

## Big G in Conversation: Greening Guelph March 16, 2021

Transcript

Host: Wendy King

Gene Matthews, General Manager of Parks

Tara Baker, City Treasurer, and General Manager of Finance

Bryan Ho-Yan, Manager of Corporate Energy and Climate Change.

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Upbeat Music

Wendy King 0:02

Welcome to Big G in Conversation, the podcast from inside Guelph City Hall. Hi, I'm Wendy King. And on today's show we're talking with the folks from the city's parks finance and climate change office about Greening Guelph and the impact that has on Guelph's, finance's and energy goals. Let's move into council chambers and get started.

Wendy King 0:26

Such an important topic, the greening of Guelph. Welcome Gene Matthews, General Manager of parks, Tara Baker, city treasurer, and general manager of finance, and Bryan Ho-Yan, manager of corporate energy and climate change. Welcome, everybody.

Guests 0:44

Hi, Wendy.

Wendy King 0:46

So, I understand the Guelph has been designated as a tree city of the world. So, Gene, that might be for me, for you rather, but it sounds like a huge honor. Can you tell me about that?

Gene Matthews 1:00

Yeah, that is Wendy, for me, for sure. So, tree city of the world. It's an honor that's been given on behalf of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Arbor Day Foundation. Tree cities of the world is an international program that celebrates cities for the care and planning they put into our urban forests. And that's in five specific areas. So, establishing responsibility, setting some rules

around our urban forest, knowing what we have allocating resources, and of course, celebrating achievements.

Wendy King 1:35

So, forgive my basic question here. But do you as the city literally know how many trees you have the health of all the trees, locations, etc.

Gene Matthews 1:47

So, we know the locations of, through GIS systems that we have pretty much every tree that we have in the city of Guelph. And it's right around 2.9 million trees, and the economic replacement value of those trees is estimated at about \$803 million.

Wendy King 2:07

I think we've all noticed how incredible being outside and all of this is the pandemic. So, I mean, they're valuable for so many reasons, not the least of which is our mental health. Right?

Gene Matthews 2:20

Absolutely. We're seeing a lot of increased use and all of our open spaces and our green spaces across Guelph. And I think that's common across most municipalities in the world right now.

Wendy King 2:29

Yeah, I think so. So as a bit of an overview, I understand that you're in phase two of the city's urban forest management plan. Can you tell me what that is exactly?

Gene Matthews 2:43

Absolutely. So, our urban forest management plan is a 20-year long term plan with nested short-term management and operating plans. The plan has 22 recommendations which speak to everything from tree planting priorities through to bylaw renewal, and development. And it really is segregated into four kinds of specific pods. So, management and monitoring of urban forests. And that's getting a sense of what do we have? And how is it doing the second pod would be legislation, policies, and guidelines.

Gene Matthews 3:16

So again, those are things like tree technical manuals, how we care for our trees, the city of Guelph, and bylaws that we need to develop or revisit. It also speaks to protecting, enhancing, and planting of urban forests. So that's of course protection of what we have retention of what we have, and further establishment of the urban forest and making sure the species is aligned with the footprint of the city of Guelph. And then I think one of the most important parts is that fourth module is outreach, stewardship, and partnerships. So that's engaging residents, engaging opportunities to make sure our urban forests as well maintained in the city of Guelph.

Wendy King 3:56

That was my next question. Does the average citizen have a role to play in those goals?

Gene Matthews 4:02

They do. So, planting trees engaging when we're when we're back to the new normal post COVID-19, engaging tree planting days being mindful of impacts that they may have on trees that they don't know about. So, you know, proper planting of trees at their home, making sure that if they're going to be doing works on their property, that they're engaging good tree protection while they're doing those works so that trees aren't harmed, and then just leaning in as a community. So, I very much found at my time with Guelph, Wendy that we have a very passionate community within Guelph, a better urban forest. So, leaning in and being engaged absolutely helps the health of our urban forest.

Wendy King 4:46

I've read also about Parkland dedication. Could you align with that is?

Gene Matthews 4:51

Sure, so Parkland dedication, put simply is that is making sure that as the city of Guelph grows and develops that our Parkland grows and develops with it. So, through the development process that is engaged with our planning team and developers, there's a part of that those processes that dictate whether cash in lieu or property will be allocated through that development to go towards green space and park space for residents of the city of Guelph.

Wendy King 5:22

Okay, so we'll come back to some of the challenges that you face. But there's a lot of talk about climate change. We've all witnessed all this strange weather patterns around the world. This may be for Brian, but whoever, what can we do to help the trees through climate change?

Bryan Ho-Yan 5:40

I think it was a lot of what what Gene was saying, you know, let's get some consideration and help that out. So that, you know, we're giving proper watering or, you know, making sure that we're putting the right soils and planting them properly, and the right varieties as well. And, you know, enjoy them too. They're, they're so important to us and the mental health, like you were saying and getting out there. That's part of it, too, because the more we enjoy it, the more we respect them. And the more we engage in making sure that they're healthy.

Wendy King 6:09

So, for sure, we know they're beneficial and Tara, I guess, this may be where you come in, can you put a money figure on how beneficial?

Tara Baker 6:21

Thanks, Wendy, that's a tough question. I don't think I could actually quantify the exact dollar value of how beneficial you've heard kind of from Gene the total value of that tree asset. Over \$800 million. So, you know, the, I think, though, like in terms of benefit, you have to you have to also look at the flood mitigation, there's a number of kind of real good impacts that it has that definitely would protect our infrastructure as well. And so, I think, you know, I don't exactly know how to quantify it, but there's definitely value.

Wendy King 7:04

Yeah, for sure. And just investing in green projects actually pay for itself?

Tara Baker 7:10

So, I don't I mean, I'll start, I think there's, there's definitely, in some cases, depending on the project, I think it can, it can have like a payback plan that, that can pay for the capital investment. And the city's got a really great example of that with the recent streetlight replacement project that we are planning to fund through the savings that that are resulting from from a much more efficient light fixture. So So that's an example of where yes, it can be self-funding. But then there's other other projects that just don't have that same return. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be doing it. Because there's so many other benefits, not just from the financial perspective.

Wendy King 8:00

And it may not be just right now, but it's a return on investment, as you were saying.

Tara Baker 8:06

Right. I think that a lot of these projects, and you know, what the the one that comes to mind, and Brian could could speak more to it is is our plan for you know, the the movement to electrifying our fleet you know, that's probably the project that's going to give us the most value in terms of reduce reducing our carbon footprint related to our vehicles. But likely, that is not going to pay for itself in terms of the the financial piece, but the value in the long-term benefit for health and everything else, I think absolutely will pay off in the long run.

Wendy King 8:43

Yeah. Brian, did you want to add to that?

Bryan Ho-Yan 8:45

Yeah, for sure. I think Tara hit it right there in terms of the extra value at the site, or the cool benefits of it all. I mean, you know, with with a healthy urban forests and trees in the neighborhood, again, we're seeing it through COVID. It's given us an escape, you know, from from the mental pressures and whatnot that's going on. It's connecting us with the environment and outside. So, it's, it's brought a lot of health to the community. But it's even looking at some of the climate change aspects to the value of, you know, having better air quality, being able to capture some of that CO2 that's in the atmosphere that we're putting out through the energy and activities that we're doing. And then and then and Tara touched on it, too, from the infrastructure side of this. You know, it's helping us mitigate against flood. It's helping us against, you know, heat stress, providing shade during those really hot, extreme weather days, right. And those things are hard to quantify and monetize. But there's definitely value in the short term and in the long term, and it's something that we can't forget.

Wendy King 9:57

I was noticing in the notes, there's something called tree canopy, does that protect us from changing climate? And maybe some extreme weather events?

Bryan Ho-Yan 10:07

I would definitely say so. Yeah. Again, having a strong canopy brings a lot of biodiversity. So, you know, that helps from, you know, having, again, a healthy environment and outdoors. Having the canopy as well-being robust, it does have a lot of soil retention, or helps about soul retention. So again, you know, it's keeping our basements dry and making sure that we're not getting flooded out. And then and then I mentioned as well, you know, it provides shade. And, you know, it protects us from that heat island effect that we see when we have a lot of black asphalt and whatnot, and how that sucks up all that heat. So, it is helping. It is definitely helping our community.

Wendy King 10:56

And that to some challenges, we often hear about Gypsy Moth or emerald ash borer. That all sounds very problematic. So how do you anticipate and maybe fend that off?

Bryan Ho-Yan 11:12

So, for certain, are urban forest management, urban forest does have challenge as any forest or any urban forest? Certainly does, Wendy. So, the good news is, and then I'll go over some of the challenges that we are really starting to ramp up some of our monitoring programs as dictated through the urban forest management plan. So that's that staff have the resources to do a different job at forecasting what invasive species for the example what other challenges might be coming our way. So emerald ash borer, of course, caught a lot of folks on the backfoot and approaches maybe were a little bit reactionary over a decade ago. Gypsy moth, where we're not seeing that be a significant risk at present to our urban forest canopy, we are starting to increase our monitoring after efforts towards that invasive species to make sure that we're that we're preparing. And we're aware of what the scope of those challenges may be. Beyond that, though, our urban forest obviously faces challenges through wildlife. So beaver, beaver destruction, as an example can be significant. Weather. So as the weather becomes more volatile, and as ice storms for an example can increase, that, of course can have very significant impacts to our urban forest, canopy, other infrastructure conflicts that we have through to, you know, larger development through to more homeowner related development that we have. And then we need to do a job at increasing the resources and the knowledge that staff have, so that we can be more proactive and responsive to those challenges that our urban forest canopy faces.

Wendy King 13:01

Do you have like percentages between how many buildings you can have? And how much green space?

Bryan Ho-Yan 13:10

Not that I am aware of right now, Wendy, that's something we could have a have a look into, after our time today, and get back to you, but not that I'm aware of off the top of my head right now.

Wendy King 13:24

So, it's a huge undertaking, though, to do all of this to figure out where you're going to look after and maintaining and planting. So, you obviously can't do it just as the city you must have a lot of partnerships and also citizen engagement.

Bryan Ho-Yan 13:42

Absolutely. So, their provincial organizations, Trees Ontario, we have the Guelph Urban Forest Friends, as one example of many stakeholders and engaged residents that we have, that are supporting our efforts, for sure. And we're happy to have that level of engagement and we need it.

Wendy King 14:02

You might have covered this already. But how do you figure that trees help us use less energy?

Bryan Ho-Yan 14:10

That's a good question. Other things again, you know, in the summertime, they do protect us from that sun. So, as we're running our air conditioners and we're trying to stay cool during that all you know, the trees do cast a good a good shade on our housing if it is done properly. Even from a water perspective. So, I mean, if we have trees there, they are protecting our lawns and our flower beds and whatnot too. So, I mean, healthy landscapes is a wicked program that I like to use that that's offered by the city, and you know, it's using that to reduce our water use and remember that it does take a lot to treat water, a lot of energy to treat water and a lot of energy to pump that water to the houses.

Bryan Ho-Yan 14:57

Right. How do you think projects like the parks Master Plan is going to help further green Guelph?

Gene Matthews 15:05

So, our parks and recreation master plan will be that document that helps guide resident feedback, residents input staff expertise, and awareness and the vision that the Guelph strategic plan has. And that Council have for a variety of initiatives and opportunities at Guelph. That plan will really help us prioritize in budget conversations, and asset retention and creation conversations, new park development, really how and when we're going to engage those kinds of works, that really is coming from, again, from opinion and comment from the public and residents, what they are needing and seeing as priorities link through the overall strategic plan of the city of Guelph, and to the desire of council.

Wendy King 15:59

How did you feel like you have a lot of support, council wise and also committee wise about all of your plans?

Gene Matthews 16:07

Certainly, from the from the park's perspective, very much I do feel like we have that support for sure. And we see that in stakeholder meetings that we have, when we're developing these master plans when we see council members putting us in contact with residents that have ideas or have thoughts or have challenges that they're seeing in their backyards in their communities, and then to supporting and leading through budget conversations to make sure that we have those those alignments. So, I would say that, yes, from the park's perspective, very much feel like we have that support from Council.

Bryan Ho-Yan 16:44

I'd like to quickly add to I mean, one of our strategic pillars is sustaining our future. And it does talk on on making sure that we are having a healthy green infrastructure and looking at the urban forest and maintaining that. And then again, it the tie into energy conservation and climate change and all that. So yes.

Wendy King 17:04

It seems like people are really paying attention to that kind of thing now, do you think so?

Bryan Ho-Yan 17:09

Yes, definitely.

Gene Matthews 17:11

Absolutely.

Bryan Ho-Yan 17:12

Yeah, there's I mean, climate emergencies and climate crises throughout different municipalities, including Guelph. I'm always feeling the pressure, and it's good pressure. We want to keep moving. And it gives me the motivation to work with all of our teams and the organization itself to do real action in addressing climate change and mitigating CO2.

Wendy King 17:35

With all the plans you have, how big of a staff do you have?

Gene Matthews 17:40



So, in parks, which includes our forestry operations through to our horticultural operations and sports surfaces, we have 47, permanent full time team members. And then when we expand to our summer operations, we add anywhere from 150 to 180. contract and seasonal employees. And like most folks would say, yes, there's a lot of work to go around and a lot of work to do. Before we look to add any staffing resources, we want to make sure we have the right plans and the right strategies in place, so that we're deploying our team members and their expertise as effectively, efficiently as we possibly can.

Wendy King 18:24

Has COVID thrown a monkey wrench in your plans?

Gene Matthews 18:29

Yes.

Wendy King 18:33

Any at all.

Gene Matthews 18:35

So, from the park's perspective, as the example, very much because of the impacts to COVID-19, we really delayed and pared down our seasonal hiring. And that did, unfortunately, but understandably, did delay some of the work that we do. And we're just looking at picking a lot of those works back up and reprioritizing it so we can get caught up.

Wendy King 18:56

Time for that rapid fire. So, whoever wants to handle these, we'll just go quick. But what impact do all the initiatives you talked about have on the city budget?

Tara Baker 19:07

So, I'll take this one. The, you know, the sustaining our future pillar encompasses a lot of what was talked about today, as well as other strategies related to stormwater and kind of like broader climate change. And so, you know, we've got a strategy in place. It's a longer-term funding strategy. And we're asking counsel on an annual basis to start incrementally increasing the investment towards that 100% renewable goal. And so, it's absolutely has an impact on budget. But we also hope that as we start mature, that that some of the savings can be reinvested, and that we're also getting grant funding from

other levels of government and including our partners in the community to helping us do this through maybe, you know, development type standards and those those types of processes as well.

Wendy King 20:09

And how do all the initiatives that we talked about benefit the community? I know, that's a big question.

Tara Baker 20:17

Since it's quiet, I'll have fun again, I think, you know, generally everything we talked about today is about the benefit to the community. You know, I, you know, water conservation. Guelph is, you know, we're land we're landlocked, and we rely heavily on water. You know, it's, it's protecting our assets, it's providing health benefits. So overall, I think, I think this entire strategy is just really because of the benefits to the community.

Wendy King 20:47

And what may be one word to describe why the city wants to move forward on all of this?

Gene Matthews 20:54

for the benefit of our community, hard to put it in one word, but really, because not everything can be one word, but I really think for the benefit of residents and the betterment of our community, Wendy?

Wendy King 21:06

Perfect. Well, you all make me want to go out and hug trees and learn more about trees. So, my thanks to Brian, Tara, and Gene, for your time and your expertise.

Guests 21:17

Great. Thanks, Wendy. Thanks, Wendy.

Wendy King 21:22

I'm Wendy King with the city of Guelph Big G in Conversation podcast. Thanks for joining me. If you have ideas for a show or comments, you can email [bigGpodcast@guelph.ca](mailto:bigGpodcast@guelph.ca). Until next time, take care and let's keep the conversation going.

Upbeat music

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