

Guarding & Enhancing Pelham's Natural Forest Heritage

Canada Day having just past, we may continue choosing to 'wave the flag' as part of a patriotic ritual, or we may also dig a little deeper and notice the symbolic primacy of the Maple Leaf in that ritual. That the valuing of trees is essential to our identity as Canadians is right there on our flag! Rather than merely waving the flag once a year, perhaps we might also find a way to substantively honour that part of our identity throughout the year.

Action on this has never been more urgent. Large parts of Europe are deluged with levels of flooding not seen in at least 500 years, while in a new west coast climate norm of aridification British Columbia is on fire yet again this year, the town of Lytton having burned almost entirely to the ground. Lives were lost. It is the lives of local voters and their loved ones in developed countries that are now increasingly at risk. What we want is the recovery and implementation of a 'Seventh-Generation' planning perspective to address that risk.

Analysis, Policy Comparisons & Recommendations

Voter's recent experience on South Pelham is evidence that the intent of our tree By-law is not making it down through to levels of application. Homeowners adjacent awoke to discover that numerous trees were yet again thoughtlessly slated for destruction. Surely the point of having elected representatives is to represent our concerns effectively such that they are meaningfully reflected throughout Town policy documents in such a manner that they are responded to proactively as a matter of course, rather than responded to only reactively on an *ad hoc* basis after being induced to do so by a shocked citizenry. What we want is language in the By-law that *guarantees* protection of our identity just as strongly as one might identify with, *and protect*, all of one's ten fingers. The current amendments to the Tree By-law before Council continue to fall short of that standard. What follows are a few specific (but by no means exhaustive) recommendations for not only the preservation of our trees and forests, but also the means to an economically viable model for the enhancement of this part of our Natural Heritage.

We Want Our Existing Forests Protected

Talk of 'civic pride' and the use of forensic language referencing 'tree canopies' does not begin to acknowledge voter's attachment to our trees and forests. A simple civic pride may be projected outward, but a more complex identity is jealously harboured within. The poetic imagination of Jane Urquhart as immortalized in "The Stone Cutters" provides some idea of our

attachment to our forested landscapes like the 'Linear Cathedral' that is our very own Merritt Road, lined as it is by "extraordinarily large trees...*like a choir of green angels singing to the sky.*" If our annual pilgrimages to our northern Canadian landscapes are any indication, it is our broader forested ecologies that we really yearn for. What we want is more of such landscapes here where we live. What specific steps is Council prepared to enact to guarantee that our forest landscapes like Merritt Road are permanently preserved in their entirety?

We Want Our Forests Expanded

The proposed Tree By-law currently before Council for approval purports to address climate change: "The Town will endeavour to consider all aspects of climate change when planning any tree selection and planting projects to minimize affects (*sic*)... and includes five actions for adapting to the impacts of climate change." While it is abundantly clear that aggressive measures are needed, including the mass plantings of trees to help mitigate the loss of global forests, we would note that "endeavouring to consider" is somewhat remote from that goal. Further, the enumeration of any one of those five 'actions' is missing, as is any other substantive indication of a perception of the seriousness of the situation.

Instead, upon a closer reading we find that the By-law actually harbours provisions that prevent this from happening. Specifically, this By-law still continues to prohibit the planting of anything other than transplanted nursery trees of a minimum size. While this may be an entirely appropriate response within new developments, given limited budgets the cost of this option has the unintended consequence of necessarily curbing the scale needed to address climate change. Adopting instead the 'Seventh-Generation' perspective on planning for a moment, the simple expedient of dropping of acorns, maple keys, and other tree seeds throughout our rural roadway allowances would enable an approach involving tree planting *en masse*. In fifty or a hundred years the difference in the size of the resulting trees would be negligible, but our comprehensively tree-lined rural roadways would be truly impressive, not unlike Merritt Road.

Further, the proposed By-law stipulates that any such planting by an entity other than "town staff, or a contractor acting for the Corporation of the Town of Pelham" is also prohibited, effectively foreclosing on any volunteer response by ecologically-minded individuals or community groups. A substantial greening and beautification of our rural roadways is to be had at little or no cost to the public purse if we change just this one provision to explicitly permit such an option.

We Want *All* of Our Forests Protected & Expanded

While the policy professes a goal of “promoting a healthy and robust tree canopy within the Town of Pelham,” explicit “Policy Constraints” remain whereby this policy is in effect restricted to “municipally owned lands within the Town of Pelham,” and therefore fails entirely to address the vast majority of our forests which are privately owned. While staff recognizes that more robust options like those contained in the Niagara Regional Tree By-law are available, they do not recommend them citing a lack of resources. But that is not at all surprising. Visionary planning is the prerogative of elected officials, rather than of staff. Would that Council find ways and means to promote forestation on private lands as effectively as is possible on public lands. The challenge therein lies in ensuring that private landowners stand to benefit from a choice to preserve forests in their natural state. This is dealt with in some detail in the section following.

It is ironic that much of the prescriptive material contained within the proposed By-law itself deals with the minutia of the cutting down and replacement of those trees. Such replacement effectively equates one or more saplings with a mature specimen. We recommend that the 5 year window anticipating the imminent demise of a mature specimen be expanded not just in time, but by encouraging adjacent homeowners to also plant trees in their front yards so that the loss of any one of the trees is mitigated. A property tax differential, even if slight, might be sufficient to induce the desired behavior. The result over time might look much more like Oak Lane, where housing is nestled within a largely forested context. This outcome has won the praise of planning consultants, one of whom specifically stated in a public meeting that this particular streetscape is routinely cited by that consultancy as *the* way to engage in greener urban planning. Once generalized, such greening could reasonably be expected to continue as a draw to our town. This is why people move here: they want what we have. The rising tide of stimulated housing pricing and concomitant increase in tax base would more than offset any losses incurred by an initial tax abatement policy stimulus.¹

The Economic Benefits of Enlightened Policy

Best economic practices abound here within Niagara and in multiple outside jurisdictions clearly indicating what is possible. For example, we might want to consider the policy alternative employed in Switzerland which reimburses its farmers for the maintenance of its picturesque roadsides largely for the benefit of its tourism industry. Accordingly, it pays for this out of the revenues and taxes enhanced by that policy. It's wins all around: tourism brings in

¹ That this is true is readily demonstrated by contemplating the negative results to housing pricing and the tax base in the event of an unfortunate loss of all trees in such a locale.

foreign exchange bolstering their domestic currency, increasing their international purchasing power and therefore also boosting the Swiss standard of living. Local businesses, and by extension whole economies, spring up through the multiplier effect. Farmers are even supported, and all of this at no net cost to taxpayers. Based on these results, you might even conclude that the Swiss have adapted their ability to design precision clockworks for application in the political arena, where a well-meshed continuum of policies ensure their country is run like a business enterprise. This is what a successful broad policy implementation looks like.

We may want to start our engagement in a similar enterprise through a similar policy of property tax abatement which recognizes at least in part the lost opportunity costs to landowners who preserve their forests in a natural state to the benefit of all. Further, any policy document serious about the preservation of forests should include a dovetailing with opportunities for conservation easements and other similar measures at other levels of government and NGOs, pointing out the financial incentives available to landowners who choose to avail themselves of these options. Recognizing these opportunities would benefit our community at little or no expense whatsoever, while announcing our intention to take the matter of our Canadian identity seriously.

Perhaps not surprisingly, just as for the Swiss, there would be an ample market for an authentic Canadian experience which we are already ideally positioned to deliver. As part of a more comprehensive business strategy, such a change in perspective would enable private entrepreneurs to contemplate serious investments in hospitality and other related ventures through an effective marketing of our green environs. This would not only be a great fit with tourism opportunities available in neighbouring municipalities, but could shift a substantial portion of our tax burden onto these newly created sectors. Perhaps not incidentally, such a shift reducing upward pressure on property taxes generally could reasonably be expected to enjoy considerable voter support. While 'economic benefits' are mentioned only in passing within this document, what is needed are more 'action' specifics along these lines in this and other related Town planning documents, in order to capitalize on these latent opportunities.

But this requires the sort of foresight and more comprehensive planning that recognizes that various policies that appear to be separate, actually have considerable overlap. Like Niagara-on-the-Lake, we are within easy driving distance of significant populations throughout the Golden Horseshoe. Exercising such foresight, the former has done very well by any metric to capitalize on this opportunity by preserving and building upon their *Cultural Heritage*. By comparison, satellite imagery* proves that we have significantly more intact old and second growth forests than any other municipality in Niagara, including NOTL. While Niagara-on-the-Lake may have developed its own asset base at considerable effort and expense, they have nothing like our well preserved forests available to us free for the asking. Unlike NOTL, however, we have yet to

recognize the opportunity already here to capitalize on our *Natural Heritage* at a coherent policy level.

That the laws of supply and demand dictate that these intact forests have far greater value than any other land use by virtue of their relative scarcity supports a vision of that capitalization. Indeed, this opportunity would be secure far into the future as that scarcity can only grow relative to population increases, and in particular, as other municipalities with less insightful leadership continue to succumb to the temptation of parceling out their land in yet more soulless urban sprawl. From a business point of view we could follow suit and sell the golden goose outright at the outset, or we can 'stand on guard' and cultivate that asset, and thereafter reap continuous multiple benefits for generations to come.

We currently have a CAO within whose capacity it would be to negotiate the achievement of our most important goals. Let's avail ourselves of that opportunity.

Wally Braun



*Readily available satellite imagery (Google Maps) clearly indicates the disproportionate share of heavily forested land within the Niagara Region enjoyed by the Town of Pelham