

Water

When sewage flows from Winnipeg homes, schools, and businesses into Winnipeg rivers, Lake Winnipeg experiences the consequences in the form of toxic algae blooms that endanger the health of the lake and lake-dependent communities. Ten of those communities, all First Nations, have taken legal action against the municipal, provincial, and federal governments. While the First Nations seek financial compensation for losses due to pollution, they are primarily engaging the legal system in an attempt to protect Lake Winnipeg, or Weenipagamiksaguygun in Anishinaabemowin. Understanding Weenipagamiksaguygun as a living being with a spirit, and water as sacred, the First Nations consider it their duty to speak for the lake, and are undertaking their action on behalf of the lake as well as of themselves.¹

For far too long, municipal budgets have failed to account for the true cost of water and waste services, ignoring the high price paid by Indigenous communities forced to deal with the environmental consequences of the City's decisions. In the water chapter of the AMB, we focus on the need for Winnipeg to heed the call of First Nations to make clean water for all a top priority. We argue that this can and must be done in ways that ensure that the costs of clean water are borne by those who can best afford to do so.



The Red River from Taché Ave. / Alanna Yuen

Historical context

Since the completion of the Winnipeg Aqueduct in 1919, water has travelled 150km west from Shoal Lake, at the Manitoba-Ontario border, to the City of Winnipeg, supplying Winnipeg homes and businesses with a steady source of soft, clean water. Prior to accessing water from Shoal Lake, people living in Winnipeg procured water from private and public wells, from the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and by collecting rainwater.² Building the aqueduct cost the city an enormous amount: skeptics called the plan “implausibly expensive,” yet taxpayers repeatedly voted overwhelmingly in favour of the project, agreeing for the city to take on a debt of \$13.5 million to get the work done.³

But as costly as it was for Winnipeg to build the aqueduct, the benefits for city dwellers have been enormous and ongoing. Access to Shoal Lake water meant an end to worries about how a growing city would meet demands for domestic and industrial water use, as well as the decline of typhoid, an infectious bacterial fever often spread when feces from people carrying the disease enter the water supply.⁴ While Winnipeg did not begin to treat sewage until the 1937 opening of the North End Sewage

Treatment Plant, and sewage flowed into the city's rivers, disease levels went down as the use of river water declined.⁵

Building the aqueduct for the benefit of Winnipeg came at the direct expense of Anishinaabe whose territory included Shoal Lake. Various levels of settler government agreed to the appropriation of almost 4000 acres of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation's reserve without permission from the First Nation.⁶ Winnipeg's mayor Thomas Deacon described the Shoal Lake 40 reserve as "a remote place," but Shoal Lake 40 First Nation Chief Pete Redsky understood the seized area as "the best part of our Reserve," and "very good farming, good timber, good hay land."⁷ The construction of the aqueduct resulted not only in loss of land for the Shoal Lake 40 community, but also in the First Nation being cut off from the mainland and forced to live on an artificial island.⁸ Clearly, the benefits of the aqueduct did not extend to those living at Winnipeg's water source. The activism of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation successfully forced municipal, provincial, and federal governments to end the community's forced isolation and chronic water crisis in 2019 with the construction of the Freedom Road.

Present-day conditions

In cities, tap water and wastewater, including sewage, are closely connected. In Winnipeg, tap water continues to flow from Shoal Lake, where city dwellers use it for numerous purposes, including the essentials of drinking, cooking, and cleaning. Most of the water that enters Winnipeg homes and businesses from Shoal Lake leaves again through the sewer system, where, after treatment, it winds up in the Assiniboine and Red Rivers before flowing into Lake Winnipeg, some 55km north of the city.

In spite of the fact that most wastewater is treated before exiting the city by way of the Red River, Winnipeg's sewage treatment system leaves much to be desired. The North End Wastewater Treatment Plant has not met the provincial government's 2005 requirement that total phosphorus concentration not exceed 1 milligram per liter, or the two additional deadlines to meet these goals.⁹ Capacity for biosolids is projected to run out in four to six years.¹⁰ Billions of litres of untreated sewage enter the rivers each year and the current treatment process is not doing enough to remove harmful bacteria and chemicals that damage ecosystems and threaten human health.¹¹ The 10 First Nations suing the City and other levels of government find it unacceptable for Winnipeg's waste to be harming Lake Winnipeg and the people who depend on it. The City has

been able to drag its heels on major investments in water conservation and wastewater treatment only because tap water comes all the way from Shoal Lake. Unlike Indigenous communities north of the city, Winnipeg doesn't depend for survival on waters fed by the Red River. At both water source and waste outlet, Winnipeg has solved its own problems by creating problems for others. This must stop.

A meaningful commitment to advancing government-to-government relationships between Indigenous and municipal governments means respecting the Indigenous laws that have been in place much longer than Winnipeg has existed. In Treaty #3 territory, where Shoal Lake is located, First Nations have articulated Anishinaabe Nibi Inaakonigewin, or water law principles, in the form of the Nibi (Water) Declaration. These principles include the recognition that nibi is alive, has a spirit and connects everything, and that Anishinaabe have been responsible for the care of nibi and aki (land) since time immemorial. The duty to respect and care for nibi extends to the protection of nibi for future generations.¹²

The Nibi Declaration expresses similar ideas to the First Nations of Lake Winnipeg in their recognition of the lake as a living being with a spirit. Protecting nibi is a moral obligation to future generations, and it is also necessary for maintaining the health of people and the ecosystems upon which we all depend for survival. We call on the City of Winnipeg to recognize Indigenous laws as fundamental to municipal decisions about water.

Actions

- **The AMB** recognizes that Winnipeg's treatment of water affects communities beyond the city limits and prioritizes investment in the city's wastewater treatment and infrastructure.
- **The AMB** calls on the City of Winnipeg to expedite planned changes to the North End Wastewater Treatment Plant. A 2024 report commissioned by the City of Winnipeg identified a three-phase project — power supply and headworks facilities, biosolids facilities, and nutrient removal — and estimated the cost at approximately \$2.38 billion, reflecting 2018 estimates that will likely be higher once adjusted to current rates.¹³

As the Lake Winnipeg Foundation has noted, the estimated costs for biological nutrient removal costs are up a remarkable 80 per

cent from the 2017 estimate of \$795 million.¹⁴ They are not likely to get cheaper. The time for major investment in the city's wastewater treatment facilities is past due. Continuing to pollute the waters of our Indigenous neighbours violates the principles of the City of Winnipeg's Indigenous Accord, first adopted in 2017. The Accord committed to "creating and maintaining relationships and partnerships that recognize and respect the rights of Indigenous peoples," based on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and reiterating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action (2015) and the Final Report of the National Inquiry on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls Calls to Justice (2019).¹⁵

Creating a wastewater system that reflects these commitments and works to undo decades of environmental racism will require greater public understanding, political will, and significant investment of public dollars. We have witnessed cities elsewhere, both in Canada and internationally, undertake the work necessary to remake their relationship to the waters they live with. This includes Paris, which undertook a \$1.5 billion USD strategy that made the previously unswimmable Rivier Seine swimmable in 2024. Closer to home, Ottawa undertook a \$232 million dollar sewage overflow reduction strategy,¹⁶ and Victoria built a \$775 million sewage treatment plant in 2020, ending a more than a century of dumping raw sewage into the Pacific Ocean.¹⁷

Change will require support from both provincial and federal governments. In April of 2026, Manitoba's provincial government announced \$500 million for the final phase of the North End Wastewater Treatment Plant and supported the City's request for similar support from the federal government.¹⁸ The issue of Winnipeg's wastewater is not simply a municipal problem, and we encourage the City to continue to seek meaningful commitments from other levels of government.

- **The AMB calls** on Winnipeg to expedite its Combined Sewer Overflow Master Plan (CSO), which works to reduce the amount of raw sewage dumped into rivers during rain and melt events. The City has promised to add an additional \$60 million between 2024 and 2027 to the annual budget of \$30 million per year.¹⁹ The CSO Master Plan is still projected to take to 2045 to complete, and that is simply too long. The AMB will increase annual investment in the CSO Master plan by 50 per cent with an eye to expediting timelines, and providing additional support

for green infrastructure such as rain gardens, permeable pavements, and retention ponds (Cost: \$15 million).²⁰

- **The AMB calls** on Winnipeg to expand equitable and conservation-oriented water pricing and expand options for those who cannot pay water and wastewater bills.

We can and must find ways to support necessary infrastructure projects without adding to the burden currently borne by the poor and lower income households in Winnipeg. Most importantly, we urge the City to undertake rate design that integrates a greater degree of conservation-oriented water pricing and more equitable rate design. This should be an inclining block system with three tiers, the lowest one a “lifeline block” designed to meet a household’s basic needs.²¹

In the short term, there must be more meaningful options for those unable to pay water and wastewater bills. When people cannot pay water and wastewater bills, they can face debt, possible loss of housing, destabilized and separated families, and risks to health. We urge the City to double emergency relief available through the H2O Help to Others program currently jointly run by the City of Winnipeg and the faith-based Salvation Army. We suggest that this program be put under City of Winnipeg control, that the limits for total household incomes be raised, the one-time forgiveness offered to water customers unable to pay their bills until 2017 be reinstated, and that information about the program be better promoted, including among front-line service organizations (Cost: \$52,000).²²

Winnipeg’s water and wastewater system is a product of a century and a half of colonialism and environmental racism. It is past time for Winnipeg to manage its own waste without damaging First Nations and Metis communities downstream. We join a long line of reports calling on the City of Winnipeg to take action, and to do so in ways that distribute the costs among those who can bear them, and provide resources for those who cannot.

Notes

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