

Staff Report



Infrastructure Services Department

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REPORT TO: Community and Infrastructure Services Committee

DATE OF MEETING: January 26, 2026

SUBMITTED BY: Joshua Shea, Manager of Forestry and Natural Areas Management, 519-783-7930

PREPARED BY: Hajnal Kovacs, Forestry Project Manager, 519-783-8864

WARD(S) INVOLVED: Ward(s) – All

DATE OF REPORT: December 17, 2025

REPORT NO.: INS-2026-014

SUBJECT: Tree Canopy Update

RECOMMENDATION:

For Information.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- The purpose of this report is to share an update on the various activities to achieve long-term tree canopy goals of 30% canopy cover in each ward by 2050 and 33% city-wide by 2070 and to present the 2025 tree canopy cover data.
- The key finding of this report is that Kitchener's tree canopy cover is 26% which is a decrease of 1% from the previous 27% in 2019 assessment.
- There are no financial impacts associated with this report.
- This report supports **Cultivating a Green City Together: Focuses a sustainable path to a greener, healthier city; enhancing & protecting parks & natural environment while transitioning to a low-carbon future; supporting businesses & residents to make climate-positive choices.**

BACKGROUND:

Since 2014, the City of Kitchener has tracked changes in urban tree canopy cover using LiDAR surveys, an advanced imaging technology that helps measure how much area is covered by tree canopy cover. In 2022, Council set canopy targets to achieve 30% canopy cover in each ward by 2050 and 33% city-wide by 2070. These goals reflect Kitchener's commitment to urban forestry, climate resilience, and community well-being.

This report provides an update on the 2025 tree canopy coverage and Kitchener's progress toward these canopy targets.

*** This information is available in accessible formats upon request. ***
Please call 519-741-2345 or TTY 1-866-969-9994 for assistance.

REPORT:

This report provides an update on the tree canopy initiatives and measures to achieve the tree canopy targets approved by Council. It is recognized that the targets are ambitious yet achievable and provide long-term objectives that require near-term and ongoing investments.

Tree Canopy Initiatives

Tree Planting: The Growing Kitchener's Urban Canopy project, funded through the City's existing budget and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, is doubling tree planting efforts in 2025 and 2026. Kitchener planted 1,400 large trees in boulevards in 2025 and will plant an additional 3,000 in 2026. Council's previous investments in tree planting has enabled timely replacement of individual trees that have been removed from boulevards and contributes greatly to the resiliency and sustainability of the urban forest.

Tree Maintenance: The proactive block pruning program has maintained over 7,500 trees annually since 2024 (the annual goal of pruning 1/10th of inventoried trees) while the woodlot maintenance program removes hazards from woodlots (2,400 trees in 2025). The shared resources between these two programs creates some trade-offs between enhanced street tree care and backyard hazard tree removal.

Partnerships and Education Resources: Kitchener partners with REEP Green Solutions to expand urban tree cover on private properties. Since 2019, over 820 trees have been planted at subsidized rates. Since 2024, Kitchener's Community Canopy program has focused on planting new trees in low tree equity neighborhoods, offering the first tree for free to residence. REEP supports this program by organizing and coordinating the planting. REEP also fosters community engagement through guided Tree Walks, connecting residents with nature. Since 2023, Kitchener has collaborated with Sustainable Waterloo Region and Trees Canada to host 2-3 volunteer planting events annually, creating new canopy in parks and public spaces while strengthening community participation.

Tree Canopy Coverage

Tree canopy coverage exhibits natural year-to-year variability due to several factors so to account for this and ensure reliable trend analysis; canopy measurements are conducted on a five-year cycle.

Between 2014 and 2019, Kitchener's urban tree canopy cover increased from 25% to 27%. The 2025 assessment indicates a decline in tree canopy cover to 26%.

While existing trees have continued to grow and expand the canopy, these gains were not sufficient to compensate for the tree losses incurred since 2019. Where conditions permit, City trees are replaced when removed however the benefits of these new plantings take time to materialize. Young trees require 5-10 years before their canopy meaningfully contributes to overall coverage, making early and consistent replanting essential. Council's commitment to dedicated maintenance funding has been the cornerstone of the return on investment from retaining and maintaining the City's mature trees, ensuring the health and longevity of our urban forest. Without sustained, and ideally expanded, funding for both maintenance and planting, we

risk reversing these hard-won gains. Every dollar invested today accelerates canopy recovery, strengthens climate resilience, and enhances community livability for decades to come.

Canopy growth, largely driven by the expansion of existing trees, contributes to the greatest canopy gains but also creates vulnerability: losses of large, mature and aging trees due to various reasons can significantly reduce overall canopy coverage. There has been notable canopy losses since the last canopy survey in 2019, for reasons including:

- Ash dying from the invasive Emerald Ash Borer (Attachment A),
- Storm damage from major storm events in May 2021 and July 2022, (Attachment B)
- Hazard trees identified for removal based on risk assessment inspections, and
- Site alterations and construction projects.

These reasons have also led to some of the canopy cover variation across the wards. Other factors influencing canopy variations across wards include:

- Young trees in new developments or re-plantings have not yet contributed significantly to canopy cover (Attachment C), and
- Limited planting space in some areas like industrial areas which are dominated by impervious surfaces.

The 2025 ward-level canopy cover presented in Kitchener ranges from a high of 36% (Ward 4) to a low of 17% (Ward 5), see Figure 1: Overview of the 2025 Tree Canopy Percentage per Ward compared to the City wide average. Figure 1. Over the most recent five-year period, none of the wards have seen canopy gains sufficient to give them an overall increase in tree canopy cover. Some Wards have decreased in canopy cover up to 3% since 2019. Five wards currently fall below the city-wide average of 26%, while 5 wards exceed it .

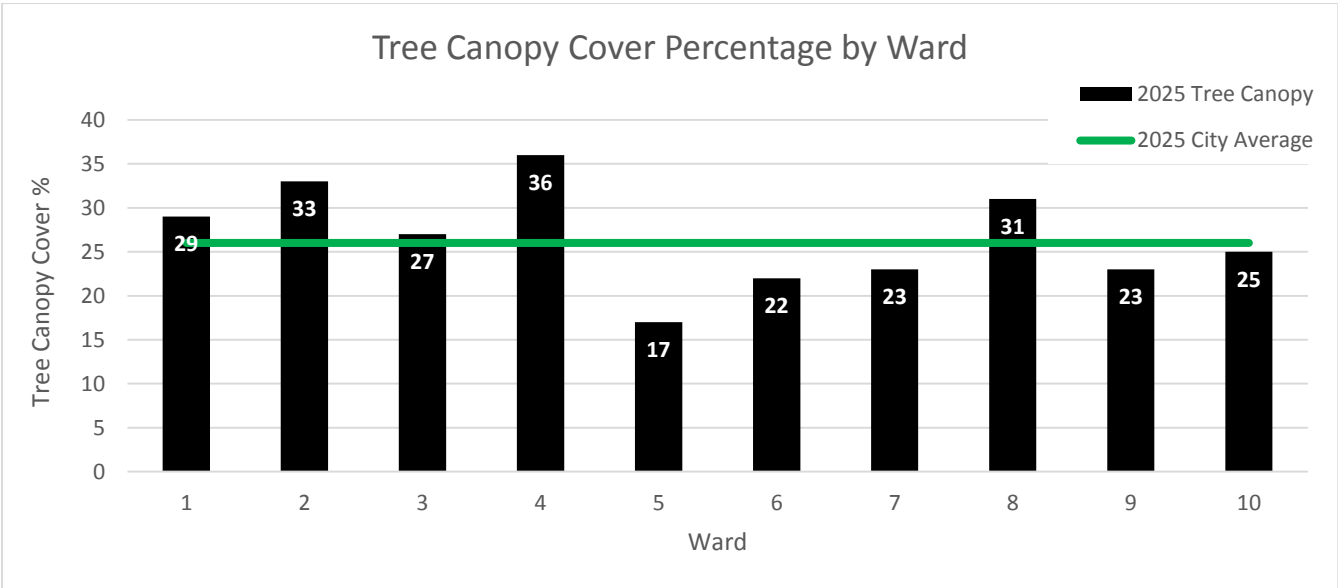


Figure 1: Overview of the 2025 Tree Canopy Percentage per Ward compared to the City wide average.

Tree Canopy Ownership

Tree canopy cover distribution in the City is almost evenly split between private land and public land:

- 49% of the canopy is on private land (down from 50% in 2019),
- 49% is on public land (up from 48% in 2019), and
- The remaining canopy falls in areas with an unknown ownership

The trend shows a small shift of canopy cover from private to public land since 2019. This could indicate:

- Increased planting or preservation efforts on public property,
- Possible loss of or slower growth of trees on private property, or
- City acquisition of natural area properties through the subdivision development process and other acquisition opportunities.

Staff recently reviewed tree conservation processes and are implementing improvements to strengthen protections and compensation for public trees. Staff are in the process of reviewing opportunities to enhance private tree conservation through the bylaw, policies, education, and community engagement, ensuring all neighbourhoods contribute to a thriving urban forest.

Next Steps and Strategic Opportunities

To increase our tree canopy immediately by just 1% (1.38 km²), we would need to plant 1.3 million new trees to realize the growth immediately, whereas allowing trees to grow over 20 or 40 years we would only need to plant 40,000 or 18,000 trees, respectively. This difference highlights the value of long-term planning and proper tree maintenance. Continued investment in tree maintenance, health and survival today ensures that fewer newly planted trees are needed to achieve canopy goals, saving resources and maximizing overall benefits.

Tree canopy growth is about sustainable, long-term gains. While fluctuations happen, our commitment ensures steady momentum toward our goals. Kitchener residents consistently support a greener, healthier city. As we work toward our 2050 and 2070 canopy targets, protecting and maintaining existing trees is one of the most effective strategies. Recent findings reinforce the need for proactive preservation, strategic replacement, and sustained investment in planting and care to ensure long-term urban forest health and expand canopy coverage citywide.

The next tree canopy assessment is scheduled for 2030 and a report will be brought forward to Council at that time to share an update on progress in achieving our tree canopy target.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports **Cultivating a Green City Together: Focuses a sustainable path to a greener, healthier city; enhancing & protecting parks & natural environment while transitioning to a low-carbon future; supporting businesses & residents to make climate-positive choices.**

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Capital Budget – The recommendation has no impact on the Capital Budget.

Operating Budget – The recommendation has no impact on the Operating Budget.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

Staff continue to utilize a variety of social media, website content and other communications tactics to regularly engage with the community including social media videos, surveys, promotions etc. around the Forestry program.

INFORM – This report has been posted to the City's website with the agenda in advance of the council / committee meeting.

PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:

- [INS-2022-002 Tree Canopy Target for Kitchener](#)
- [INS-20-017 – Kitchener Urban Forest Canopy - Update](#)

APPROVED BY: Denise McGoldrick, General Manager, Infrastructure Services

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A – Map of Example Ash Loss

Attachment B – Map of Example of Storm Damage

Attachment C – Map of Example of New Tree Canopy