

*Core area of the park at the tip of Point Douglas, with the interpretive centre in the foreground.*

## Little Forks, Big Ambition

Last week, I was delighted to read that celebrated inner city advocate, Sel Burrows, has joined hands with former Manitoba premier, Gary Doer, landscape architect, Jean Trottier, Anishinaabe communications specialist, Dene Sinclair, and others, to announce Little Forks, a plan for a new national urban park in Winnipeg.

It's an exciting proposal that would include the reclamation and remediation of a 40 acre industrial site, the planting of some 85,000 trees and the protection of a significant portion of the riparian forests that grace our rivers.

Should it gain approval, Little Forks will stretch downriver from St John's Park to the Norwood Bridge on the Red; from the mouth of the Seine south to the Niakwa golf course and west on the Assiniboine from the forks to Osborne Bridge.

Those 10 kms of river water will also be conserved and protected as part of the plan, which just might be the wedge Councillor Brian Mayes needs to push the federal and provincial governments into sharing the cost of upgrading our combined sewer system. Especially given that there are more than two dozen sewer overflow sites on the river portions included in the Little Forks plan.

Needless to say, a national park with waterways that experience frequent surges of human and other toxic waste would be a bit of an embarrassment.

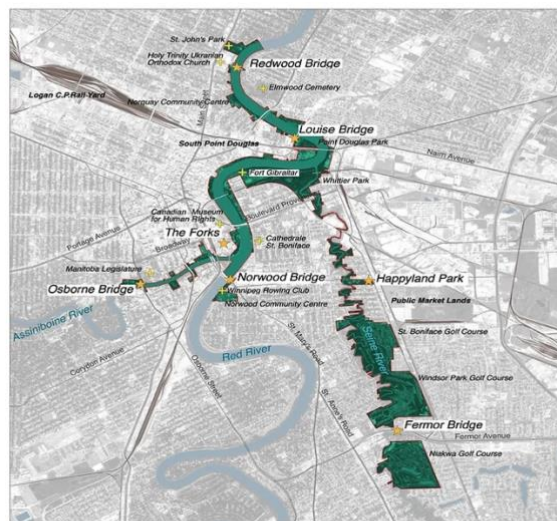
But beyond the potential spin off benefits associated with pollution control on the Seine and portions of the Red and Assiniboine, the team pitching Little Forks has even bigger ambitions.

In fact I almost dropped my coffee cup when I read their waterways conservation framework which suggests that “the creation of a national urban park could provide the impetus for implementing a Greater Winnipeg Waterways Conservation Framework.”

Equally exciting, the park would also include a 105 meter conservation buffer zone, designed to protect the riparian ecosystems that embrace those waterways, while allowing for public access via a network of connecting trails.

Now, just stop for a minute and think about that. Imagine what a concerted effort to clean up and protect even a portion, never mind the full length, of the city’s Red, Assiniboine and Seine Rivers would mean, not only for the human population but also for wildlife in the city and downriver? Imagine a place where recreational trails wind their way through the heart of the city center along our rivers, allowing all of us access to the natural beauty and bounty of those waterways and their forests?

Sounds like a city I want to live in.



Indeed, if the Little Forks parks and trails are developed some 90,000 people currently living in neighbourhoods with limited access to greenspace, will be no more than a 10 minute walk from Nature.

Even more important, as the website notes, 18,000 of those residents are indigenous – a people with a long and storied history associated with these Treaty One waterways. And indigenous knowledge - their history, traditional land and water protection practices – will play a leading role in the park’s development, interpretation and ongoing maintenance. One can only hope that an archeological survey, supervised by elders and other indigenous experts, will also be included in the park’s development plans.

But there are other reasons to get behind this national park proposal. For thousands of years human life was centered on these waterways, not only as a site for seasonal gatherings, hunting and fishing but also water based trade and river lot harvests. They were the life blood of their surrounding communities – Indigenous, Metis and settler - and in many ways gave rise the emergence of the city itself.

They were also areas rich in biodiversity – their forests home to thousands of migrating and resident birds, their waters once teeming with spawning fish and their trees and grasslands a refuge for a host of animals from fox and deer to beaver and coyotes.

If done right, the establishment of Little Forks Park - the planting of trees, remediation of land and the clean-up of our rivers - would go a long way to restoring that extraordinary habitat for future generations, while setting our city on a path to greater resilience in the face of a changing climate.

But beyond the compelling environmental benefits and improvement in quality of life there are also substantial economic benefits associated with protected lands. Recent studies suggest that protected parkland can have a positive impact on a city’s economy that goes far beyond an ability to attract tourists. One study demonstrated that access to nature in metropolitan areas can attract both people and businesses to move in and stay and even increase per capita income.

So I ask you - who could ask for more from a national urban park?

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