

Executive Summary Report

Tree Permit Pricing Research



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

CONTEXT

Edmonton's urban forest consists of approximately 380,000 boulevard and open space trees and over 3,000 hectares of forested natural areas. The City often finds itself in a position where trees, especially when they are located near construction sites, are damaged or lost due to inadequate protection measures.

Over the last year, the City has been working towards developing a new Public Tree Bylaw. The draft bylaw proposes that anyone planning to conduct certain kinds of work (like construction, demolition and excavation) within 5 metres of a City tree or 10 metres of a Natural Stand must obtain a Tree Permit from the City.

Recent jurisdictional scans have confirmed that few Canadian municipalities have established a permit system associated with active maintenance and/or construction work around publicly owned trees. As such, the City of Edmonton will be one of the first municipalities in creating such a tree permitting system.

OBJECTIVES

The main focus of this research was to help determine the optimal pricing for the new tree protection permit.

The research objectives of this study were to understand stakeholders':

- Perception and attitudes towards main features/supports that will be offered with different pricing options
- Perception and attitudes toward different pricing options
- Preferred pricing option and payment
- Anticipated barriers and possible supports from the City
- Ideas/suggestions to improve the options

METHODOLOGY

NOTES ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- The findings in this report provide a summary of the opinions expressed by participants in qualitative discussions.
- These discussions are exploratory in nature with the flexibility to uncover and examine topics and issues as they arise in the conversation.
- Due to the limited number of respondents, results cannot be generalized or quantified, but rather are to be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.
- The value of the discussion is not in counting how many people made a specific comment; the value is in understanding where the comments are coming from, and what assurances and challenges the feedback creates for the City in terms of moving forward with an effective strategy.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 35 in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with various stakeholders including builders, developers, association representatives, and utilities.

These interviews were designed to understand stakeholders initial impressions of the proposed tree bylaw, permit plans, and permit pricing. The findings of this phase of the research were used to determine the content focus of the focus groups. All stakeholders who participated in the in-depth interview phase, were invited to participate in the follow-up focus groups.

A total of three (3) focus groups were held:

| Group | Segment | Location | Date | Time | Participants |
|-------|------------|----------|----------------|------|--------------|
| 1 | Utilities | Online | March 26, 2021 | 11am | 7 |
| 2 | Builders | Online | March 30, 2021 | 11am | 8 |
| 3 | Developers | Online | March 31, 2021 | 11am | 3 |

- Leger was responsible for recruitment, guide development, hosting and moderating all sessions, analysis and reporting.

PROPOSED PRICING

The following proposed pricing table was shown to participants at various points during the research process, including:

- ✓ In-depth interviews (emailed as a PDF document to participants ahead of scheduled interview, and discussed in interview)
- ✓ Focus groups (shown near the end of each discussion, and discussed as a group after more information was provided to participants based on in-depth interview feedback)

| DRAFT FEE OPTIONS FOR PRICING STUDY | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|----------|
| Tree Protection Plan | | |
| Options | Description | Fee |
| A | Application and plan review and no mandatory site inspection. Includes communication with the applicant and issuing the permit | \$96.25 |
| B | Option A with one site inspection at the start of the project (after fencing is installed) | \$183.75 |
| C | Option B with another site inspection at the end of the project (confirm take down of fencing) | \$271.25 |
| D | User gets to choose from Options A, B or C | |
| Tree Preservation Plan | | |
| Options | Description | Fee |
| A | Application and plan review and one mandatory site inspection prior to issuing the permit. Also includes communication with the applicant and issuing the permit | \$315.00 |
| B | Option A with one site inspection at the start of the project (after fencing is installed) | \$420.00 |
| C | Option B with another site inspection at the end of the project (inspect for site condition and any potential damage) | \$525.00 |
| D | User gets to choose from Options A, B or C | |

KEY PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS TREE PERMIT PRICING

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Stakeholders are not ready to talk about pricing:

- There is a strong need to further educate stakeholders about why this is an issue, including the data to support why this is an issue, and the steps that have brought the City to this point in the process.
 - Nearly all participants during the in-depth interview phase of this research were not ready to discuss the pricing options, and commonly cited they do not want to pay anything for the permit, and/or that they do not understand why this permit is being proposed and how the City got to this point in the process.
- Many feel that a permit is not necessary and support the bylaw itself. They feel that the bylaw would allow the City to enforce non-compliance, which most participants feel is the bigger issue.
- Utilities are concerned about emergency work and how that would be factored in and dealt with, they are concerned about the number of permits they would need, and are not clear on what types of work would qualify under the annual permit and which would be out of scope.

2. Stakeholders would like to spend \$0 for the Tree Protection/Preservation Permit, they feel that enforcing the bylaw should be sufficient:

- Many want to know how the proposed pricing for the permits was determined (cost recovery vs. cash grab):

- The City needs to clearly clarify if this is cost recovery. Many participants noted that this feels like a cash grab. However, they also noted that if the permit pricing is determined by cost recovery, then that would be acceptable.
- The differences between all the pricing options is not clear to all participants, some noted they were not sure why having an inspection would cost more than not having one when the inspection should be providing them assurance.
 - Assurances and value of the inspection needs to be clearly communicated to stakeholders.
- Among those who did provide feedback regarding the proposed prices:
 - They generally feel the proposed prices look in line with other permit fees.
 - They generally agreed with the lowest cost option as their most preferred option (\$96.25 and \$315), they also feel that it is not necessary to provide options as people will just choose the cheapest option.
 - However, many cited they would have issues if they would need to apply for hundreds of permits per year.
 - Annual or blanket permits were preferred by most, paying an annual fee did not appear to be a concern, the concerns arose when discussing the potential for hundreds of applications a stakeholder could submit in a year.

KEY PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS TREE PERMIT PRICING

3. Stakeholders do not want to wait for permit approval:

- Worried about the City having the resources to implement, review, and approve plans/permits (concerns about approval/wait times).
 - Strongly feel that the City, Bylaw and Forestry, are not resourced appropriately to execute this permit process within the 2-week window described. Participants feel that Council will need to greatly increase operating budgets for both departments (Bylaw and Forestry) in order for this process to work effectively and at little impact to their operations (as stakeholders).

4. Stakeholders are concerned about the additional costs outside of the permit itself- additional time and resources needed to apply for permit, specifically, hiring specialists to develop/approve preservation plans

STAKEHOLDER IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE OPTIONS

- Other options discussed:
 - Have an audit process rather than a permit.
 - Have fines for non-compliance with bylaw rather than a permit.
 - Suggest stronger fines for non-compliance, \$500 is not perceived as being enough to make a difference to most.
- Integration:
 - Have permit process implemented with other permit processes already in place.
 - Have the inspections tied to other inspections currently being done.
- Proposed plans need to be clearer:
 - Need clear direction as to what exactly is expected of them.
 - Need clear definitions of what is applicable under each plan, including annual.
- Other thoughts:
 - Would like to see video or photo submissions be implemented, to save time and money.
 - Would like to be allowed to advertise on tree protection.

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