

Operational Services Report to  
Infrastructure and Planning Committee  
2026 March 11

ISC: UNRESTRICTED  
IP2026-0033

## **Accelerated Poplar Tree Replacement and Sidewalk Repair Program Update**

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to provide a response to the Notice of Motion, July 29, 2025, regarding poplar trees and sidewalk damage.

### **PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION**

On July 29, 2025 Council directed City Administration to report back through Infrastructure and Planning Committee by end of Q1, 2026, with a recommendation for an accelerated program to replace declining poplar trees within 5 metres of sidewalks in established communities with alternative tree species that have less invasive root systems;

And further, that Administration include in its report the impacts on the urban tree canopy and provide a recommendation that for every poplar tree removed and replaced with an alternative species, another poplar tree be planted in a more suitable location.

And further, that Administration include in its report the financial implications of both the tree and damaged sidewalk replacement, with the program to be delivered at no cost to residents;

And further, that Administration include poplar lifecycle planning as part of the Urban Forestry Strategic Plan update.

### **RECOMMENDATION(S):**

That the Infrastructure and Planning Committee recommends that Council:

1. Direct Administration to use this information to help develop a concrete quality level of service target and associated funding requirements for Calgary's sidewalk network, no later than Q3 2026.
2. Direct Administration to use this information to help develop a tree condition level of service and associated funding requirements for Calgary's urban forest network, no later than Q3 2026.
3. Direct Administration to report back, through the concrete and tree condition level of service reporting, on progress made to address poplar tree-related sidewalk damage.

### **CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER/GENERAL MANAGER COMMENTS**

The General Manager concurs with the contents of this report.

### **HIGHLIGHTS**

- Administration has identified over 11,000 locations where poplar trees are within 5 m of an aggregate 56 km of sidewalks. This includes 3211 locations where there are condition problems with the sidewalk, the tree, or both assets.
- Administration is recommending a coordinated approach between the two programs of concrete rehabilitation and tree replacement that balances priorities and seeks efficiencies in location specific asset repairs to address poor condition assets.
- Additional funding is needed for existing programs to carry out the strategy developed in response to this Notice of Motion: \$7.93 million for sidewalk rehabilitation and \$9.85

## Accelerated Poplar Tree Replacement and Sidewalk Repair Program Update

million for poplar tree replacement. Current investment levels support the \$0.15 million for asphalt pathway repair related to poplar root damage.

- Tree species other than poplar trees also damage sidewalks. Administration identified 5071 locations where non-poplar trees are within 5 m of poor condition sidewalks. All other tree related sidewalk replacement and tree replacement would need an estimated investment of \$30.6 million; \$23.6 million for sidewalk rehabilitation and \$7 million for tree replacement, additional to the poplar concerns.
- The proposed strategy to replace damaged sidewalks and declining trees with a coordinated approach would be scalable based on the investment provided through Council's funding decisions. This is a component of a larger infrastructure gap including a \$246 million shortfall for concrete rehabilitation and a \$62.4 million shortfall for tree replacement.

### DISCUSSION

Poplar trees, as well as other species of mature trees, provide significant contribution to the urban canopy, however sidewalk concrete can be damaged due to their aggressive surface root systems. Wards 4, 6, 10, 11, 13 and 14 have the most sidewalks impacted by large, declining poplars, and 311 service requests regularly note the following issues:

- Safety Concerns: Slips, trips and fall hazards from uneven sidewalks, and water pooling leading to ice formation in wintertime contributing to falls,
- Infrastructure Damage: Damage to public infrastructure like sidewalks, as well as private property damage, and
- Accessibility issues: Inaccessibility for seniors, people relying on mobility aids and strollers.

Approximately 3% of poor sidewalks city-wide are related to poplar trees in 1723 locations. Administration has identified:

- 242 locations where unhealthy poplar trees are near damaged sidewalks
- 1481 locations where healthy poplar trees are near damaged sidewalks
- 1438 locations where unhealthy poplar trees are near good condition sidewalks, and
- 50 locations where poplar trees are near damaged pathways, tree conditions vary.

Annual tree risk assessment and bi-annual sidewalk condition assessments prioritize current operational practices. Desired levels of service are under development for sidewalk concrete, and the Urban Forest Strategic Plan will outline mature tree lifecycle management processes. Service level and risk tolerance considerations are informed by the scope of sidewalk and tree asset condition concerns and limited by available resources and investment. Increased setback requirements between concrete and poplar trees have been in place since at least 2007, so there should be reduced damage from poplar roots in newer communities as trees mature.

We have developed a plan focusing on three service-oriented goals; accessible sidewalks, public safety, and maintaining the tree canopy. Coordinating the programs to make progress on sidewalk concrete rehabilitation and poplar tree management includes the following considerations:

## Accelerated Poplar Tree Replacement and Sidewalk Repair Program Update

- **Reduce safety risk** where sidewalk tripping hazards are present and unhealthy poplar trees have damaged sidewalk concrete by replacing the declining tree and sidewalk.
- **Improve public safety and sidewalk accessibility** where there is sidewalk damage in proximity to healthy poplar trees. Recommend that a site-specific solution is developed for maintaining mature healthy trees and replacing sidewalk with an appropriate intervention, such as root barrier / rebar, rubber sidewalk, asphalt or concrete to provide safe sidewalks and pathways. Where unhealthy poplars are in proximity to good condition sidewalks, proceed with tree removal on a risk-informed basis.
- **Build Calgary's urban canopy** by planting two trees for every removed poplar; a more suitable species at the poplar removal site, plus a new poplar in a park or natural area. Poplars, and other mature trees, provide extensive environmental, economic and aesthetic benefits in their community including shade, cooling, air quality improvement, stormwater management, habitat provision and community character in established neighbourhoods. The City is committed to growing the urban canopy to 16% by 2060 and to providing safe and accessible sidewalks and pathways for Calgarians.

To carry out the proposed accelerated and coordinated programs of damaged sidewalk replacements and poplar tree replacements, additional funding would be required. The investment could be scalable depending on Council's decisions. Additional capital funding to the Urban Forestry Lifecycle AIP capital fund and the Mobility Concrete Rehabilitation sidewalk replacement capital fund would address the backlog of work identified in this report.

### EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public engagement was undertaken        | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dialogue with interested parties was undertaken     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public/interested parties were informed | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public communication or engagement was not required |

Targeted outreach pertaining to poplar tree removal and damaged sidewalk concrete replacement has not been undertaken at this time. Service request records relevant to root damaged concrete and other infrastructure were reviewed to understand key resident concerns. We will continue to engage with similar municipalities such as The City of Edmonton to learn and understand how they manage their tree replacement and root damage reduction program.

Urban Forestry has a procedure for individual tree notice of removal as well as community-wide notification practices which would be followed prior to any tree removal activities. Mobility has an approach to community notification for sidewalk replacements that would be followed. If an accelerated program of poplar tree removal and sidewalk replacements were undertaken, communication strategies for affected neighbourhoods would follow current protocols.

### IMPLICATIONS

#### Social

Many Calgarians seek out the aesthetic and community character of established neighbourhoods for the benefits provided by mature canopy trees. They enjoy the visual and environmental attributes of large trees, such that the loss of poplar trees may be perceived

## **Accelerated Poplar Tree Replacement and Sidewalk Repair Program Update**

negatively. Sidewalks add social value to connect Calgarians to activities, neighbours and their community, as well as to enjoy our tree canopy. However, poor sidewalk condition and uneven footing cause safety concerns for residents, particularly those who rely on mobility aids. The injuries due to slips, trips and falls on uneven sidewalk concrete and ice build-up can have significant health and safety impacts on Calgarians. Further, the aesthetic of the community, including tree and sidewalk condition, can impact perceptions of safety and care.

### **Environmental**

A healthy and connected ecological network is supported by mature trees, which contribute to climate resilience and health benefits such as shade and temperature reduction, air quality improvement, cooling, stormwater management and mental health improvements. Approximately 125 m<sup>2</sup> of canopy cover is associated with each healthy poplar tree, contributing to the urban tree canopy target of 16% by 2060. Protecting and maintaining a healthy tree canopy depends on providing lifecycle maintenance, selecting suitable species, protecting soil conditions and striving for equity in planting to integrate environmental benefits across the city. Replacing poplars at a 2:1 ratio, as proposed in response to this Notice of Motion, can help to build the urban canopy. Similarly, the provision of good quality pedestrian infrastructure supports low emission travel.

### **Economic**

An accelerated approach to addressing poor condition sidewalk concrete and declining poplar trees will require The City to allocate additional resources and investments in Mobility and Urban Forestry. It is not anticipated that this would impact broader system economics. Poplar damage to sidewalks is only a portion of the issue, as there are other tree species and other causes of sidewalk damage that also impact Calgarians and would have a significant cost to rectify. Dead public trees and damaged sidewalks can have a negative impact on property values.

### **Service and Financial Implications**

#### **New capital funding request**

The accelerated program scoping provides some clarity on the magnitude of the investment needed to address the ongoing infrastructure issues with poplar trees and sidewalk damage through a risk-based and location specific approach. The current unfunded backlog of approximately 39,000 dead and poor condition trees requires approximately \$12.6 million for removals and \$49.7 million to replace one tree per removal. The unfunded backlog of poor sidewalk concrete replacement is estimated to be approximately 53,320 flags at a cost of \$246 million. With respect to an integrated poplar tree and sidewalk replacement approach, approximately \$7.98 million would be required to replace all damaged sidewalks adjacent to poplar trees, \$0.15 million for damaged asphalt and approximately \$9.85 million would be needed to replace, at a 2:1 ratio, all declining poplars near sidewalks. If this approach were extended to all tree damaged sidewalks and all declining trees it would require \$23.6 million and \$7.0 million for 1:1 tree replacement, respectively. Further details on breakdown of costs and the accelerated sidewalk and poplar replacement program are included in Attachment 1.

Operational Services Report to  
Infrastructure and Planning Committee  
2026 March 11

ISC: UNRESTRICTED  
IP2026-0033

## Accelerated Poplar Tree Replacement and Sidewalk Repair Program Update

### RISK

There are safety risks to the public associated with both damaged sidewalk concrete, with dead and declining trees, as well as mature, healthy trees. These risks can only be assessed with an informed risk assessor on-site to determine the prioritization of risk mitigation measures which may include removal and replacement for trees. The accelerated program addresses the joint risks of both unhealthy trees and damaged sidewalk first and progresses to other locations of damaged sidewalks and unhealthy trees to decrease public risk. There are ongoing public safety concerns in locations where poplar trees have damaged sidewalks, which would be addressed by this program. All risk mitigation measures should be taken with an informed and practical approach to addressing sidewalk rehabilitation and declining tree health issues, and supports overall risk informed operational processes.

### ATTACHMENT(S)

1. Declining Poplars and Sidewalk Damage Scoping Report
2. Presentation – Accelerated Poplar Tree Replacement and Sidewalk Repair Program Update

Department Circulation

General Manager/Director	Department	Approve/Consult/Inform
Doug Morgan	GM, Operational Services	Approve
Kyle Ripley	Director, Parks and Open Space	Approve
Troy McLeod	Director, Mobility	Approve

Author: Parks and Open Spaces, Resource Stewardship and Mobility, Asset Management.