

## Staff Report

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**Report To:** City Council

**Report From:** Eckhard Pastrick, Manager of Parks & Open Space  
Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services

**Meeting Date:** September 22, 2025

**Report Code:** CS-25-104

**Subject:** High Priority Tree Removals – 2025

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### Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report CS-25-104 respecting High and Very High Priority Tree Removals, City Council authorizes the allocation of \$180,000 the anticipated 2025 operating surplus to remove very high and high hazard trees (approximately 288 trees) in the fall of 2025.

### Highlights:

- The City's updated inventory identifies 22,039 public trees, with 18% ash, 31% maple, 32% other deciduous, and 18% conifers. Hazard ratings show 1,444 trees in *high* or *very high* hazard categories. An up-to-date asset inventory and condition assessment is a critical piece of managing the City's trees.
- Many trees pose significant risks due to structural defects, emerald ash borer damage, and poor condition. Without timely removals, the City faces increasing liability exposure in the event of property damage or injury.
- Current staffing and budgets cannot keep up with hazardous tree removals, pruning, or planting needs, leaving a backlog of high-risk trees.
- The City is projecting a 2025 year-end surplus, largely from a WSIB rebate tied to effective workplace risk management. Staff recommend allocating \$180,000 from this surplus.

- Council is asked to approve this one-time funding to remove approximately 288 of the highest-risk trees in 2025. The actual final number will be based on the tender results. This proactive investment would improve public safety, reduce liability, and support responsible asset management.

## **Strategic Plan Alignment:**

[Strategic Plan](#) Priority: Safe City.

## **Climate and Environmental Implications:**

This supports the objectives of the City's Corporate Climate Change Adaptation Plan by strengthening the natural infrastructure, including the urban forest.

## **Previous Report/Authority:**

[Report CS-23-132 from the Manager of Parks and Open Space Re: Tree Inventory Update](#)

## **Background:**

The Director of Corporate Services advised that the 2025 year is tracking toward a surplus at year end and asked staff about high-priority projects that may be considered for part of these funds prior to year end. The purpose of this report is to present a tree removal project to Council's for consideration.

## **Tree Inventory**

In 2014 and 2015 the City's first inventory of street trees and trees located in more public spaces, such as of parks and open spaces was completed. In 2022, as the City worked to address the impacts of the Emerald Ash Borer, the importance of updating and expanding the tree inventory was identified. In 2023, Council approved project 23D.13, Tree Inventory Renewal.

Like any other asset, an up-to-date and accurate inventory is an important tool in managing assets. An updated tree inventory will:

- Facilitate improved resource planning and allocation of maintenance action, including pruning and planting;
- Prioritize tree care and removals based on risks to public safety and property;

- Provide data for managing the urban forest;
- Provide a foundation for evidence-based, data-driven decision-making;
- Identify the density of ash trees and other species in hazard, ravine, and escarpment lands within a 20m buffer zone between City lands and private properties that may be impacted. (Trees in these lands under 10cm Diameter at Breast Height (DBH) were not to be inventoried.); and
- Update previously inventoried trees (removed, increased in size, updated hazard rating, etc.).

This work was presented to Committee and Council in report CS-23-132. Work to collect all parks asset data, including trees has continued.

### **Inventory Summary**

The following information has been collected to date:

Species	Number	Approximate percentage of Urban Forest
Ash (all species)	4 113	18%
Maple (all species)	6 913	31.3%
Other Deciduous (ex. Ash and maple)	7 074	32%
Conifers (cedar, white pine, spruce, etc.)	3 939	17.9%
Total	22 039	

### **Hazard Ratings:**

While hazard assessment is subjective, several core parameters were considered through the inventory to determine the rating. Considerations include:

- structural integrity,
- significant defects,

- species and potential to cause damage. Weak branch attachment, significant lean, decay, minimal foliage, or root instability are some factors.

The inventoried trees are characterized by the following hazard rating:

<b>Tree Hazard Rating</b>	<b>Number</b>
Very low	2 019
Low	13 930
Medium	4651
High Hazard	1194
<b>Very High Hazard</b>	<b>250</b>

The condition and hazard rating are extremely helpful in directing resources and minimizing risk. There is valuable data that can be utilized to predict the potential structure and health of the urban forest.

The current staff complement cannot keep up with the influx of work orders, let alone planting and proactive pruning requirements. In the last few budget years, Council has supported additional operating dollars to allow for additional contracted removal of high-hazard trees.

While significant progress has been made, staff are concerned with the timeline to address the poor condition and high-hazard trees. This creates a significant risk management issue for the City. Comments from the City's Corporate Services Division indicate that with the information and inspections, the City faces potential liability exposure. In the event of a claim related to tree damage, the City's adjuster will request the inspection history and known concerns regarding City trees.

Council is requested to allocate funds from the anticipated 2025 surplus to contract tree removal.

This would allow the removal of very high and high-hazard trees, significantly reducing the City's potential liability. The final number of trees removed will depend on the actual tender results.

This work is packaged and ready to tender. The cost estimate was developed based on estimates from contractors.

## **Analysis:**

Given the updated tree inventory data and the increasing volume of high- and very high-hazard trees identified as the ash borer disease progresses, there is a clear and pressing need to accelerate removals to mitigate risk to public safety and reduce the City's liability exposure. The current staffing and budget levels are insufficient to address the backlog of hazardous trees in a timely manner.

Allocating additional funds from the projected 2025 year-end surplus will enable the removal of approximately 288 of the most dangerous, very high and high hazard trees. This proactive investment supports responsible asset management, aligns with Council's previous commitments to urban forest health, and significantly reduces potential costs associated with future tree-related claims or incidents.

## **Financial Implications:**

As previously reported in the 2025 T1 Financial Update, the City is tracking toward a year-end operating surplus, a portion of which has been attributed to a one-time rebate from the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). This rebate, now confirmed, represents a return of insurance premiums due to the City's strong performance in workplace risk management, injury prevention, and system compliance.

While the full financial update for the second term will be provided in the upcoming Q2 Financial Update, it is reasonable to consider that the City's 2025 year-end position remains favourable at this time.

From a financial strategy perspective, the WSIB rebate should be viewed as a risk management surplus; a refund tied directly to the City's effective mitigation of workplace liabilities. In this context, allocating a portion of the anticipated surplus toward the removal of high- and very high-risk trees represents a logical and responsible reinvestment of those returned funds. These trees present ongoing liability exposure to the City. Removing them is a risk reduction measure, not unlike preventing workplace accidents, and aligns with the same principles that underpinned the City's eligibility for the WSIB refund in the first place.

This report recommends that Council authorize the allocation of \$180,000 from the anticipated 2025 operating surplus to fund the immediate removal of approximately 288 hazardous trees in fall 2025. This one-time investment

would significantly reduce the City's exposure to tree-related claims and public safety risks.

**Communication Strategy:**

The City would issue a media release to advise people in the area of these removals.

**Consultation:**

Richard Goetz, Tree Inventory and Park Asset Specialist

**Attachments:**

None

**Recommended by:**

Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services  
Eckhard Pastrick, Manager of Parks and Open Space

**Submission approved by:**

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Eckhard Pastrick, Manager of Parks and Open Space at [epastrick@owensound.ca](mailto:epastrick@owensound.ca) or 519-376-4440 x 1221.