

Urban Trees Enhance Business Sustainability and Opportunities

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In this article, I will address two themes related to the title. One is the role of trees in the streets of shopping districts for which I rely on research articles by Kathleen Wolf of the University of Washington. The second theme is that of business opportunities related to vigorous urban-forest programs in diverse municipalities.

Dr. Wolf (2004; 2005) conducted fascinating research on urbanites' preferences for spending time on shopping-district streets with and without trees. The results were clear: people preferred treed streets to those with no trees. This has several implications for shopper behaviour. One is that shoppers would be inclined to spend more time in treed streetscapes and therefore might spend more money at the shops there. Another is that shoppers may increase their fidelity to shops on treed streets, making them more significantly repeat shoppers at those stores. All in all, the street trees could therefore be seen as agents supporting the sustainability of businesses located on those streets. What a shame that, in our fair city of Halifax, some of the main shopping streets - Quinpool, Spring Garden, and Barrington on the peninsula, and Portland in downtown Dartmouth - are almost totally devoid of trees. The streetscapes are overwhelmingly hard, with concrete sidewalks and asphalt roadways in total domination of the outdoor space. We can do better! Vancouver's downtown does better in this regard (see photo).



My next theme implicates both business and employment opportunities. Obviously, when businesses flourish, this bodes well for employment opportunities. So, while I take a business lens on urban-forest management, I thereby jointly implicate job prospects in the sector at the same time. To the degree that the management of city-owned trees is serviced largely by municipal employees, the business opportunities would be low but job opportunities high.

Let us assume that a city has decided to ramp up its urban-forest programming in a significant way. This invariably means that the city will spend much more money on its trees. The first order of business is to develop an urban-forest management plan, meaning business opportunities for consultants that specialize in this sector. It is fair to say that the municipalities across Canada that have an urban-forest plan are much more numerous today than they were even a decade ago. Most such plans were developed by consultants or through a partnership of city planners and consultants.

Plan implementation is where the business opportunities really emerge. Nurseries benefit with increased demand for planting stock. So do truckers when the stock travels considerable distances. Often, for example, the planting stock used in the streets of Halifax comes from nurseries as far away as Ontario. [While this creates business opportunities, surely we should seek ways to localize stock production and reduce transportation distances!] Next comes the planting. Here in Halifax, with implementation of the Urban Forest Master Plan (UFMP; HRM Urban Forest Planning Team, 2013) came new opportunities for contractors to bid on planting jobs (see photo). Somewhere close to ten thousand new street trees have been planted in HRM in the past seven years. With a contract price very roughly at five hundred dollars per tree, this represents millions of dollars' worth of business in planting street trees.

Then there is tree pruning. Until 2013, all (or most) of the street-tree pruning organized by HRM was done by HRM staff in response to 311 calls or storm events. [I say "organized by HRM" because Nova Scotia Power does a fair amount of tree pruning as a consequence of unfavourable interactions of street trees and power lines; that pruning focuses not on the health of the trees but on reduction of power-line losses and power-outage risks]. The city still responds to 311 calls, but starting in 2014 the urban-forest managers implemented a proactive pruning program where each tree should get a pruning visit on a regular basis - the standard interval seems to be every seven years. With proactive pruning, the managers can keep ahead of deadwood and structural issues - the trees are assessed and treated with health, longevity, and safety all in mind (see photo). The proactive pruning program in HRM, which takes place during the leaf-off period in winter, is done by contractors who bid on the pruning jobs.

Finally, there are research and monitoring services that the municipality may want to contract out. These services provide the urban-forest manager with information critical to making program improvements over the mid to long term. Stretching the concept of "business" a bit here, I would like to mention how this works in HRM. Since 2010, a partnership arrangement between HRM and Dalhousie University has been consummated first to create the UFMP (2010-2012) and secondly to provide research and monitoring services during plan implementation (2013-present). The "business" arrangement here procures my expertise at no expense to HRM, but the annual research agreement pays for two summer field assistants drawn mostly from the

pool of Dalhousie graduate students studying for the Master of Resource and Environmental Management. So, it's not a for-profit arrangement like a consultancy; rather, it's an employment and capacity-building exercise for young people keen to enter the field of urban forestry while fulfilling key information needs of the urban-forest manager.

To conclude, some cynics might observe that urban-forest programs cost a lot of money and yield few direct monetary benefits. Both of those are absolutely true. But I have two responses to that. One is that society pays for a lot of things that have dubious financial cases - governments and philanthropists subsidize all sorts of things that are good for people because people want these things and are usually unwilling to pay, individually, the full cost. Trees in the city are, in some respects, no different from other urban environmental programs. Second, the benefits of trees (especially street trees) to urban dwellers and visitors are enormous, both in range and diversity and in reduced costs borne in other sectors of our economy (like health and infrastructure renewal). Most dollars spent on trees in the city are very wisely spent, and I wholeheartedly support a vibrant private sector in work on urban forests.





References

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