

REVISED MEDIA VERSION

Trees Are Not an Obstacle to Development

After Saanich's defeated vote, a clearer and legally grounded path forward

By Nathalie Chambers, Saanich Councillor

A defeated motion is not a final verdict. It should compel us to return with the official texts, exact attribution, legal clarity and a practical route forward.

Recently, Saanich Council rejected my motion concerning the [Universal Declaration of Tree Rights](#). I was disappointed, but this conversation must not end there. In Saanich, trees are living infrastructure: they cool neighbourhoods, manage water, store carbon, stabilize soils and protect biodiversity. Protecting them is not an obstacle to development. It is part of responsible development.

Housing and tree protection are not competing public goods. Responsible growth requires us to plan homes, infrastructure and ecological systems together, measuring consequences across decades rather than one permit, one parcel or one election cycle.

Saanich's 2019 LiDAR analysis identified at least [742,000 trees](#). More than 537,000 are located on private property, and roughly four-fifths of the urban forest canopy lies on land not directly managed by the municipality. That canopy covered 43 per cent of Saanich in 2019; the [Urban Forest Strategy](#) sets a target of 44 per cent by 2064. The [Coastal Douglas-fir zone](#) is British Columbia's smallest climatic zone and its most at risk. Garry oak ecosystems survive across only a small part of the District, while more than one hundred associated species face the risk of extinction.

This distinction matters. Trees on private property are not outside municipal concern; they are outside the District's direct ownership and day-to-day management. Their future depends on municipal bylaws and land-use decisions, but also on the knowledge, participation and support of owners. Saanich has many residents who already act as careful stewards. A practical owner-stewardship program, informed by the Declaration, could reinforce that work through education, technical assistance, public recognition and appropriately designed incentives.

These figures do not mean that every tree is unprotected or that every project will cause ecological collapse. They do mean that decisions must account for cumulative loss, ecological rarity and the limits of replacement.

Trees are also working natural infrastructure with measurable economic value. A recent assessment reported that [Nanaimo's tree canopy](#) provides services valued at \$13.7 million each year. That figure is not a valuation of Saanich's canopy, but it illustrates a principle that applies here: mature trees reduce pressures associated with stormwater, extreme heat, air pollution and carbon emissions. The cost of preserving functioning ecosystems is generally lower, and the result more reliable, than attempting to reconstruct those functions after they have been lost. The [Federation of Canadian Municipalities](#) has estimated that local climate adaptation requires \$5.3 billion annually across Canada and has reported that proactive resilience investment can return roughly six dollars in avoided future losses for every dollar spent. We should cut costs, not trees.

I must also speak candidly. When I brought forward the first motion, I did not provide Council with all the official documentation, the exact institutional attribution or the legal explanations needed for a fair assessment. I take responsibility for the fact that the material before Council was incomplete.

[Ricardo Rey](#) is the author and initiator of the Universal Declaration of Tree Rights, founder of the Assembly of the Tree and President of [La Compagnie des Papillons Bleus](#). That organization is the founding organization and official institutional steward of the Declaration and its implementation framework.

The Declaration contains [three founding articles](#). They recognize the Tree as a sensitive living being, a source of Life and a common good of humankind; affirm that Life on Earth depends upon the existence of the Tree; and state that human beings must act with the Tree in a spirit of fraternity and solidarity. They are accompanied by the [Fifteen Commitments of Local and Regional Authorities](#), a voluntary and progressive roadmap organized around five verbs: governing, knowing, acting, preserving and transmitting.

We must be equally clear about what adoption does not do. The Declaration does not grant trees [legal personhood or confer standing to sue](#). It does not transfer municipal authority, amend provincial law or impose fifteen regulatory duties on residents. Any binding measure would still require the bylaws, budgets, consultations, permits and procedures prescribed by British Columbia law. The full legal scope is set out in the [official municipal-adoption guidance](#).

Saanich already has an Official Community Plan, an [Urban Forest Strategy](#), a [Biodiversity Conservation Strategy](#) and a [Tree Protection Bylaw](#) under review. The Declaration would not replace those instruments. It would connect and strengthen them through a coherent ethical and institutional foundation.

The private-land question remains central. Saanich did not restore stronger environmental protections during development on private property at a time when the District retained greater municipal discretion to do so. I opposed that course. Subsequent provincial housing legislation, including [Bill 44](#), has since narrowed the scope within which the municipality can re-establish comparable protections and has made the protection of trees during development substantially more difficult. This makes it even more important to use every lawful municipal tool still available, and to align housing and biodiversity rather than treating either as expendable.

Land-use policy also requires public confidence. I am not funded by developers. My position has consistently been guided by environmental protection, transparency and the public interest. Development-sector participation is legitimate, but it must be transparent and balanced by ecological evidence, affected residents, Indigenous knowledge and the long-term public interest. Concerns about the influence of development interests should be addressed through disclosure, accountability and an open evidentiary process, without unsupported allegations about any individual.

There is a Canadian precedent. On June 9, 2026, [Terrasse-Vaudreuil, Quebec](#), unanimously adopted the Declaration and committed to integrating its principles progressively into municipal policy.

I am now preparing a new, materially distinct motion through the [August 17 Notice of Motion process](#). It will attach the authenticated texts, explain what adoption does and does not do, recognize existing policies, direct staff to assess alignments, gaps, costs and implementation options, and reserve every binding obligation or material expenditure to Council.

Before filing it, I will seek written advice from the Corporate Officer on whether the proposal may proceed as a new matter under [section 38](#) rather than as reconsideration under [section 28](#).

This is not an attempt to revive the same motion. It is a response to the concerns raised, a correction of the record and an invitation to Council to judge a new proposal on its merits.

Trees are not an encumbrance to be removed before the real work begins. They are the real work: habitat, shade, resilience, memory, beauty and inheritance. They are also cost-saving infrastructure whose benefits grow over time. A community preparing for the future must build it with them, not around what remains after they are gone.

Nathalie Chambers
Saanich Councillor

OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS, LEGAL ANALYSES AND SCIENTIFIC SOURCES

The titles and addresses below are clickable. Hyperlinks in the article lead directly to the corresponding documents.

- **Official Framework of the Universal Declaration of Tree Rights**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/cadre-officiel-de-la-declaration-universelle-des-droits-de-larbre/>
- **Legal Foundations of the Universal Declaration of Tree Rights**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/fondements-juridiques-declaration-universelle-droits-arbre/>
- **Christopher D. Stone and the Universal Declaration of Tree Rights - A Shared Concern, Two Distinct Legal Frameworks**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/christopher-stone-universal-declaration-tree-rights/>
- **The Three Founding Articles of the Universal Declaration of Tree Rights**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/three-founding-articles-universal-declaration-tree-rights.pdf>
- **The Fifteen Commitments of Local and Regional Authorities - official English text**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/fifteen-commitments-local-regional-authorities-udtr.pdf>
- **Local Authorities and the Universal Declaration of Tree Rights: Principles, Procedure and Legal Scope**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/local-authorities-universal-declaration-tree-rights/>
- **British Columbia Municipalities and the Universal Declaration of Tree Rights**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/british-columbia-municipalities-tree-rights/>
- **Terrasse-Vaudreuil Resolution No. 2026-06-111 - unofficial English translation**
<https://www.declarationuniverselledesdroitsdelarbre.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/resolution-2026-06-111-terrasse-vaudreuil-unofficial-english-translation.pdf>
- **District of Saanich - Urban Forest Strategy 2024-2034**
https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Community/Documents/Environment/240726_SaanichUFS_8_online.pdf
- **District of Saanich - Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2024**
<https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Community/Documents/Environment/RSTC/240625%20-%20District%20of%20Saanich%20-%20BCS%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

ADDITIONAL MUNICIPAL, MEDIA AND POLICY SOURCES

These references document the Saanich context, municipal procedure, provincial housing reforms and the economic value of urban trees.

- **District of Saanich - State of Biodiversity Report 2023**
<https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Parks~Recreation~and~Community~Services/Documents/State%20of%20Biodiversity%20Report%20-%20FINAL.pdf>
- **District of Saanich - Council Procedure Bylaw, 2021, No. 9660**
<https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Local~Government/Documents/Bylaws~and~Policies/councilprocedurebylaw.pdf>
- **District of Saanich - 2026 Schedule of Council Meetings**
<https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Local~Government/Documents/Mayor~and~Council/0%20-%202026-council-calendar.pdf>
- **District of Saanich - Small-Scale Multi-Unit Housing**
<https://www.saanich.ca/SSMUH>
- **District of Saanich - Tree Bylaw project update Q&A, June 2026**
<https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Community/Documents/Q%26A-Tree-Bylaw-project-update-june-2026.pdf>
- **District of Saanich - Tree Protection Bylaw update**
<https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/community/natural-environment/trees/tree-protection-bylaw.html>
- **Province of British Columbia - Small-Scale Multi-Unit Housing (Bill 44)**
<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/housing-tenancy/local-governments-and-housing/housing-initiatives/smale-scale-multi-unit-housing>
- **Times Colonist - Saanich could lead call for stronger biodiversity safeguards**
<https://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/comment-saanich-could-lead-call-for-stronger-biodiversity-safeguards-12071621>
- **Times Colonist - Garry oak ecosystem is under great threat in Saanich**
<https://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/comment-garry-oak-ecosystem-is-under-great-threat-in-saanich-11824300>
- **Times Colonist - Tree canopy saves Nanaimo \$13.7 million a year, report says**
<https://www.timescolonist.com/local-news/tree-canopy-saves-nanaimo-137-million-a-year-report-says-12581366>
- **Federation of Canadian Municipalities - Investing in Canada's Future: The Cost of Climate Adaptation at the Local Level**
<https://fcm.ca/en/resources/investing-in-canadas-future>

Methodological note: The 742,000-tree figure is a minimum LiDAR estimate. More than 537,000 trees are reported on private property, but neither figure should be interpreted as the number of trees that are unprotected or at immediate risk. The \$13.7 million figure concerns Nanaimo and is used only as a comparative illustration of the economic value of urban-canopy services. The FCM figures concern national municipal climate-adaptation needs and avoided-loss ratios; they are not a direct valuation of Saanich's trees. The description of provincial constraints is deliberately cautious and is supported by Saanich's June 2026 Tree Bylaw project Q&A.;