Coalition to Save the Elms

To Preserve and Protect the Urban Forest and Urban Environment

A Presentation to the City of Winnipeg Executive Policy Committee
March 14, 2005

Background

The Coalition to Save the Elms is a non-profit, citizen-based, tree focused conservation organization that was founded in 1992 in response to the heightened threat of Dutch elm disease to Winnipeg's elm population. Winnipeg is said to have the largest mature elm population in North America.

Dutch elm disease is a fungal infection carried by the elm bark beetle. The beetle breeds in dead and dying elm wood, such as that found in firewood piles, on dead limbs and in dead trees. It travels down the tree trunk of healthy elms in fall to over winter under the bark at the base of the tree. The remedy is to remove all dead and dying wood and to carry out a program of basal spraying in fall to control the beetles before they hibernate.

In 1992, thanks to a one-time federal grant, the Coalition to Save the Elms was able to create a project to clean up the dead wood on the riverbanks of the City, employing City of Winnipeg welfare recipients. The project was an enormous success, resulting in a reduction of much of the deadwood that had been providing breeding grounds for the Dutch elm beetle. Nevertheless, this was just a small start to an ongoing citizen-based effort that has so far helped to keep our elm forest from being decimated as was the case in cities in eastern Canada where Toronto, for example, lost 80% of its elms. We have not yet won the battle. We continue to lose elms at the rate of between two and five percent depending on the year.

After the initial project, the Coalition adjusted its mandate to one of creating ongoing awareness among citizens to encourage them to take preventive action on their own properties. We teach citizens how to keep their trees healthy, how to prune, how to nourish and water and how to recognize infection so that infected trees can be removed to prevent further spread of the disease. We also educate homeowners about how to care for their other trees in recognition of the fact that much of our urban forest is ageing and requires more care to maintain while younger trees develop.

We also promote and administer the annual tree banding campaign, which has stimulated healthy competition from private operators, making the service more widely available. Our continued promotion and awareness campaigns are critical to the future of this program which helps to keep trees from being defoliated by canker worms and other migrating insects and in so doing, keeps the trees healthier and more able to mount their own defences against disease.

Why you should care

The replacement value of Saskatchewan's 300,000 American elms has been valued at just over one billion dollars. Vancouver's 145,000 boulevard trees have been valued at $500 million. The value of Edmonton's 280,000 boulevard and park trees is estimated at $800 million.
In Winnipeg, we don't even have the money to do a proper inventory of our trees but estimates put our elm forest alone at 165,000 trees valued at close to $600 million dollars.

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The trees are a vital part of our urban infrastructure. Our urban forest is a civic treasure that has much to do with the attractiveness of the City as a place in which to live and to do business. The stunning green canopy that envelops the city in summer is always remarked on with wonder by visitors.

But trees take a long time to grow. Unlike sidewalks or roads or even bridges, no amount of money can replace a mature tree in a short time. And today, in high traffic areas, thanks to automobile exhaust, de-icing compounds, root compaction from passing traffic and collisions, no amount of money can get a tree to live to maturity. Most expire in a short ten years.

We need to preserve and protect the mature urban forest, our greatest and least replaceable asset.

Current status

The Coalition to Save the Elms has always worked closely with the people at the City of Winnipeg Forestry Branch and with those at Insect Control, both of which have been very helpful and supportive of our efforts. We provide a necessary public awareness and education component in addition to our tree banding efforts and have also been involved in the basal spray program for the City.

Our education efforts are vital to the continued protection of not just the elms but of the entire urban forest, much of which exists on private property. Through citizen action, every dollar spent by the City on the program is multiplied many times in effect. Or to put it another way, if it weren't for the Coalition-stimulated efforts of private citizens, to protect and preserve their elms and other trees, infections of many kinds would be impossible for the City to control. Because of our efforts, many citizens pay to band street trees as well as those on their own properties.

We and you must necessarily work together to be most effective. At the very least, the Coalition's efforts save hundreds of thousands of dollars for the City.

The City has been very understanding of this imperative and arrangements have been made over the past number of years to pay the Coalition, under a service agreement, a small sum in the amount of $20,000 for the work it does. Grants prior to this were for $40,000. This money comes from the budget of the Forestry Branch, whose resources are already very limited. The Coalition also occupies a one-room office in the Insect Control Building on Waverley for which a fee is paid by the City representing an amount of about $20,000 leaving us with only the $20,000 with which to carry out the terms of our service agreement. The service agreement includes the education and public awareness campaigns, our banding programs and several other outreach activities that the city is not equipped to provide but which necessarily complement the work of the Forestry branch

The Coalition ekes a few more dollars through fund raising and selling its banding services. However, this is not enough to meet the public's need for constant awareness and education. Last year, for example, for the lack of a small sum – just $5000 – we were unable to purchase the television time (offered to us as a non-profit organization at 1/3 the regular cost) to promote the tree banding program. In spite of that, we were still able to band 7,000 trees in the most vulnerable areas, but this is just a small portion of the need.

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What we are requesting

We believe that it is the community's interest to have a service agreement directly with the city – our own "line item" so to speak, that would pay us $40,000 as in the past. We would ask that these funds not be taken from the Forestry branch, but rather set aside from another source to avoid depleting the already meagre funds of Forestry, which is already many years behind in its pruning schedule (and prevention of Dutch elm disease by removing the deadwood).

We would also like to request the same arrangement that the city apparently has with other non-profits (some senior's organizations) who rent space for $1 per year. This would free all of the available funding for use to allow us to more effectively manage the public awareness campaign and to expand our tree banding efforts.

We are also requesting additional funding for the Forestry Branch. The level of tree maintenance and Dutch Elm Disease control in Winnipeg is not adequate and is leading to the decline and death of the urban forest. A pruning cycle of 1 in 35 years is clearly an indication of this and should not be allowed to continue. Trees are green infrastructure and if allowed to disappear their years of value cannot be easily replaced. It is less expensive and more desirable to maintain existing and mature trees than it is to remove and replace them. Ongoing maintenance at adequate levels makes good financial policy.

Addendum
Saving the Elms on Broadway

The Coalition is very resourceful. We have found enough sponsors to help us put out a quarterly newsletter in the form of a tabloid paper called the Urban Forester.

We would like to alert you of an exciting project which will be launched this spring to rehabilitate the elms on Broadway. The following article will the headline story in the *Urban Forester*, 10,000 copies of which will be at community news-stands late next week and in the mail to our members and other community leaders.

Our final request is for your **support** for this project and your **authorization** to work with and through your Forestry Branch and other areas of the administration to plan, co-ordinate and conduct the tree rejuvenation operations necessary to rescue the historic trees on Broadway as outlined below.

Saving the Elms on Broadway

The Coalition to Save the Elms is ready to launch a program that will rescue the trees on Broadway and help restore pride in Winnipeg's historic and once most beautiful avenue.

For the past year, the Coalition to Save the Elms has been working on a plan to rescue the failing elms on Broadway. With the enlisted help of the City of Winnipeg and local business residents, the Coalition has a plan to improve and enhance the health and viability of the elms (and other trees) on Broadway. This will have the side benefit of renewing the aesthetic appeal of Winnipeg's most historically beautiful street.

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By focusing on a street that symbolizes the pride we have in our city and in mobilizing the community to action on behalf of the Broadway elms, the Coalition expects to stimulate awareness about the general plight of the public trees in the city

Businesses along Broadway are being approached and asked to adopt-a-tree – or multiple trees – on Broadway for rejuvenation, replacement and maintenance. The donation per tree is $1,000 per year for 5 years, during which time, it is hoped that many of the historic trees can be nursed back to health. Those that are too far gone will be replaced.

Many things have contributed to the decline of these trees, and neglect is certainly one of them. Over the years, the growing space of the tree roots has been sharply diminished by the widening of the sidewalks and the roadway, reducing the area accessible to rain and topsoil nutrients. Most of the roots today are covered with cement or asphalt and their outward quest for food has been curtailed by building basements and underground structures. Worse, the soil they exist in has been severely compacted by the weight of the hard features and by passing vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Every winter they are subjected to daily assault from liquid salts that draw the moisture out of the little open ground they have left. Year after year of insect infestation – canker worms and forest tent caterpillars are just two, not to mention the elm bark beetle – has helped to weaken them further. Then there are collisions with cars – many trunks bear the battle scars of their too close encounters with automobiles.

A walk down the median on Broadway tells a sorry tale. There are many dead and dying branches. Some trees are only skeletons. It does not take a trained eye to see that these fabulous old giants are slowly dying. The Coalition and its partners are determined that this will not be allowed to happen.

Program of work on the trees

There are 162 trees in the ten block area to be brought into the program. They have been assessed and some changes have already been made to their environment. Lights will be removed for the summer and watering capabilities have been restored. But there is much more to be done.

Work will begin this spring on an eight point tree health regimen. This will see the trees being cleaned of winter salt and pollution. Dead and damaged branches will be pruned. Watering will take place as necessary. The trees will be banded in fall. There will be ongoing and frequent inspection for signs of DED or other disease. Severely wounded or dead trees (and there are some) will be removed and infill trees planted. But perhaps most important and certainly most expensive is a program of vertical mulching.

Vertical mulching is a remedial activity that involves drilling 2.5-inch holes at 18-inch Intervals, beginning several feet from the tree trunk then continuing around the tree. The holes are then back- filled with a mixture of organics, fertilizer and fine gravel or coarse sand to promote penetration of air and water to the root zone.

This is a huge job and it is expected that work will be carried out over several years, but cleaning and watering will be undertaken immediately, with other programs of work being undertaken as the resources are raised though the fund raising project.

The City is on side

Continued health and maintenance of the trees requires co-operation and assistance from various departments of the City of Winnipeg, particularly the forestry department. Dave Domke, the current City Forester, has been very helpful and co-operative, making resources available from a meagre budget and his department will continue to be involved. But to make the project an asset to the local business investors and to all citizens, the Coalition would also like to see enhancements to the turf in the existing median and on the boulevards. Ideally, at some point it would be desirable to install permeable pavement on the sidewalks and structural soils under the roadway which would enhance root hydration and root growth.

Over the next few months, volunteers will be calling on Broadway businesses. If you are interested in getting involved or making a pledge, call 832-7188 and we will get back to you with details.

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