

How can we protect our crucial 'urban forest' when we don't know why trees are cut down?

By Charles Teague (<http://www.cambridgeday.com/author/charles-teague/>)

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(http://www.cambridgeday.com/public_html/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/082618i-Katya-Guseva-stump.jpg)
(<https://pixabay.com/en/stump-summer-grass-forest-944138/>)

About 200 mature trees are to be cut down at a single development site in the Cambridge Highlands. (Photo: Katya Guseva via Pixabay)

Our city's definitive study reported a 7 percent tree canopy loss from 2009 to 2014, in sharp contrast with what one would take as an increase when reading our city's website (<https://app.box.com/s/l4lnndh17zyq9tf35gooe6yfmaj5gd5>) and planting (<https://app.box.com/s/snxdcxp074f1lbzknc2c8hijonovb5vs>) committee minutes. This increase was actually only an estimate; only for city-owned trees; and only for the number of baby trees planted – not for the canopy provided by mature trees.

Now our city jeopardizes the work of yet another task force as it continues to not look at all available data.

OPINION

The city's consultants will report some initial data Thursday to the Urban Forest Master Plan Task Force (<https://www.cambridgema.gov/Departments/publicworks/urbanforestmasterplan>). What will not be included are the hundreds of mature trees cut down just this year and the hundreds more planned to be cut down.

This April, 50 trees were cut down in North Cambridge alone in 10 days (<http://www.cambridgeday.com/2018/04/28/another-bad-10-days-for-trees-in-cambridge-just-part-of-may-2-tree-massacre-slideshow/>), while hundreds

were cut down along rail lines over the year. Previously, 90 were cut down for the Jefferson Park redevelopment and 32 for Harvard's student center redevelopment. While spread out in time, these are large numbers considering the canopy protecting us from climate change comes from mature trees.

Already-planned developments show an equally grim tree future: about 200 mature trees are to be cut down to build hundreds of rental apartments at 55 Wheeler St.

(<https://www.google.com/maps/place/55+Wheeler+St,+Cambridge,+MA+02138/data=!4m2!3m1!1sox89e37709fc5b73sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiKuODX2IvdAhVEheAKHQHVDawQ8gEwAHoECAUQAQ>)

in the Cambridge Highlands, on the site of the former Abt Associates. Another 190 mature trees at Volpe

(<https://app.box.com/s/w4932w6tdyfyq33k7hrjmpuor1021hun>)

in Kendall Square are to be cut down by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for its redevelopment. For Vecna on Cambridgepark Drive, 16 mature trees will be cut down – a number that looks small only by comparison. There are many more such examples.

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Our mayor's staff proposed that "pro-tree is an anti-development ploy." Even if this were true, why should losing trees to development be ignored during the process of creating a plan to save our tree canopy for its public health benefits?

Our city arborist already has a lot of tree cutting data. By law

(https://library.municode.com/ma/cambridge/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TIT8HESA_CH8.66TRPR), the arborist

reviewed the tree plan for every large development for the past 14 years. Every tree removal using a crane or blocking the public way requires a permit from the Department of Public Works. These companies can be asked how many trees they cut down and the reason why. The department itself removes many trees, and for them the department already has the detailed information that can help planning – including not only the number of trees it cut down, but also the kind, size, environment and, most importantly, the reason. (And for dead trees, sometimes why they died.) Our city also has many building plans on file with before-and-after landscape plans, especially for projects going to the Board of Zoning Appeal. Finally, institutions such as Harvard and MIT surely have records going far back in time that may help us plan for our already changed climate.

To be sure, aerial studies show all tree losses. But to consider policy thoughtfully, perhaps following the lead of communities that control cutting down trees on private property, we must understand why trees

are cut down. The paper trail required to tell us exists in city and other records. The task force needs to add a review of these records to do its job properly.

Comments to the task force can be emailed to cwoodbury@cambridgema.gov
(<mailto:cwoodbury@cambridgema.gov>)

*Resident Charles Teague has advocated successfully for the North Cambridge Linear Park, getting restitution park trees for those cut down by W.R. Grace and working with developers to improve their park boundaries. Email ChangeCambridge@gmail.com
(<mailto:ChangeCambridge@gmail.com>).*



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