



Making Room for Nature

I have a couple of stories to tell about our city which may seem unrelated but are actually intimately connected. The first pertains to my own neighbourhood and some traffic calming devices designed to get people to slow down to 30K on Wolseley Avenue, one of the area's residential through streets.

It's a great idea, because in addition to speed bumps, the city also installed bump out curbs - a semi-circular curb that extends the boulevard into the road and acts as a deterrent to speeders.

When I first saw them, I was pretty excited, because I'd just come back from visiting my old stomping grounds in Montreal, where I'd seen the same bump outs in my friend's Notre-Dame-de-Grace neighbourhood. There, the city had filled them with native grasses and flowering plants, the kind that native bees have co-evolved with and love.

It was not only beautiful but environmentally smart as well as low maintenance and economical. So I had high hopes that our city was about to follow Montreal's example.



A bump-out curb planting in NDG, Montreal

How deluded was I, because a few days later what did I find planted in our bump out soil? You guessed it - nothing but grass sod, that sad and sorry emblem of the green desert approach to city planning.

Although, in the current context of rapid biodiversity loss and climate change, calling it “planning” might be a stretch.

A few days later, I was chatting with a friend and got yet another glimpse into Winnipeg’s outmoded approach to creating a “climate proof” city.

Turns out a friend of hers lives in Charleswood on a street of river lot houses, and when a neighbour’s home sold, it was purchased by an infill developer. The lots on that street are pretty big and most are heavily treed so you can see why they might be attractive for infill.

So, what did this particular developer do? Well, instead of building, say, an affordable condo-duplex, he subdivided the land into 4 lots for 4 – get this – “detached condos.” In other words, 4 separate single family dwellings.

And rather than retaining a healthy portion of the trees, his workers revved up their machinery and felled every tree on the property.

The tree cutting frenzy was so bad, that the neighbours wound up frantically searching for their land title surveys to stop the workers from cutting down the trees that edged *their* properties.

Three years on, and not one new home has been built on that property.

See where I'm going with this?

This is what happens in a city that thinks any development is good development. A city with no coherent, overall vision of the future, backed up by an action plan aimed at enhancing the natural environment and protecting and expanding the greenspaces, trees, intact forests and wildlife corridors that offset biodiversity loss and climate change impacts.



Contractors who remove trees to build infill should be required to replace them at a 2 to 1 ratio.

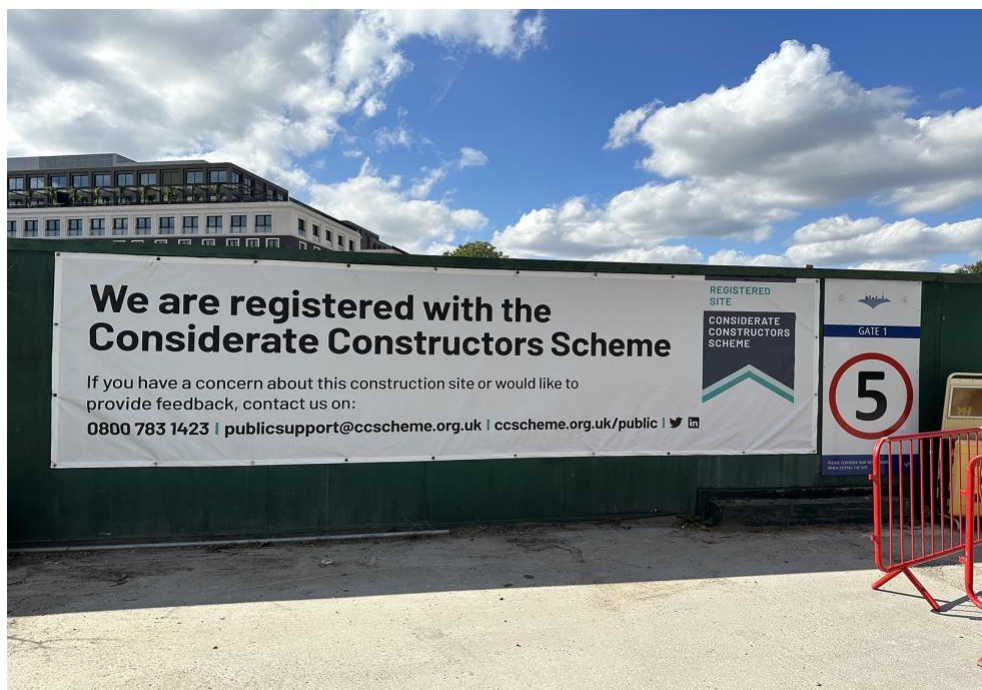
And in the midst of an infill development bonanza, prompted by Winnipeg's participation in the Federal housing accelerator program, the absence of a plan to protect natural infrastructure, like trees, means that they'll likely be deemed expendable, mere obstacles to be removed to facilitate construction.

Now, don't get me wrong – we can't save every tree and infill is, without a doubt, climate smart and absolutely essential. Any effort to create denser neighbourhoods that promote walking and biking over cars and carbon is a good thing.

But if in the process of creating that density we lose 1000s of heat mitigating mature trees to development, never mind the thousands being lost to disease, what then? When the summer heat dome hits will people walk and bike or turn to their air conditioned cars?

What will it take to get developers to preserve as many mature trees as possible on larger infill lots? And on smaller lots, what are the barriers to tree friendly construction? How can the city make protecting and retaining trees a bonus for developers – by requiring, say, fewer costly variances or accepting fewer parking spots?

Turns out there are any number ways to incentivize greener development. In the UK, the development industry had such a bad reputation that the city of London started a list of “considerate constructors.” Those that met higher sustainable standards, respected the community and did their best to protect the natural environment, were given preference on city contracts. And those contractors are now spot checked by the industry itself to ensure standards don’t slip.



Another great idea? Ensure key city departments continue to work together to quickly establish enforceable tree protection bylaws, zoning regulations, as well as a greenspace masterplan and biodiversity policy that will help to create truly liveable, denser communities.

Climate resilient communities that make room for nature.

To learn more about Montreal's bump out curbs go to:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp15OcuiBX8>