

Private Land Tree Planting Program Research Briefing

Project Context:

The City of Ottawa is seeking to diversify its tree planting programs as part of the Tree Planting Strategy under the Urban Forest Master Plan (UFMP). The City has requested services to conduct research and inform the development of a new tree-planting program for private land. Private land could include residential land or commercial land, including green space surrounding multi-unit residential housing. The purpose of this research is to ensure that a possible future program is informed by best practices and includes processes and procedures for a fair, equitable, and transparent distribution of trees in Ottawa.

Research

EnviroCentre researched 13 different private property tree planting program models operating in eight different municipalities in Canada. Interviews were conducted with four programs: Trees Winnipeg, LEAF in Toronto, City of Surrey, and REEP Green Solutions for Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo & Guelph.

This briefing summarizes key findings and program considerations most relevant to the Ottawa context. Please refer to the complete research document provided for additional details.

1. Program Details and Structure:

There are a variety of models and basic program structure options. For this research, EnviroCentre looked into elements that shape the structure of a program, including the model (in-house or by a third party), funding/revenue, cost of trees to participants, target properties, and partnerships. While many programs offer trees for residential or commercial properties, the overwhelming focus is on private residential properties. City-run programs are generally funded by the municipality, with revenue generated through tree sales and supplemented by some grant programs. Non-profit organizations that run programs in partnership with the municipality receive municipal funding complemented by grants, sponsorship, donations, and tree sale revenue. Programs that provide trees at no charge (giveaways) tend to operate with fewer services available to property owners. For example, property owners have to pick up the trees and plant them themselves, with little to no maintenance or follow-up. Programs that have trees available for purchase (all at reduced/subsidized costs) tend to offer more services (for example, delivery and planting). Tree replacement programs offer rebates to reduce the costs of replacing trees damaged by pests/diseases or extreme weather events and residents are responsible for purchasing and planting the trees themselves.

Key considerations for Ottawa:

- Working with a third-party program operator allows for more funding sources to complement municipal investments.
- Full-service tree planting, with options for DIY, provides flexibility for residents.
- The number of trees planted annually remains relatively small for most programs.
- Establishing formal partnerships with nurseries is fundamental.

2. Eligibility, Application and Ordering

Almost every program has eligibility requirements, which include confirmation that the tree will be planted in the municipality where the program is operating. Full-service tree planting programs have very clear and precise eligibility requirements that include tree placement criteria assessed through an online application, online consultation, or site visit. Criteria include the distance from fence lines, hard surfaces, buildings, etc. Only once the criteria are met is the resident eligible for the tree program. Programs that do not charge for the trees/saplings tend to be on a first-come, first-served basis and distribute trees through scheduled community events. A growing number of programs are managing orders and tree sales using an online purchasing portal, such as Shopify. This type of platform also provides the ability to collect data/metrics related to orders and contact information for follow-ups.

Key considerations for Ottawa:

- The use of an initial online application helps determine basic eligibility and collate program interest requests.
- Full-service programs require a greater level of due diligence before sending staff to plant the tree(s) and therefore a site visit is required.
- Cancellation fees, or fees for consultations that do not lead to a tree purchase through the program, can be a deterrent to exploitation of the free service.
- Online platforms for ordering reduce administrative burden, create efficiencies, and allow for some data collection opportunities.

3. Tree procurement, distribution, and care

In the programs we looked at, the average tree size is 5–7-foot native trees, but not all programs offer only native trees. Most programs offer a variety of trees, including fruit, deciduous, and conifer trees, and the resident uses an online application/purchasing system to select and pay for their tree. All the programs work with local nurseries; however, the approach varies. Some programs order their tree stock and use a municipal facility to store and manage the trees and shrubs before distribution. Others order the trees and only pick them up on the day of the distribution event. In Surrey and London, residents pick up the tree directly from the nursery. The South Nation Ash Tree Replacement Program requires residents to source, pay for, and pick up their trees, and reimburses them. Programs that offer full-service tree planting procure, purchase, and deliver the trees directly to the property. The LEAF program in Toronto uses this model. The approach chosen for tree procurement and distribution impacts program staffing and space requirements, which affect program costs. The number of trees planted annually varies between the programs. Programs such as LEAF and the City of Surrey distribute between 1,500 and 2000 trees. Programs that focus on seedlings may distribute more trees, however the tree survival rate is likely to be much lower. The programs also use different methods of sharing tree care best practices. Online videos and printed resources distributed with the trees are the most common. Overall, very little follow-up or data collection is embedded in the programs we reviewed.

Key considerations for Ottawa:

- Native trees are recommended, however, considerations for future climate impacts (such as weather) are important to consider.
- Providing a diverse selection of trees will allow for resiliency in case of disease or infestations.
- Prioritizing an approach that leads to the highest tree survival rate is fundamental to ensuring the future health of Ottawa’s urban canopy.
- The relationship between the program and the supplier (nurseries) is key and will need to be set up based on the delivery model.
- Exploring options for tree care and post-planting monitoring and data collection will be important to examine during the development of a local program.
- Warranty and risk management are important to consider. Tree placement criteria and an application process are ways to lessen the risk to surrounding buildings and ensure the tree type is well suited to the location.

4. Communications, Engagement and Education

Promotion of the programs generally consists of traditional municipal communications channels, social media, and newsletters. Larger cities tend to have an ongoing uptake, while some smaller communities report having a decreasing number of requests. In addition to the promotion of the tree sales and giveaways, awareness building is a co-benefit of program promotion and can include raising awareness about the importance of the urban tree canopy, native trees and plants, and biodiversity, among other things. A website, or a dedicated page on a municipal website, is generally used to share program details, resources, and links to applications and order forms. Booths at community events are commonly used to engage residents, raise awareness, and promote the program(s). Since the pandemic, most programs now offer online videos about tree types, care, and maintenance. In-person workshops and training are available in some cities.

Key considerations for Ottawa:

- All the programs have similar planting seasons – spring and fall. The only variance is the ordering model used and when that is launched.
- Ongoing engagement, post-planting, is a way to monitor the health of the trees and gather data over time. Ottawa should identify what data and metrics will be most useful over time and consider ways of collecting that data.
- A lens of equity and inclusion should be used when developing any communications activities.
- Maintaining some form of ongoing engagement with participants, such as responding to questions by email, can be very effective in education and awareness building.

5. Equity

The LEAF Low-Canopy Greening Initiative is the only program that we reviewed that specifically focuses on providing free trees to neighbourhood improvement areas (NIAs) and that has an equity focus. The program is specifically designed to address low tree canopy in urban areas and is a separate stream from the LEAF backyard and DIY programs. Re-Leaf in Winnipeg has identified an

interest in expanding its program to reach higher-priority areas by lowering the price of the trees. No other program has an equity-specific focus.

Key considerations for Ottawa:

- Equity and inclusion should be a priority as the program is developed to ensure that the areas most in need will receive and benefit from the tree planting program.
- Finding solutions for engaging property owners in areas of the city with higher rental units is important to address tree equity.
- Working with large rental agencies such as Ottawa Community Housing or Minto should be explored.

6. Other considerations:

- Programs run directly by a municipality highlighted challenges related to staffing and overtime requirements to coordinate and run tree distribution events, which typically happen on weekends.
- Managing large volumes of tree inventory can be challenging and requires a lot of space.
- When trees are given away for free, there is a greater risk of residents not showing up and therefore leaving unclaimed tree stock. Some programs donate the unclaimed trees.
- Funding can be a challenge for these types of programs and third-party service providers expressed the importance of various forms of program revenue – the municipality, grants, and sponsorship.