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I am one of a number of people requesting information on operations of the Urban Tree Conservation by-law. The reason we want information is that monitoring data is key to an evidence based approach to policy making and decision making by elected officials. This by-law is particularly important to decision making because it applies to private property where more than 50% of the City's remaining urban canopy is located. If we are to have an effective Urban Forest Management Plan it must be driven by good monitoring data. In particular, we need to know how many trees are being removed from the urban canopy, the reasons for removal, when permits are denied why are they denied, is the denial justified, if people ignore the bylaw and cut trees are they charged with a violation and what is the result of those charges.

This report does not answer any of these questions. The report tells us how many tree permits have been issued, but every permit can cover 1 to 20 or more trees so number of permits does not indicate number of trees removed through the permitting process. The report tells us how many permits are issued or denied, but not the reasons for issuing or the reasons for denial. The report is silent on the question of how many charges have been laid for violation of the bylaw (removals without permits), or the outcome of any of those charges. These are things Councillors responsible for oversight of the bylaw and the public need to know to understand the operations of the bylaw.

The frustrating part of all of this is that the data we want is collected by City staff on the ground, using the SAP-based Forestry Portal. It is entered by City Operations staff electronically at the site at the time of their field visits, much like parking permits and other permitting activities of the City. City staff file electronic reports indicating where there has been an application for a tree permit, how many trees are covered by the permit, and the reasons for issuing or denying the permit. Any person with basic database management skills can compile that information electronically in a matter of hours, and put it together in a report. This was not done in this case, even though the request for the information was made 11 months ago.

Why is that? How can Council and Forestry Services be expected to monitor the operations of the by-law if this information is not freely and openly collated and made available to the public?