

9. Green Space Master Plan

Parks are essential to making Winnipeg an attractive place to live, work, and visit. Green space and natural areas near where we live contribute to our wellbeing. With good planning and investment they will be there for generations to come. The economic benefits of green space are multifaceted and complicated to measure but we know they are significant. For example, our urban forest alone has been valued at \$1 billion, an amount equal to the total amount of Winnipeg's operating budget (Trees Action Group). A desirable image for our city leads to improved tourism, incentives to locate here, increased real estate values, clean air, health and recreation opportunities and overall quality of life.

Land development and urban sprawl are rapidly consuming urban wilderness, connecting corridors and putting pressure on existing green space. According to the *Our Winnipeg* development plan, Winnipeg's population is nearing 700,000 and is growing by more than 10,000 per year (*Our Winnipeg*, 7). With the last parcels of land to be developed there must be careful planning and respect for these resources.

The City of Winnipeg needs an overarching infrastructure plan to preserve, protect and enhance its forest, green space, urban wilderness and connecting corridors. In 2011, the *Our Winnipeg* plan took effect as the City's official municipal development plan, guiding growth and change for the City. "A Sustainable Winnipeg", an accompanying document to the *Our Winnipeg* plan calls for a City of Winnipeg Parks, Places and Open Spaces Sustainable Management Plan to "Recognize and preserve Winnipeg's parks, green spaces and riverbanks as green oasis in our urban setting (37)". With the current pace of development it is disappointing and unacceptable that there is still no plan. Especially so, when Winnipeggers spoke so passionately about their natural environment at the Speak Up Winnipeg consultations (*Our Winnipeg*, A Sustainable City, 36).

The lack of a master plan for our urban green space infrastructure is resulting in piece-meal consultation and planning, particularly with the current developer lead process for project based land development. Continuous green space corridors are particularly threatened as the emphasis for development is on one neighbourhood or another. Too often, urban spaces in new communities are designed at the expense of natural ecosystems and landscapes. This need not be so.

The old idea that cities are only for people and that nature opportunities are maintained by someone else outside the city is no longer pertinent. Like rivers and streams, hydro corridors and unused rail lines, nature corridors do not stop or start at the city limits. Continuous green space and corridors are highly desirable for passive recreation and active transportation, and Winnipeggers are keen to see their city embrace a holistic strategy to ensure preservation of green spaces. These green corridors have potential to provide recreation and nature opportunities. This potential is being squandered by the lack of a plan.

There is widespread enthusiasm among citizens to enhance Winnipeg's natural assets. The City's own Ecologically Significant Natural Lands (ESNL) Strategy states that "Since 1992 over 80 community partners have invested thousands of volunteer hours. The value of grants has an estimated value of about three quarters of a million dollars annually" (Ecologically Significant Natural Lands, 20). The City's Public Works webpage lists stewardship groups and other organizations involved with naturalization in the City of Winnipeg. In addition to these groups there are countless other citizen groups advocating for green space such as OURS-Winnipeg's successful petition in 2012 to protect green-space, Charleswood Habitat Protection, Parker Wetlands Conservation, residents' associations, naturalist groups, elm tree groups such as TAG, Nature Summit Manitoba, and student groups putting native plants in their school grounds. A

master plan for parks, forests, green space, urban wilderness and connecting corridors could further support the work these citizen groups engage in to protect green spaces.

Toronto, Edmonton and Halifax provide current examples of cities that have adopted multi-year urban parks and forest management plans. In May 2013, Toronto's City Council approved a Parks Plan 2013 to 2017, with a vision of "a city within a park". It states "Parks are essential to making Toronto an attractive place to live, work, and visit" Parks Plan, 5). Toronto residents value parks and natural spaces. For example, in their Parks Plan survey, 93 per cent (Parks Plan, 5) of respondents said that parks are an indispensable part of the city.

In 2012, the City of Edmonton adopted an Urban Forest Management Plan for sustainably managing and enhancing its urban forest. The urban forest includes all trees from city owned to those on private property to roof top gardens. The report recognized that collectively, Edmonton's trees represent an irreplaceable asset. Its 2010 Corporate Tree Policy tree assessment guidelines estimated the value of the publicly owned portion of the urban forest at more than \$1.2 billion (Edmonton's Urban Forest Management Plan, 7). Unlike other municipal infrastructure, trees increase in value over time. The urban forest also makes a quantifiable contribution to the long-term livability of the city. Using modeling programs developed by the United States Department of Agriculture and Forest Service, City staff measured the urban forest's ability to clean the air, reduce storm water runoff and sequester carbon. Edmonton's forest removed an estimated 531 tonnes of pollutants in 2009 alone, a feat worth more than \$3 million (Edmonton's Urban Forest Management Plan, 7).

In 2012, Halifax Regional Council approved the Halifax Regional Municipality Forest Master Plan. A guiding principle of the plan states the HRM urban forest is a complex natural resource system, and managing a public resource in the

face of great future uncertainty requires a management system that fosters continual learning and refinement. The report goes on to say that public involvement is fundamental to the long-term success and, public participation encourages a sense of ownership among the citizens (Halifax Regional Municipality, 8).

Conclusion

Planning must be done by the City of Winnipeg to prepare a multiyear master infrastructure plan to manage Winnipeg's green space, forest, urban wilderness and connecting corridors. Also required is a commitment to a transparent urban planning process. This need not be a costly endeavour. The city has many tools at its disposal and with smart planning can reconfigure resources. The least challenging and most unimaginative "solution" would be for policy makers, planners and developers to parcel out the natural areas and green space as real estate, dismantle the connecting corridors, and relegate the memory to a few street names.

New Expenditure:

- Green space Master Plan Committee: \$300,000

Golf Courses

The City of Winnipeg created 12 golf courses for use by Winnipeg residents and visitors between 1921 and 1982. These courses represent a total land mass of over 1,000 acres, much of it in prime locations along rivers and creeks. For years the City operated three of these city owned courses, two were managed jointly with a private operator, and seven were leased to private operators. There are 50 golf courses within 70 km of Winnipeg.

The golf courses were made part of a Special Operating Agency, Winnipeg Golf Services, in 2001. A shift occurred from viewing the City owned courses as recreation facilities operated

for the public good, to a “strategic operational focus to maximize profitability”. By 2006 the golf courses were running a \$265,000.00 deficit. The golf courses were set up for this shortfall with \$2.1 million funds taken from golf courses revenues for general revenue over a seven year period.

In 2007 Mayor’s Economic Opportunities Commission recommended selling the golf courses. An operational review of City of Winnipeg Golf Services submitted to Council in 2010 recommended the city divest itself of seven of the golf courses. In 2011, an Expression of Interest was put forward to accept proposals for commercial or residential development. Community groups and residents responded with a demonstration of opposition to the idea of selling such a large amount of prime public green space. There was concern that condos and other development would be built on the golf course land zoned as parkland.

In 2013 the City again attempted to divest itself of four of the golf courses by offering long term leases to an Ontario golf management business for three and declaring Blumberg surplus, paving the way for its sale. Council again backed away from leasing the golf courses following public outcry. The file for Blumberg currently rests with the City’s real estate department. It is unclear if funds arising from a sale will pay down the golf deficit, contribute to parkland or be used for general revenue. As for the time being there is no official plan to sell the remaining golf courses.

Golf courses are not just for golfing; many are used for hiking and in winter, cross country skiing. The Nordic Centre in the Windsor Park Golf Course is a good example of collaboration to maximize these community assets. The Nordic Centre in the Windsor Park Course further builds on the investment by the City to offer an important amenity to our winter city. The budget for 2014 includes \$3.115 million for golf course maintenance and operation, this is \$235,000.00 less than what was spent last year. The golf budget increased greens fees for an adult game by \$2.00. This is significant since 69 per cent of the total revenue for operating golf courses comes from greens fees. Budget 2014 also moved to increase the Winnipeg Golf Services (WGS) line of credit from \$6.5 million to \$7.5 million, signaling there would be more borrowing to cover shortfalls. Finally, this year the WGS Advisory Committee was disbanded; throughout all of this activity related to our golf courses the committee did not meet.

What is needed is a clear vision and plan that is included in a broader Greenspace Master Plan. A working group comprised of partners and stakeholders needs to explore how to ensure the public golf courses of Winnipeg remain public and operate responsibly. Other partnerships like the Nordic Centre and new spa at the Crescent Drive Course should be strengthened. The proceeds from the sale of the Blumberg Golf Course should be used for golf course debt and planning not for general revenue.