

Urban Forest Community Brief #2

Why City's Justifications or Not Updating Tree Bylaw Fall Short in Protecting Coquitlam's Tree Canopy

Supporting a healthy, resilient, and livable community through informed dialogue on urban forest management.

Prepared by:

TCUF Working Group

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Residents have recently received responses from local officials and staff regarding tree protection policies in Coquitlam. While these responses emphasize flexibility, incentives, and minimizing administrative burden, it is important to examine whether these arguments adequately address long-term canopy loss.

1. “Restrictive rules will discourage people from planting trees”

Counterpoint:

This concern is understandable—but **evidence from other cities does not strongly support it.**

- Cities with stricter bylaws (like Vancouver) still maintain **high levels of tree planting and canopy growth**
- The key difference is **how rules are structured**, not whether they exist

Well-designed policies:

- Allow **easy removal of young/small and dangerous trees causing damage**
- Protect **only mature, high-value trees**

Conclusion:

A *tiered system* reduces hesitation in planting while still protecting the important canopy.

The current argument presents a **false trade-off** between planting and protection.

2. “There are many valid reasons to remove trees”

Counterpoint:

This is true—but it does **not justify unrestricted removal.**

Best practice systems:

- **Allow removal for valid reasons** (damage, safety, infrastructure conflict ie sewer, water, etc.)
- But require **basic justification and review**

The issue is not whether trees *can* be removed
It's whether they can be removed **without any reason or oversight**

Conclusion:

Introducing **simple criteria** does not block legitimate removals—it ensures accountability.

3. “Administrative burden and cost to taxpayers”

Counterpoint:

This argument overlooks the **cost of inaction**.

Losing mature trees leads to:

- Increased urban heat (higher cooling costs)
- Greater stormwater infrastructure strain
- Reduced air quality
- Lower long-term property and community value

These are **real financial negative impacts**, often exceeding administrative costs.

Also:

- Many cities operate permit systems that are:
 - **Cost recovered through fees**
 - Not heavily subsidized by taxpayers

Conclusion:

The argument focuses on **short-term administrative costs**, while ignoring **long-term environmental and financial costs**.

4. “Education and incentives are enough.”

Counterpoint:

Education is important—but **not sufficient on its own**.

- Voluntary systems depend on individual choices
- Even well-meaning property owners may remove trees due to:
 - Convenience
 - Development pressure
 - Misunderstanding of long-term value

Without baseline protections:

- Tree loss becomes **incremental and widespread**

- Canopy decline happens **quietly over time**

Conclusion:

Education works best when paired with **minimum standards and safeguards**.

5. “Restrictive cities still allow removals, so rules don’t matter.”

Counterpoint:

This misrepresents how bylaws function.

- Yes, removals still occur—but:
 - They are **reviewed, assessed and counted**
 - They often require **replacement or mitigation**
 - High-value trees are more likely to be **retained**

The difference is not “removal vs no removal.”

It is **managed vs unmanaged loss**

Conclusion:

Even imperfect regulation significantly **reduces unnecessary canopy loss**.

6. The Core Issue: Cumulative Canopy Loss

The current permissive approach creates a long-term risk:

Small, individual decisions add up to significant canopy decline

Because:

- No justification is required
- No consistent replacement is enforced
- Mature trees are not prioritized

This leads to:

- Gradual loss of large canopy trees
 - Replacement with smaller, less effective trees—or none at all
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Key Takeaway

The current arguments emphasize:

- Flexibility
- Cost avoidance
- Voluntary action

However, without stronger alignment between policy and long-term goals:

These approaches will result in continued canopy loss over time

A balanced system does not require heavy bureaucracy. It simply requires:

- **Basic justification for removing mature trees**
 - **Clear distinctions between tree types**
 - **Consistent replacement or mitigation**
 - **Canopy target and the ability to track progress (loss or gain)**
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Final Thought

Protecting an urban forest is not about preventing all tree removal.

It is about ensuring that:

- The **most valuable trees are preserved where possible**
- Losses are **intentional, justified, and offset**

Without these safeguards, even well-intentioned policies can gradually erode the very canopy they aim to support.

This brief has been prepared by the TCUF Working Group as a resource for the community. It is shared in good faith to support informed discussion and to highlight considerations that contribute to a healthy, livable, and sustainable Coquitlam.