

Toronto Star

Earth's salvation in urban forests

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In a remarkably short time, most people on our planet have come to see climate change as the most pressing issue facing us. However, our world leaders remain, in large part, evasive and unwilling to commit to concrete programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In Canada, Prime Minister Stephen Harper seems to specialize in giving lip service to voluntary cuts in greenhouse gases, but it is actually a city mayor who is making the ambitious moves to back up his public statements. Toronto Mayor David Miller has put bold plans in place to reduce his city's environmental footprint, while still accommodating inevitable growth in the coming decades.

The commitments made by Toronto, the C40 (a group of the world's largest cities committed to tackling climate change) and the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement are monumental landmarks in our battle against global warming. Cities consume 75 per cent of the world's energy and produce 80 per cent of anthropocentric greenhouse gases. In addition, 50 per cent of the world's population lives in cities and that number is expected to rise to 60 per cent by 2030.

These numbers are stark, but Toronto and more than 650 other cities around the globe are committed to addressing them. Toronto has set a target for a 30 per cent reduction of greenhouse gases below 1990 levels by 2020. It is a bold initiative; how can it be achieved? The answer lies in part with the magnificent and all-powerful tree.

Urban trees have a vital role to play in the battle against climate change. They provide a healthier environment for both people and animals, by removing air pollution and smog. They save cities millions of dollars a year by stabilizing storm-water runoff. They filter out water pollution and reduce energy costs by as much as 40 per cent by both heating and cooling homes.

Perhaps most importantly, urban trees are excellent long-term carbon warehouses. The bigger they are, the more effective they are at

storing carbon dioxide (CO₂).

When it comes to trees, it is true that Toronto has an advantage on many other North American cities – its park system and forested ravines are exquisite and vital for the 5.5 million inhabitants of the Greater Toronto Area.

Torontonians adore their trees, with more than 7 million of them spread out over 634 square kilometres.

Toronto is leading the way for other cities to show how they too can help combat climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Importantly, it is setting clear objectives and attainable goals to back up its promises. Miller has recognized the role trees can play and the city is undertaking a detailed urban study. Toronto has planted 500,000 trees in the past decade and is looking to add millions of trees in coming decades.

Trees will not in themselves solve our immediate problem of rising CO₂ and other greenhouse gases, but they will help to stabilize emissions by 2050 once all cities, globally, buy into reducing greenhouse gases by at least 30 per cent.

Beyond the actions of Mayor Miller, it is important to remember that global warming is not a political issue – it is a citizens' issue. Mayors and city councils have a vital civic role to play by setting targets, but each of us has our own important role too. We need to reduce the amount of energy we spend at home, at work and while travelling.

And don't forget about that splendid tree. There are more than 80,000 species of trees on Earth, which absorb approximately 1.8 billion tonnes of CO₂. Try adding to that number by planting one tree in your yard for each member of your family.

We know what's causing climate change – now let's solve it together.

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