

OBIAA 2024 AWARD SUBMISSION – STANDARD

Contact Name: Rachel Braithwaite and Lindsay Taylor	Pillar & Category: Leadership and Management: Advocacy and Governance
BIA/Organization: St Catharines Downtown Association	Time Period: March 2022 and On
Entry Title: Urban Street Tree Advocacy	
Project Description: <i>(two sentences; 50 words or less)</i> Advocacy for enhanced tree canopy coverage within the downtown core through proactive management strategies, science driven decision making, and partnerships.	

NEED OR OPPORTUNITY

The St Catharine’s Downtown Association is Niagara’s designated Urban Growth Centre. We have over 700 members and are the only BIA in St Catharines. While 12 mile creek (a beautiful trail along the canal) is linked to the edge of the BIA the downtown does not have a significant amount of urban canopy cover (trees). We have a number of large residential developments underway and planned for but the challenge was how do we attract people to our downtown. Our Streetscape and Sustainability Committee were aware that our downtown would be the new residents back-garden and thus we needed shade, healthy air and beauty – what better way to achieve this than with trees.

AUDIENCE

In order to bring more trees to our downtown we knew we needed to first of all prove the need (research, measure, engage the community) then find partners and advocate. To help us prove the need we worked with students from one of Canadas leading research institutions – Niagara College and hired one of them through a grant to lead this initiative. Our partners were identified as those with a similar interest:

1. Property / business owner in the area that would benefit from an increase in residents / more foot traffic. Because they are our members it was quite easy to get their support and through our Streetscape and Sustainability Committee we had an avenue for direct engagement
2. Environmental Groups who understand the benefit more trees provide – A number of these partners were already members of our Streetscape and Sustainability Committee, we also joined the Niagara Climate.... And went to numerous local events to meet various environmental groups and build relationships
3. City of St Catharines – as we have very little privately owned space available for planting we needed to partner with the City as they would need to plant the trees. The key was identifying the correct staff to connect with and ensure they were aware that the report was to support their role not criticize.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Our initial main goal was to get more trees downtown, after research we found that the majority of trees downtown were younger, smaller trees. With Trees providing the most value (in terms of beauty, clean air, shade) when they reach a larger size, our initial goal needed to change to ensuring that trees reach maturity. In order to do this we had a number of objectives:

1. Prove the need for more mature trees in the downtown core – What sustainable (Economic, Environmental, Societal) benefits would more mature trees in the downtown core bring. Using industry standard inventorying, research, data modelling and comparative analysis to identify gaps.

2. Establish partners that would help advocate and support the goal – Establish at least 5 partners to either work closely with us on this project, or that would provide an avenue to advocate / share the need.
3. Raise awareness for the importance of Urban street Trees through advocacy
4. Expand the tree canopy downtown by 10% with new tree plantings.

IMPLEMENTATION

Lindsay first connected with us by volunteering on our Streetscape and Sustainability Committee in 2021. In March 2022 we obtained a grant through YBBE funding so that we could offer her a part time position as our Sustainability Director. Among other tasks Lindsay with the help of a fellow Niagara College graduate who was with us through the Canada Summer Student Position and several Niagara College Interns began collecting data to create a Tree Report that would measure what trees we currently have and demonstrate a need for more trees downtown.

At the same time Lindsay was gathering input and buy in from our partners. Throughout the research process, various stakeholders from the SCDA's Streetscape & Sustainability Committee, City of St. Catharines, Niagara Region, Niagara College, Downtown Guelph Business Association and Waterloo's Asset Management Team provided guidance and feedback on the direction of the following recommendations.

The Report was completed in August of 2023 and outlined the following recommendations:

1. Reclassify street trees, and other green infrastructure, as capital assets
2. Establish partnerships for the goals
3. Expand the City of St Catharines' Urban Forestry team
4. Capture tree value and maintenance in all relevant by-laws
5. Adopt location, biodiversity and site preparation considerations for tree planting
6. Improve connectivity between downtown and 12 mile creek

We engaged with our members on this initiative through a number of methods:

- Landing page on our website with a link to the report (this page has had 812 visits since it was posted, the average time each user spent on the site was 2 minutes and 45 seconds which demonstrates the interest)
- Public webinar on urban street trees (from this a number of members in attendance joined our Streetscape and Sustainability Committee)
- Walking Tours of the tree canopy downtown
- Newsletter updates
- We created an infographic summarizing the importance of urban street trees
- Social media posts: One of our members commented: "How amazing! She is indeed a hero, and so is Sean. Amazing work our friends are doing, greening our city is such a powerful stance, full support for our heroes"
- Event – we began a 'Go Green' Event downtown in the spring that focusses on sustainable practices – this brings together all the partners, allows are businesses to showcase sustainable practices that they follow, and provides a venue for us to share about the Tree Report
- Tree Adoption Program – we are also creating an opportunity for both members and residents to adopt a tree (they will be guided on how to monitor the health of the tree and report if they have concerns). Although this program is in the infancy stages of roll out we already have 5 of members that have expressed interest.

The caliber of the Tree report really improved the credibility of the work of the BIA. We had numerous Councilors reaching out to share how impressed they were and asking if it could be done for the whole City.

As with most things the challenge is often funding, in order for trees to reach maturity there needs to be adequate preparation and maintenance – this is obviously costly. However, in the report we added a value for the trees to show that a mature tree is valued much higher than a small tree, also, planting once the right way is more cost effective than needing to replace the tree each year. By classifying the trees as a capital asset, it allows the City to benefit more from the more mature tree that would have a much higher price tag.

As a way to continue to raise awareness of the importance of mature trees, at this years Go Green Event Lindsay is adding a price tag to each of the trees downtown and a scavenger hunt for people to find the highest valued tree....

We have never encountered anyone throughout this process that doesn't want more trees downtown, as such, getting buy in for this initiative was not hard.

RESULTS

As mentioned, our initial main goal was to get more trees downtown – in our first year of consultation with the City 28 additional trees were planted. We have also seen at least 10 trees planted this year; we are now working closely with the City to do a thank you social post to raise awareness of these plantings.

Our objectives were:

1. Prove the need for more mature trees in the downtown core:
 - a. We measured:
 - i. The amount of carbon our street trees store (31.44 metric tons)
 - ii. How much oxygen our trees produce (2.8 metric tons)
 - iii. How diverse our trees our (the more diverse the better survival) (0.77)
 - iv. The average size (20cm – diameter at breast height)

We created several maps of tree locations in our downtown – identifying current tree location, tree species, size, and health assessment – this was made available to our partners and the public. This research allowed us to measure what we have as of 2022 and we compared it to other Cities (Guelph) and previous years to highlight that:

- We have more trees since 2016
- The size of the trees downtown has decreased
- We have more hazard trees
- Our trees are storing less carbon

We also conducted public surveys with the community and received close to 700 responses. Overwhelmingly people identified the importance of green spaces, parks and access to nature. They expressed a desire for more trees, 399 respondents identified that access to more trees would make the downtown more vibrant.

2. Establish partners that would help advocate and support the goal:

Numerous stakeholders from the SCDA's Streetscape & Sustainability Committee (local horticulture experts, business owners,...) , City of St. Catharines, Niagara Region, Niagara College, Downtown Guelph Business Association, Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, Niagara Parks, Niagara Geopark, Brock University, and Waterloo's Asset Management Team provided guidance and feedback.

Having a dedicated & widely respected Sustainability Director, that is an expert in this field, allowed the SCDA to establish partners that were previously beyond our reach, expanded our capacity to advocate for downtown, apply for novel funding sources, and amplify our work throughout the region.

With our partnerships we were able to obtain a number of items to help support the research components at no cost to the BIA. We also obtained a number of grants for jobs (CSJ and YBBE) to help cover some staffing costs. The SCDA invested approximately \$5,500 towards this initiative (mostly allocated to staffing, conference costs and some printing) as seen below.

Expense	Levy	In-Kind/Grant
Staffing	\$5,000.00	\$18,000.00
Conference Fees	\$450.00	\$600.00
Printing	\$50.00	N/A
Totals	\$5,500.00	\$18,600.00

3. Raise awareness for the importance of Urban street Trees through advocacy:

Lindsay (Our Sustainability Director) and Sean (our Canada Summer Jobs Intern who continued to volunteer and help with the report) presented the final report at two conferences:

- a) 2023 At the International Association for Great Lakes Research in Toronto, this helped to build relationships with the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority and the Ministry of the Environment. It also ignited discussions around increasing community involvement with urban forestry management and the uniqueness of urban ecology.
- b) In Sept 2023 at the Society for Ecological Restoration Global conference in Australia. This global gathering brought together the world’s leading experts in ecological restoration and environmental conservation. As a result of this presentation they are now partnering with a colleague in South Africa to help expand the research and need for urban street trees

At both of these conferences their presentation was one of the only one that identified how the urban environment can play a role in sustainability.

4. Expand the tree canopy downtown by 10% with new tree plantings. Through the extensive advocacy efforts and partnerships we were able to see 28 new trees planted in the downtown in 2023, increasing the tree canopy by 11% in the first year alone.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS (SEPARATE DOCUMENT)

- The complete tree report is available through the public website below. This site includes additional materials (e.g., tree inventory on Google Map, printable infographic for business members, recommendations, ect.) <https://mydowntown.ca/urban-street-trees/>
- Multiple blogs were created to outreach with business members including an article on the Value of Trees to a BIA: <https://mydowntown.ca/the-value-of-trees-in-a-bia/>

- Email from Councilor to other Councilors and Mayor:

“I wanted to share this fantastic post from Lindsay Taylor - the Sustainability Director for the St. Catharines Downtown Association - who you may recognize from her council presentations. Lindsay has done incredible work at the SCDA with her urban tree research and documentation and presenting that research internationally at the Ecological Restoration (SER) 2023 conference in Darwin, Australia. <https://mydowntown.ca/downtown-st-catharines-advocates-for-greener-main-streets-on-the-global-stage/> We are incredibly fortunate to have Lindsay at the SCDA and as a resident of the great ward of St. Patrick's. If you haven't had a chance to read the SCDA Urban Tree Report - take a look, it is incredible.”