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Town of Aurora

Committee of the Whole Report

No. OPS26-008

Subject: Protecting Aurora's Oldest Trees – Heritage Tree Management Guide

Prepared by: Matthew Volpintesta, Manager, Parks & Fleet

Department: Operational Services

Date: March 10, 2026

Recommendation

1. That Report No. OPS26-008 be received; and
2. That the Heritage Tree Management Guide, and associated principles, be endorsed.

Executive Summary

Following a motion carried by Council on September 23, 2025, for the Protection of Aurora's Oldest Trees, staff completed a best practices review of heritage tree management. Through extensive research and consultation staff have prepared a draft Heritage Tree Management Guide (the Guide) which details a series of key components, from creating a listing, through to preservation and commemoration practices:

- In response to the Protection of Aurora's Oldest Trees motion, staff conducted a best practice review and prepared a working draft of a Heritage Tree Management Guide.
- From initial assessment and archiving through to preservation and commemoration of Aurora's heritage trees, several key components make up the Heritage Tree Management Guide.

Background

In response to the Protection of Aurora's Oldest Trees motion, staff conducted a best practice review and prepared a working draft of a Heritage Tree Management Guide.

The intent of the Protection of Aurora's Oldest Trees motion is that these trees serve as a living testament and hold future cultivar legacies to Aurora's ecological heritage, and the preservation of significant natural features aligns with the Town's ongoing commitment to environmental stewardship, public education, and the protection of its natural assets.

The motion included the following items to be explored:

- That staff identify trees believed to be senescent or centenarian in nature, representing important natural, cultural and historical significance, assessing the health, species, and estimated age.
- That staff investigate measures to ensure the long-term protection and maintenance of these trees, including hazard risk assessments, long term health.
- That staff report includes commemorative recognition elements such as an interactive plaque at the site highlighting ecological, cultural, and natural significance to the community; a neighbourhood ribbon cutting event to foster community pride; and collaborative tours or map-based integration with the arboretum.
- That staff consult with the Town's Museum and Archives, Heritage and Environmental Advisory Committees for input on the design and wording of the commemorative plaque.
- That staff develop an afterlife plan should the tree perish.
- That any costs associated with the plaque, assessment, and preservation measures be considered as part of the next applicable operating or capital budget or funded through available grants or sponsorship opportunities.

Through this report, staff provide detail of considerations made in working toward a go-forward approach for strategizing efforts to protect, celebrate and extend the life of Aurora's heritage trees.

The Guide provides a structured framework to manage heritage and mature trees, including trees approaching the end of their lifecycle, located on municipal property. The draft Guide was formulated through a review of tree policies from municipalities across Canada, including provincial and municipal legislation, best practices from urban forestry organizations and innovative programs such as TreeCycle Canada. Some examples on municipalities reviewed include Middlesex Centre (Ontario) Burnaby (British Columbia), LaSalle (Ontario), and Whitehorse (Yukon Territories), which embed end-of-life considerations within broader tree management policies.

Furthermore, building on policies from Ontario's Forestry Act, *Ontario Heritage Act*, *Municipal Act, 2001* combined with best practices from urban forestry organizations such as Tree Canada, who developed an Urban Forestry Guide that emphasize lifecycle management, risk assessment and sustainable disposal, key components reveal themselves as core function of a successful management guide.

Analysis

From initial assessment and archiving through to preservation and commemoration of Aurora's heritage trees, several key components make up the Heritage Tree Management Guide.

Several key components around the assessment, preservation, and commemoration form a comprehensive Heritage Tree Management Guide. The following Table details the key components proposed within the draft guide:

Key Component	Comments
Assessment and Decision Framework, and Registry of Trees	The first step is to establish criterion including what characterizes a tree as having cultural or natural heritage significance, being: age of tree, species, geographical location, or other historical occurrences. Once a criterion is set, the tree should be thoroughly documented, including photographs, measurement, and record of historical significance for archives. As part of this assessment, risk assessment should confirm structural decline and assess health under existing tree inventory categorization. There is also a public engagement component, which would seek input, including notifying public community and stakeholders; consider commemorative options.

Key Component	Comments
Tree Protection or Preservation Strategies	Dependent on risk assessment, this can involve species and lineage preservation strategies (seed bank, nursery reproduction). Further, additional strategies include heavy pruning focusing on structural integrity, vertical mulching and deep root fertilization and watering regime. The protection and preservation component does play a key role in achieving the Town's endorsed canopy cover target of 40 per cent by 2034.
Disposal and Repurposing	Recycling and re-use are excellent options should failure/removal occur. This includes urban lumber programs, and partnerships with local sawmills or artisans to turn logs into park furniture, tables, public art installations. A cited example is TreeCycle Canada who partner with municipalities to urban wood (biomass energy) into clean energy or wood products.
Commemorative Practices	Commemorative practices may involve a myriad of options which include memorial plaques in situ and heritage displays, archival and repurposed wood through options detailed above such as public art.
Replacement and Ecological Continuity	Plant native or climate-resilient species near the original site or genetic duplicates through preservation methods detailed above such as nursery reproduction. This is also a potential consideration as a commemorative practice and is recommended to exceed tree replacement policies and By-law (example; multiple young trees for one large heritage tree).

Key Component	Comments
Policy and Program Integration	This focuses on recommendations toward the Town's various tree protection by-laws and urban forestry master plans with options to integrate practices into other programs and municipal strategic goals, such as canopy cover targets.
Communication and Education	Communication and education play a pivotal role in the process from the outset through the course of the Guide. At the outset, engagement and education help formulate a list and criterion for designation as having significance. Through the management plan for a particular tree, engagement and communication allow for promotion of the tree, in celebrating any commemorative practice or enlightening the public on the process to protect or repurpose a tree.
Funding	Funding is a key component to this work and a consideration when applying the Guide to Town trees. Considerations around archiving, and tree protection/preservation are likely the most significant when accounting for budget needs, as would repurposing. Communication and education may also impact a need for funding, should materials be produced. There is a possibility of revenue generation which may contribute to funding the end-of-life program, through sale of repurposed materials.

Following endorsement of the Guide, staff will finalize criterion for listing Town-owned trees and create an initial registry of trees including location, significance, specimen details and scientific data collection and photographic documentation. This work will continue through to 2027 and will include specific planning for each specimen based on current condition, and future risk. Once formally assessed, appropriate resources and preservation planning will be applied.

Advisory Committee Review

Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee Meeting – January 15, 2026:

Staff provided a background and an overview of the memorandum and draft Heritage Tree Management Guide. Staff and the Committee discussed various aspects including related provincial policies and criteria (which do not include the end-of-life aspect); scope and number of heritage trees; the program's initial focus on municipal trees; expansion and maintenance of the Town's urban canopy, and associated funding; consideration of Indigenous practices or traditions that could be incorporated within the framework; and the potential strategy and process for expanding the program to include the participation of privately-owned trees. Further, a suggestion was made to possibly incorporate indigenous ceremonies or celebrations during the commemorative phase of the management guide.

The Committee expressed support for the framework of the draft Heritage Tree Management Guide.

Heritage Advisory Committee Meeting – February 9, 2026:

Staff provided background and an overview of the memorandum and draft Heritage Tree Management Guide. The committee discussed the possibility of changing the name of the Management Guide to remove the "end of life" reference and raised questions around the legal implications of the heritage listing, and whether it protected privately owned trees. Staff delineated the heritage listing and confirmed that this program did not impact the Private Tree Protection By-Law and was not a means to formally protect privately owned trees, but rather an incentivization to preserve and celebrate heritage trees.

The Committee expressed support for the framework of the draft End-of-Life Tree Management Guide.

Environmental Advisory Committee Meeting – February 23, 2026:

Staff provided background and an overview of the memorandum and draft Heritage Tree Management Guide. The committee recommended setting a minimum perimeter or protection zone for trees where adjacent to Town-managed construction projects. Interest expressed in adding private trees and having private home-owners volunteer to have trees listed, though staff cautioned this may not be possible to transfer within title registration during property sales. Staff were encouraged to make the program as impactful as possible in the interim by starting with a moderate-sized list (15-20 trees).

The committee shared sentiment in updating the Town's Private Tree Protection By-Law to help protect heritage trees on private lands, to which staff confirmed will be presented to Council for consideration in 2027.

The Committee expressed support for the framework of the draft End-of-Life Tree Management Guide.

Legal Considerations

This program only applies to trees that are on municipal property. It is not a legal means of protecting heritage trees, but rather a celebratory program. Implementation of parts of the program may require updates to the Tree Protection Bylaw and other Town policies or plans. The Private Tree Protection By-law is a separate mechanism and does not influence or impact this program.

Financial Implications

Preservation and commemorative practices may have a financial impact to the Parks Operating Budget, including preservation applications, such as tree protection, fertilization, pruning, etc. Further, commemoration will also endure a minor cost, example; heritage plaques. Staff will seek to offset these costs through the possible auctioning or repurposing of wood products, as well as use of funding from the Town's tree compensation reserve as appropriate.

Staff will commence its creation of a heritage tree registry as per the guiding principles in 2026 and prepare an associated budget for Council's consideration as part of the 2027 operating budget process. It is anticipated that this budget may increase incrementally based upon the number of registered trees from year-to-year, or through the potential expansion of program in the future.

Communications Considerations

Aurora's public and tree enthusiasts are a significant resource in identifying historical context of natural heritage and significant trees. As such, a public "call-out" will be organized through the Town's webpage and social channels to assist in building the Heritage Tree registry. In addition to a launch campaign for the program, continuous updates will be provided including status of listings, commemorative plans, and good news stories.

Climate Change Considerations

In keeping with the recommendations of the Urban Forest Study, Climate Change Adaptation Plan, and Green Development Standards, as well as Council's commitment to growing the canopy cover to 40 per cent by 2030, the Heritage Tree Management Guide is a key action.

Link to Strategic Plan

The endorsement of the Heritage Tree Management Guide supports the Strategic Plan Goal of Supporting an Exceptional Quality of Life for All, by encouraging an active and healthy lifestyle.

Develop a long-term needs assessment for recreation programs, services, and operations to match the evolving needs of the growing and changing population.

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

None.

Conclusions

The draft Heritage Tree Management Guide represents a progressive plan of how the Town of Aurora manages its most significant natural assets. By moving beyond simple maintenance and incorporating lifecycle management, from initial archival documentation to innovative repurposing and commemoration, the Town is ensuring that its "living testaments" continue to provide value to the community even after they perish.

The Guide successfully aligns the Town's broader strategic goals, specifically the 40 per cent canopy cover target and climate adaptation strategies. Supported by the Parks and Recreation, Heritage, and Environmental Advisory Committees, this framework provides a clear roadmap for celebrating Aurora's ecological history while maintaining fiscal responsibility through potential revenue-generating repurposing programs. Following Council endorsement, the transition to creating a formal registry in 2026 will mark a milestone in Aurora's commitment to environmental heritage.

Attachments

Attachment 1: Draft Heritage Tree Management Guide (v.2)

Previous Reports

None.

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on February 19, 2026.

Approvals

Approved by Sara Tienkamp, Director, Operational Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer