

UPCOMING DATES

APRIL

- 5 Planning & Housing Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 8 Etobicoke York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 9 Executive Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 17-19 Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 22 CreateTO, 2:30 p.m.
- 24 Design Review Panel, 12:45 p.m.
- 29 Board of Health, 9:30 a.m.
- 30 Economic & Community Development Committee, 9:30 a.m.

MAY

- 1 General Government Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 2 Infrastructure & Environment Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 6 Scarborough Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 7 Toronto & East York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
Preservation Board, 9:30 a.m.
- 8 North York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 9 Planning & Housing Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 13 Etobicoke York Community Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 14 Executive Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 15 Design Review Panel, 12:45 p.m.
- 22-24 Council, 9:30 a.m.
- 27 Board of Health, 9:30 a.m.
- 28 Infrastructure & Environment Committee, 9:30 a.m.

PILOT PROGRAM OFFERS RESOURCES, TREES TO ENHANCE QUALITY OF LIFE IN LOW-CANOPY NEIGHBOURHOODS

FORTIFYING THE TREE CANOPY



Lana Hall

A pilot program that subsidizes tree planting on private properties in Toronto aims to expand options for increasing tree canopy across the City by making the tree planting service free for residents in the City's Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs). Often facing historical underinvestment, many of these neighbourhoods also have fewer trees, depriving local residents of the physical, psychological, and climate-related benefits trees can provide in urban spaces.

The pilot runs in tandem with **Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests (LEAF)**'s Backyard Tree Planting (BYTP) program, which is partially subsidized by the **City of Toronto's** urban forestry department and allows property owners to opt into the program to add green infrastructure

to their property for around 50 per cent of the \$500 price tag. The service includes a site consultation with a certified arborist, up to one free tree or up to three free shrubs, assistance with planting and delivery, and resources to help care for the newly-planted greenery.

Now, with additional funding from both the **Arbor Day Foundation** and **Salesforce**, the program is being offered free to property owners in all low-canopy Neighbourhood Improvement Areas for the duration of the pilot. Neighbourhood Improvement Areas are communities determined by the City to have higher levels of socio-economic need, and are given priority status on public and private funding towards community development. Eligible properties include single-detached homes, as well as multi-unit properties,

such as apartment buildings or office complexes.

More than 60 per cent of Toronto's trees are located on private property, according to urban forestry data, which means programs that make it easier to plant—and care for—these trees are critical to reaching the City's target of achieving 40 per cent tree canopy across the city by 2050.

But Toronto's NIAs, which have long struggled with social, cultural and infrastructure-related underinvestment, also tend to have significantly less tree canopy. Based on data from the City's urban forestry division, the average tree canopy among Toronto neighbourhoods is 26.9 per cent. Within the City's 33 NIAs, 23 have below-average canopy cover, leaving them more vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and depriving

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NRU PUBLISHING STAFF

Ian A.R. Graham, Publisher
iang@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 222

Irena Kohn, Editor
irenak@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 223

Matt Durnan, Senior Reporter
matt@d@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 225

Lana Hall, Senior Reporter,
lanah@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 226

Peter Pantalone
Planning Researcher
peterpi@nrupublishing.com

Jeff Payette
Design/Layout
jeffp@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 228

Samantha Lum
Sales and Circulation
samanthal@nrupublishing.com
Ext. 224

SALES/SUBSCRIPTIONS
circ@nrupublishing.com

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Corporate Office
1200 Bay Street, Suite 1101
Toronto, ON M5R 2A5
Tel: 416.260.1304
Fax: 416.979.2707

Billings Department
NRU Publishing Inc.
PO Box 19595 Manulife PO,
Toronto, ON M4W 3T9

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FORTIFYING THE TREE CANOPY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

residents and business owners of shade and the health and well-being benefits that come with greenspace.

“The benefits of trees, especially in an urban area, are just massive,” says LEAF executive director **Janet McKay**.

These benefits include improved air quality, as well as shade and UV protection. Because NIAs are often neighbourhoods with a significant amount of paving, trees can play an important role in helping mitigate the urban heat island effect and absorbing stormwater into the soil.

But the benefits are more than just physical, says McKay. Trees can also have positive impacts on mental health, and can serve as both visual and auditory buffers in urban settings. “They can really be our allies in getting through life in a hustling, bustling city,” McKay told *NRU*.

For ward 6 York-Centre councillor **James Pasternak**, whose ward has two NIAs eligible for the pilot program, the program will benefit both the climate and the residents in the Downsview and York University Heights neighbourhoods.

“It will be a great investment in the neighbourhoods—in health, it increases the value of homes, it’s a psychological and

physical benefit, and [provides] shading in times of increasing heat due to climate change,” he says.

Investment in programs like the low-canopy neighbourhood greening initiative signals a cultural change in the way trees are valued in urban settings, says **Toronto Metropolitan University** professor and director of its ecological design lab **Nina-Marie Lister**. In some newer developments—or in redevelopments of 60s and 70s-era projects that saw significantly added urban density, trees were largely considered as a decorative afterthought, says Lister, with little attention paid to their health or environmental benefits. “Trees were added as a kind of nature bandaid ... They weren’t included in housing as a

human right.”

Lister says she’s seen an evolving conversation—both in scientific literature and in public policy initiatives—about the importance of shade and tree cover as a human right. “We have long since talked about the right to sunlight as a kind of health and well-being necessity, but now we’re also talking about the right to shade—urban cooling in a time of global heating,” she says.

While the pilot initially launched in August 2023 with just five NIAs on its roster, it has since expanded to include all low-canopy NIAs in the greening program. This will allow for increased canopy coverage across the City, but will also enable more data collection, which is an important part of the puzzle, says McKay. Some property owners, for example, might face barriers—such as physical space, time, or resources—that influence their decision on whether or not to plant trees on private property. This is

especially true in NIAs, where residents may not have the same resources available to them as residents of more affluent neighbourhoods.

“I think this project is a first step of beginning to learn what it is we need to do to improve tree equity in the city,” McKay says.

The LEAF low-canopy neighbourhood greening initiative pilot is scheduled to run until August 2024. 🌳

Map showing low-canopy Neighbourhood Improvement Areas in Toronto, which are eligible for a pilot program that aims to provide more tree canopy in Toronto’s under-resourced communities. The program, a partnership between the City of Toronto, Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests (LEAF), Salesforce and the Arbor Day Foundation, provides free consultation, trees, planting and resources for property owners in low-canopy neighbourhoods within the City’s neighbourhood improvement areas (NIAs). Program partners say that NIAs are more likely to have fewer trees, depriving them of the environmental, health, physical, and psychological benefits of tree cover.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

