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OUR VIEWS

City must not ignore its 'urban forest'

Janesville residents are enjoying fall colors hanging on trees these days. Even people who don't relish raking can appreciate nature's kaleidoscope. Each spring, we delight in buds bursting forth and signaling the return of warm weather. But most of the year, we take trees for granted. That's too bad. Trees lining our streets save us \$1.4 million in annual energy costs. How do we know? Credit a fresh report from Janesville Shade Tree Advisory Committee volunteers, who used a DNR grant to survey our "urban forest." This "City of Parks" once was known as "Bower City." In the 1970s, Dutch elm disease ravaged large trees that created beautiful archways along many Janesville streets. Now, emerald ash borers have invaded parts of Wisconsin and threaten the more than 3,100 ash trees lining Janesville streets. Replacing them would cost \$2.2 million, the report estimates. And terrace trees make up just 10 percent of our city's trees.

"It is irresponsible not to plan for what impact this insect might have on our city," JSTAC's Mary Ann Buenzow told the city council.

While we're basking in autumn's yellow glow of our many maples, those trees also put us at risk. Fifty-two percent of terrace trees are maples, and many of those are Norway maples. Experts suggest that a community have no more than 20 percent of a genus, such as maples, and no more than 10 percent of a species, such as Norway maples.

Don't think insects can't attack maples. Buenzow, a DNR forester, says Asian longhorn beetles killed maples in New York City and Chicago in recent years but fortunately didn't move long distances and were eradicated.

Next time, we might not be so lucky, she warned.

Insects aren't the only threats.

Many of us recall the windstorm in August 2000. It destroyed hundreds of trees and damaged hundreds more.

Most of us recall how last year's flood killed many trees, particularly in our parks.

The report wisely recommends a temporary moratorium on planting maples to add diversity. It says residents could save nearly \$1 million more in fuel costs annually if trees filled terrace spots to the study's recommended levels.

Buenzow told the council that JSTAC wants to work with local nurseries to provide options to maples and to educate the public about best tree choices and pruning.

"I cringe when I drive around Janesville and see the look of the trees on the terraces that were never ever pruned," she said. "There are branches going all directions in quite unhealthy states. A lot of these big, looming silver maples are just one storm away from blocking a street..."

We were heartened by positive responses from council members, particularly George Brunner, and City Manager Eric Levitt's pledge of staff time to work with JSTAC to foster public education, improve our urban forest and develop a response plan should the ash borer hit here.

Threats from Mother Nature have shown time and again that this report is one the city must not file away.