. Another study found that residents living in greener surroundings reported lower levels of fear and less violent behavior. Studies such as these demonstrate that we are only beginning to understand the nature and magnitude of positive impacts of trees on our mental and physical health.

Protecting and enhancing our urban forest also has the potential to address some dimensions of inequity experienced by people living in rental, overcrowded and/or un-airconditioned accommodations, and people experiencing homelessness.

Urban trees are and will continue to be instrumental in helping to address the negative impacts of global warming. We have experienced some of the warmest summers on record in recent years, and this trend is expected to continue. Urban areas that experience rising temperatures from climate change can also expect rising morbidity and mortality as a result. Our communities need to find options to mitigate and adapt to these changes. Maintaining and adding to our urban forests, which provide shade and absorb the greenhouse gases causing climate change, will help.

Urban forests are an important resource for the community providing multiple benefits to human health and well-being. This strategy has excellent breadth of content, with consideration given to health effects, equity, and partnering with Indigenous peoples. As such, we strongly support adopting and implementing the *Winnipeg Comprehensive Urban Forest Strategy*.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Richards', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Lisa Richards, MD MNRM MSc FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health
Population and Public Health Program
Winnipeg Regional Health Authority

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