

Headline News

Needed: more trees

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By Liz Benneian — Oakville Today

Oakville doesn't have enough trees to maintain a healthy urban environment.

That's a reasonable conclusion to come to after reading a report prepared by the consulting firm Gartner Lee Ltd. for Halton Region.

The report notes that American Forests recommends "that 40 percent woodland cover should be maintained to benefit air quality."

A table in the report shows the percentage of woodland cover in Oakville is only 12.2 percent*. It's the kind of statistic that makes Allan Elgar, Regional councillor for Ward 4 despair.

"The only thing I know of that cleans the air is trees," he says, adding that at the rate Oakville is losing its woodlands and the Town's population is growing, the environment will be increasingly compromised.

He notes that in 1993, Oakville experienced 1 smog day. In 2001, Oakville had 20 smog days. In the same time about 200 hectares of forest cover was lost.

"Our target should be to save every woodlot we have today and plant more. We need to make a huge reforestation effort," he says.

Elgar's view about the importance of forest cover is reinforced by the Gartner report that states: "Urban forests play a significant role in reducing air pollution in an urban environment . . . The most recent report on air quality in Ontario (Ministry of the Environment, 1999) shows that Oakville and Burlington . . . have periodic episodes of poor air quality usually associated with high ozone episodes during the summer months. Retention of forest cover can play a significant role in mitigating those episodes. This function is even more significant on shorelines receiving pollution across the Great Lakes because ozone is not depleted over water, and therefore the ozone concentrations are higher along the shoreline (e.g. Oakville, Burlington) than would be expected if the pollution had passed over land."

The report later notes, "Recommendations in the literature indicate that woodland cover should achieve a minimum of 30 to 40 percent of the planning area in order to maintain viable ecosystems in terms of function and attributes."

The Provincial government is also recognizing the importance of preserving agricultural land and natural spaces and making urban communities more compact and contained.

The introduction to the Province's recently released discussion paper Places To Grow – Better Choices, Brighter Future states

"Through protection of our greenspace and natural resources we can promote a healthier population."

**The discussion paper goes on to note that:

** Business-as-usual development will consume 1,000 sq km of primarily agricultural land by 2031, an area twice the size of Toronto;

** Our environment will suffer. Air quality will decline with automobile-related emissions increasing by 42 percent.

In places as close as Hamilton and as far away as New York, programs have been instituted to promote urban tree planting to create a healthier environment. New York has undertaken an aggressive tree-planting program putting in 15,000 trees a year. The New York program is supported, in part, by U.S. government sponsored Forestry Assistance programs.

Hamilton which, like other Canadian municipalities does not enjoy any Federal or Provincial financial support for greening the urban environment, has also vowed to make tree planting a priority and has teamed up with a group called Green Venture to promote tree planting by homeowners.

Oakville, Elgar believes, must do the same. That's one reason he and local Ward 4 Councillor Rene Sandelowsky fought so hard to include the need for targets for woodland protection and forest cover in the Town's recent reply to the Provincial government on Planning reform.

"We are still going the wrong way," he says when it comes to woodland protection. "We need funding and we need a plan."

What you can do to help:

Plant trees on your property if you can.

Lobby to protect trees on any endangered woodlands near you.

Let the Town know you are willing to support a beefed up tree planting program.

**It may surprise you to know that, according to an article entitled Urban Forests Make Environmental And Economic Sense, by Roddy Scheer in the April 11 2002 edition of The Environmental Magazine, the forest cover in New York City is 17 percent – compared to Oakville's 12.2.*