

Update on Elm Wood Disposal Initiative and Next Steps

ISSUE

The disposal fee for elm wood at the Saskatoon Regional Waste Management Centre (landfill) was waived for the month of October 2023, in response to the rising risk of Dutch elm disease (DED). This initiative was combined with an education campaign to help bring attention to DED and the importance of proper disposal of elm wood. This report summarizes the outcomes of these two initiatives, provides the plan to address proper disposal of elm wood in 2024, and identifies longer-term actions that will be brought forward in coordination with the City of Saskatoon's (City) Solid Waste Reduction and Diversion Plan.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Environment, Utilities and Corporate Services recommend to City Council that the 2024 elm wood disposal plan be approved as outlined in this report.

BACKGROUND

At its regular business meeting on August 9, 2021, the Standing Policy Committee – Environment, Utilities and Corporate Services received correspondence on landfill fees for the disposal of elm trees and resolved:

That the Administration report back to the appropriate committee regarding near-term options to reduce the burden of proper elm disposal and other forestry materials required for prevention of disease spread on citizens, including waiving landfill fees.

In 2022, Administration carried out research to understand resident knowledge and behaviour regarding elm and proper elm wood disposal and conducted a neighbourhood scale pilot project. The results were presented at City Council's regular business meeting on February 22, 2023. City Council approved the following:

1. That elm wood drop-off be included in Recovery Park;
2. That further information on the level of service, costs, and fee options for elm wood be brought forward in a future report on Recovery Park; and
3. That business plan options for 2024-25 be prepared to sustain enhanced communication and education programs and develop additional programs to further reduce barriers to proper elm wood disposal.

Sustained enhanced communications and education was approved through the 2024/25 Business Plan and Budget, through the advertising budgets for Material Recovery Centre and Green Cart combined with existing advertising for DED awareness. The funding plan for ongoing enhanced elm disposal education leverages all three of these

advertising budgets to raise awareness that proper disposal of elm wood is at the Material Recovery Centre, that the Green Cart program does not accept elm wood, and to continue to raise awareness of other behaviours to mitigate the spread of DED.

In the 2024/25 Business Plan and Budget, City Council approved funding from the Waste Minimization Reserve to Project P.10086 Proper Disposal of Elm Wood. The 2024 approved budget for this project is \$75,000 and the 2025 approved budget is \$75,000, which allows for \$150,000 over a two-year span.

CURRENT STATUS

In 2023, the Parks Department confirmed four positive cases of DED in the Pleasant Hill and Sutherland neighbourhoods and initiated the DED Response Plan. Parks staff began conducting surveillance around impacted areas. Surveillance of the areas includes checking every property for elm firewood or brush and removing it if found. If residents were not home, staff removed the elm wood and left an Elm Infraction Notice with a note indicating the wood was removed. In addition, 31 trees were removed along Central Avenue. Further details are included in Appendix 1.

DED poses a significant risk to Saskatoon's urban forest, which is approximately one quarter elm trees. It is spread by several species of elm bark beetle that are attracted to decaying and freshly cut elm. Prohibiting pruning at times when the beetle is active, as well as restricting the storage, transportation and use of elm wood are the primary methods to reduce the spread of DED.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Provincial regulations prohibit the storage or use of elm wood and require that it be transported to a designated disposal site immediately. Despite these regulations, the Parks Department, through its DED response plan, continues to find significant quantities of elm wood stored on private property.

Starting in 2022, the City began a community-based social marketing approach to address the improper storage of elm wood that combined addressing gaps in awareness as well as addressing barriers to proper disposal. The results of the 2022 market research and pilot were presented at City Council's regular business meeting on [February 22, 2023 \(EUCS2023-0202\)](#).

October Pilot- Free Elm Disposal at Landfill

Building on the 2022 pilot, a Phase 2 of the Enhanced Education and Elm Disposal Pilot was developed that focused on the barrier of cost at the landfill. The City offered free disposal at the landfill in October 2023, with the following goals:

- Eliminate the cost barrier for the proper disposal of elm wood;
- Increase awareness of DED and the importance of proper elm wood disposal; and
- Reduce the amount of elm wood stored in backyards.

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Entrance and tipping fees for elm wood disposal were waived for the entire month. This timing aligned with the pruning ban being lifted as well as the opening of the new Material Recovery Centre. The enhanced education campaign also ran during the month of October encouraging the proper disposal of elm during the month of October. This initiative was targeted at residential loads, but the fee was waived for all loads as no process existed for identifying commercial loads besides the limited number of customers that have a commercial account.

Elm disposal tonnage for the month of October more than doubled from 2022 to 2023. The weight for October 2023 was 397,130 kg (397 tonnes), compared to the October weight for 2022 which was 166,700 kg (167 tonnes). Resident feedback and participation indicate the pilot was well received.

Of note, there were three times the number of loads of elm received during the pilot when compared to the previous year. In October 2023, 866 loads of elm were received at the landfill and 273 loads in October 2022. Most of the loads in October 2023 were from customers that did not hold a commercial account, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Elm Wood Loads – By Customer Types

Customer Type	#
Commercial Account Haulers	92
City (Internal)	31
Remainder – All other loads	743
Total October 2023 loads	866

Of the loads received at the landfill in October 2023, 456 of the 866 were less than 150kg (loads that would have regularly been charged only the minimum entry fee of \$15 and not tipping fees). These loads were most likely residential due to the smaller size. Larger loads were more likely to be a mix of commercial account holders, City loads, or assumed to be commercial in the case of vehicles that were bringing repeated larger loads. A breakdown of loads based on weight is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Elm Wood Loads – By Weights

Weight Range	#
Loads > 1000kg	124
Loads 150kg to 1000kg	286
Loads < 150kg (Normally charged only \$15 entry fee)	456
Total October 2023 Loads	866

Elm Wood Disposal Strategy for 2024

As the threat of DED spreading in Saskatoon increases, making elm disposal more accessible for residents, remains a priority in the City's approach to DED mitigation. The 2024 plan expands the October 2023 initiative by removing all disposal fees on elm wood for residential loads throughout the entire year. This initiative excludes commercial customers since they are believed to be in compliance with provincial

legislation. Additionally, the commercial sector has access to composting chipped elm wood waste through the private sector when the pruning ban is lifted.

The following measures are proposed for 2024:

- Free elm disposal for residents (no entry fee or tipping fee) from April 25, 2024, to December 31, 2024, with a cap of 1000 kg per visit, to help ensure only residential loads are utilizing the waived tipping fee.
- A self-declaration process for residential loads will be implemented to help ensure it is clear the entrance fee and tipping fee are only to be waived for residential customers.
- The definition for commercial hauler will align with the definition used by the standard operating procedure of the compost depot. A commercial hauler is any for-profit business, entity, or individual who:
 - Utilizes the landfill for the disposal of elm wood material;
 - Has customers who pay the commercial hauler to perform yard and tree care, maintenance, tree removal or other operation that generates elm wood waste; and
 - Advertises the service by any means including white pages, yellow pages, internet, vehicle signage, newspaper or broadcast.
- All internal (City of Saskatoon – Department) loads will continue to pay the regular entrance fee and tipping fee.

The estimated cost of the recommended approach is \$35,000-\$100,000 in 2024. This is based on estimated residential tonnages received at the landfill in 2023 and uptake of the October 2023 elm disposal pilot. It is proposed the cost of free disposal is funded through capital funding in P.10086: Proper Disposal of Elm Wood.

Enhanced Education

October Pilot – Education Campaign

The Dutch Elm Disease Free Disposal Campaign ran from September 26 – October 31, 2023. The goal of the campaign was to let residents know elm wood could be disposed of at the landfill at no cost for the month of October. It was communicated that the prompt removal and proper disposal of elm wood reduces the risk of disease transmission to healthy elm trees. The campaign used social media and billboards in public areas.

2023 DED Communication Plan

The annual Communication Plan included various tactics to address the rising threat of DED. Additional tactics were initiated as part of the DED response plan that resulted from positive cases. The 2024 DED Communication Plan will include similar tactics and some additional campaign elements, such as new material that includes renderings of potential devastations.

Further details on communication and education can be found in Appendix 2 (DED Education and Communication).

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Waiving the landfill fees for elm wood for October 2023 resulted in lost customer revenue of \$45,800. The pilot accepted all load sizes and included many commercial customers. The pilot was funded through capital projects, to ensure landfill revenues were not impacted.

The recommended elm disposal approach for 2024 is estimated to have a lost landfill revenue of \$35,000 - \$100,000. This estimate is based on revisions to participant eligibility and load size as described above that will target residential customers. It is proposed the cost of free disposal in 2024 be funded through capital funding in P.10086: Proper Disposal of Elm Wood, which has sufficient funding available.

Financial barriers to the proper disposal of elm wood may have a negative impact on the City's urban canopy, which is part of the City's natural assets. The City's tree canopy is made up of almost 25% elm trees. Unlike other infrastructure, trees increase in value over time. In 2019, the value of public trees (excluding shelterbelts and afforestation areas) was estimated at more than \$530 million. Proactive approaches to limiting the spread of DED are low compared to costs associated with accelerated spread of the disease and resulting tree removal and replacement costs.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Non-compliance with legislated elm disposal requirements has been identified during intensive neighbourhood DED response investigations. Given the extent of elm trees in Saskatoon's urban forest, there is an ongoing risk of additional disease spread through improperly disposed or stored elm wood that over time could result in the decimation of a significant portion of the urban forest. Transportation of elm firewood into Saskatoon is believed to be a significant threat for DED spread and storage of elmwood in backyards further increases the risk of spreading DED.

Composting elm wood may be a viable option available with a City-operated organics processing facility. If a city-owned processing facility is approved, the City will further evaluate viable options and seek approval from the Province to compost elm wood brought to the Material Recovery Centre when the pruning ban is lifted.

NEXT STEPS

If approved, the Administration will carry out an education campaign in 2024. The DED Communications Plan will be updated to reflect the current situation of DED in Saskatoon.

A summary report and next steps report is planned by Q2 of 2025. The report will include 2024 results, a 2025 plan, and a recommendation regarding a long-term elimination of residential tipping fees for the proper disposal of elm wood.

The Solid Waste Reduction and Diversion Plan funded bulky/special waste program development project will address the barrier of transporting loads to the landfill and will be in the scope of the bulky waste project. A key consideration is that elm wood cannot

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be stockpiled, so will need to be prioritized over other materials for collection, especially in the higher generation periods.

APPENDICES

1. 2023 DED Summary
2. DED Education and Communication

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