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Greening of Metro Vancouver 'ambitious but achievable,' report suggests

Metro Vancouver wants 40 per cent of the region's urban areas to be shaded by trees by 2050

Nathan Griffiths

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Enhanced colour satellite imagery shows vegetation estimates in Metro Vancouver from June 30, 2021. PHOTO BY SENTINEL HUB/EOS

Metro Vancouver wants 40 per cent of the region's urban areas to be shaded by trees by 2050, a target the regional authority called “ambitious but achievable.”

That represents an increase from the current tree canopy, which currently averages 32 per cent, according to a draft of a paper submitted to the Metro Vancouver Regional District board on Wednesday. The paper is part of a regional road map to address climate change.



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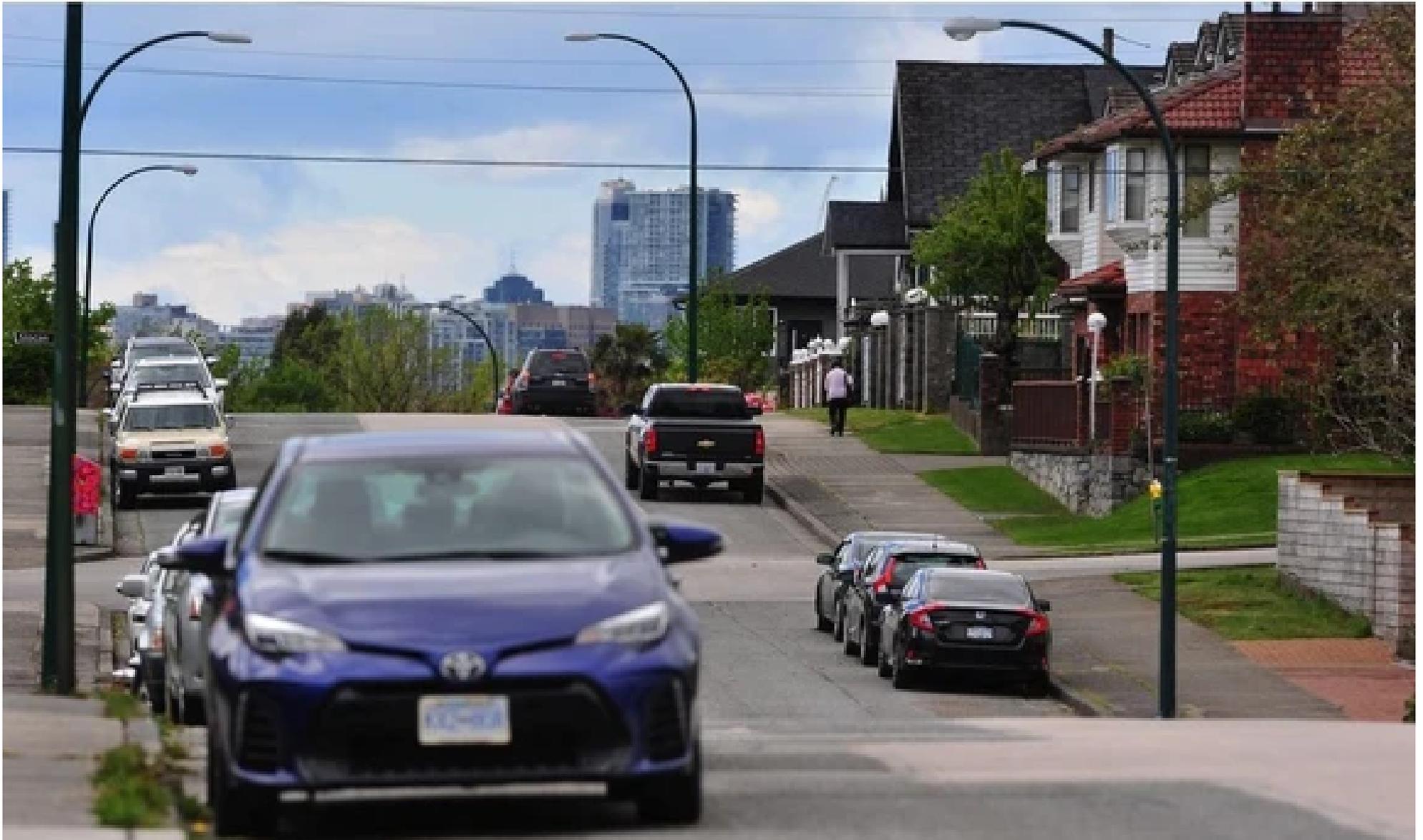
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“Protecting, restoring and enhancing nature and ecosystems maximizes their ability to provide climate resiliency benefits to the region,” the authors wrote.

Amelia Needoba, principal and Diamond Head consulting, which has completed work for Metro Vancouver in the past, said in an email that “both 30 per cent and 40 per cent have been put forward as best practices,” for tree canopy cover.

“Several cities in the Pacific Northwest have set canopy cover targets of 30 per cent,” she wrote, while “quite a few cities in the Toronto region” have targets of 40 per cent.

Only a handful of Metro municipalities — including Lions Bay, West Vancouver and UBC — meet or exceed the current 32 per cent average, according to the most recent regional data, which dates back 2014.



Only a handful of Metro municipalities — including Lions Bay, West Vancouver and UBC — meet or exceed the current 32 per cent average, according to the most recent regional data, which dates back 2014. Some Vancouver neighbourhoods have better canopy coverage than others. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /PNG

Several municipalities have begun implementing strategies to increase tree coverage since then, including tree planting, restrictions on tree removal from private lands, and requirements and incentives to plant new trees on private property.

Trees provide a range of benefits to cities and their residents, including shading and cooling, carbon storage, stormwater management and homes for wildlife. A significant proportion of the nearly 600 people who died in B.C.'s heat wave last summer lived in neighbourhoods with limited or low tree canopy.

There is increasing evidence that trees and other greenspaces offer significant health and well-being benefits, as well, including reduced deaths from cardiovascular disease and improved mental health outcomes.

“In the long run, the community and our health care system pays the price for hot urban areas with low biodiversity and less access to nature,” Needoba wrote.

In Vancouver, where tree canopy increased to 23 per cent in 2018 from 18 per cent in 2014, the city had planted 150,000 trees and aims to double the number of street trees in low-tree neighbourhoods like Marpole and the Downtown Eastside by 2030.





Example of leafy community streets to illustrate the effects of a tree canopy on residential neighbourhoods in Vancouver, BC., on May 18, 2022. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /PNG

Richmond had one of the lowest levels of tree canopy in the region in 2014, at 12 per cent. The city now has a bylaw requiring private landowners plant at least two trees for every tree removed and plans for 30 per cent canopy cover of public land by 2045.

“We are consistently planting trees,” Alex Kurnicki, manager of parks programs at the city of Richmond, wrote in an email.

Kurnicki called the number of trees planted “an important metric,” but wrote that the long-term goal was “canopy size” noting “young trees today don’t have the same size canopy as older trees.”

Lisa Muri, member from North Vancouver, noted during the meeting that the need to increase tree canopy highlighted “issues of speculative development and redevelopment” in many of Metro’s municipalities.

“Every municipality is facing canopy decline with development,” she said.

According to Needoba, “some of the biggest challenges relate to the cost of land and the competing interests for its use.”

A lack of Metro-wide data makes it impossible to track tree canopy loss over time but among the cities that have been tracking it, the message is clear: over the past 20 years, tree cover has been declining.

In New Westminster, White Rock and Surrey — three of a handful of municipalities that have historical records — tree canopy fell roughly five percentage points between 1995 and 2014, according to Metro’s report.

In Vancouver, tree canopy decreased to 18 per cent in 2014 before increasing to its current level of 23 per cent, a large part of which involved planting more than 150,000 trees between 2010 and 2020. The current goal is to reach 30 per cent tree canopy by 2050.

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