

Province must pony-up to protect urban forests



Well, here we are again folks, another intact forest in Winnipeg sits on the development chopping block, and all three levels of government are still dithering about buying it.

This, despite the fact that the developer who owns the Lemay forest can do exactly what was done on the Parker lands and other forested areas citywide - roll in the bulldozers and chippers tomorrow, clear cut the trees and not pay a single dollar in penalty for having done so.

Meanwhile media interviewers ask residents who are trying to save the forest and convince our politicians to buy it, why other people's tax money – that is, people outside of St Norbert – should be used to purchase private land to protect between 9000 and 14,000 mature trees.

Major head slap here, because truth be told I'm starting to bore myself with the number of times I've said this - those trees benefit *all of us* not just the residents of St Norbert. Not to mention the other animal plant and insect species that depend on that forest for survival. So, just in case you don't remember:

Woodlands, whether within or on the outer edges of a city, help to reduce pollution, mitigate flooding and provide a safe havens for birds, animals and endangered native bees and butterflies.

Green spaces like the Lemay are also key indicators of a healthy environment - if wildlife is attracted to the area, chances are it's free of chemical, air, and noise pollution and a great place for people to de-stress in.

Plus every hectare of protected forest and green space generates between \$4000 and almost \$30,000 in benefits yearly, in carbon storage, stormwater reduction and pollution removal.

That's because, contrary to what some people may think, the CO2 and other pollutants we spew into the atmosphere don't hang out over the center of the city. Trees on the outskirts play a significant role in scrubbing the air and absorbing the carbon we release.

In fact, intact urban forests are among the most effective urban ecosystems for delivering those services.

Sadly, Winnipeg has a lamentable history of allowing its forests to be mowed down to make way for roads and development. Just four years ago the Parker Lands development destroyed grasslands, wetlands and levelled an aspen forest generally recognized as the "largest and best remaining forest of its type near the downtown."

Just last year the province's construction of the new St Mary's interchange resulted in the clearcutting of some 4000 trees.

So why do we continue to allow this, when we now *know* the benefits of intact urban forests? Benefits so profound that municipalities around the world are busy planting mini-forests across their cities to offset the impact of climate change.

Given that why aren't our politicians falling all over themselves to purchase and protect a valuable urban woodland in Winnipeg?

Beats me. Especially given that \$1.5 million currently sits in the province's Manitoba Habitat and Heritage Corp. set aside to specifically, and I quote "help preserve natural infrastructure in the Winnipeg area."

Seems like the Lemay would qualify for that, right?

Then there's the national Natural Infrastructure Fund aimed at helping municipalities "use their ecosystems to improve quality of life, reduce pollution, enhance biodiversity and habitats, and build resilience to climate change."

Looks like a good funding bet as well.

Also a funding no brainer is the city's own Land Reserve Dedication Fund which is specifically mandated to be used for the development of parks.

So, if money is available, why aren't our governments taking swift and decisive action to buy a 22.4 acre forest? More to the point, why aren't they aiming to preserve every remaining intact woodland we have?

During the election our new provincial government promised to protect 30% of Manitoba lands and waters by 2030, and yet Tracy Schmidt, the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, recently announced that the province has no plans to help purchase the Lemay.

Really? Does the province not care about ecologically sensitive lands in urban centers? Do MLAs think that protecting smaller parcels of wilderness that help climate proof our cities and towns isn't an important part of 30 by 30?

If that's the case, it's a huge mistake.

Why? Because some 74% of Manitobans live in cities and towns where the impacts of climate change - from super storms to heat island effect - will have the direst consequences, not only on human health and wellbeing but on urban biodiversity as well.

So please, tell your representatives to get with the program. Because the benefits of protecting intact urban woodlands for the future, will far outweigh the upfront costs now.

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