



Omand's Park, Wolseley

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Winnipeg Needs To Get Behind Nature Smart Climate Solutions

Some of you may recall that on June 20, 2021, Winnipeg City Council voted to support plans to develop a Greenspace Masterplan and Biodiversity policy aimed at expanding and protecting the city's greenspaces.

It was "a momentous day, a really big day," according to Councillor Sherri Rollins, because in addition to the development of a biodiversity policy and an intent to protect and connect forests, green spaces and riverbank corridors, the plans also included a commitment to acquire an additional 1000 acres of park space.

Sadly, here we are three years later, with little or no action taken to make those aspirations a reality. The promised Greenspace plan and Biodiversity policy appear to languish in committee. And no money has been designated for the acquisition of land for new parks, especially in the downtown core and surrounding neighbourhoods where they're most needed.

In fact, rather than purchasing land for parks, council recently declared four city-owned riverbank properties “surplus.” Which means that a significant portion of the public land those almost five acres represent will be sold off to developers.



A new park in Paris on what was once an industrial site cuts between two neighbourhoods and features 800 trees forming a 5200 acre linear forest. The city now boasts a climate plan aimed at replacing parking with trees.



An abandoned industrial site in Winnipeg's Point St. Charles could be transformed into parkland © The Narwahl

It's not just a sad state of affairs, it's also a monumental financial - not to mention environmental - mistake, given that the federal government is literally throwing money at municipalities to invest in parks and greenspaces via its brand new, \$1.4 billion Nature Smart Climate Solutions Fund.

Its purpose? - to embrace "the power of nature to support healthier families and more resilient communities...by supporting projects that reduce the loss, restore, or improve the management of ecosystems which support biodiversity, such as forests, wetlands, peatlands and grasslands."

Essentially it's saying: "See those parking lots and those few remaining intact forests? Well, let's turn them into parks with trees and native plants and ponds that absorb storm water and air pollution, reduce heat island effect and, yup, even absorb CO₂."

All the city needs are the matched funds to trigger the money.

And it's not just a case of cash in and no cash out. A recent study of a new downtown park in Waterloo observed that while the park cost taxpayers \$6.4 million to build, it will return \$4 million dollars to the city in yearly health benefits from better air quality and heat reduction to reducing mental stress.

And that doesn't even begin to quantify the benefits related to reducing storm sewer loads and carbon sequestration.

So why isn't Winnipeg hopping on the smart solutions bandwagon with the same gusto it embraced the Housing Accelerator Program? It's a good question, especially given that Winnipeg has one of the lowest greenness scores in the country.

And the strange thing is we've been here before. In fact, in the 1960s council decided to add 1000 acres to our park inventory and by the end of the decade had pretty much reached that goal, adding greenspaces like La Barriere and Little Mountain Parks and John Blumberg park and golf course, among others.

Now, I'll admit that things today are a little different, given that our city blithely continues to collect infrastructure debt much like Imelda Marcos collected shoes and can't pay it back, because investing in infrastructure like new or wider roads only yields 1.4% in returns.

These days even a high interest savings account nets you more.

So what's the answer? Well, why not invest in parks that almost triple their investment in just 4 years?

And council does have the money to do that. In fact, in 1973 the city created something called the Land Dedication Reserve Fund. Its original intent was to have developers pay the

city to compensate for the privilege of turning greenspaces into, say, suburbs. Money which the city could then use to purchase or develop land for new parks

Sadly that's not how the money is actually being spent. Currently, Parks gets 75% of the money, which is absorbed into its operational budget, and the rest goes to councillors to provide recreational perks to their constituents – a tot lot here, a basketball court there.

So, here's the thing – if council really wants a lasting legacy project they could consider setting aside 100% of the money in the LDR every year, for four years, and use it to lever Nature Smart federal money to buy and develop land for protected greenspaces.



Empty and half empty downtown parking lots that could be purchased by the city and transformed into greenspaces

Of course they'd then have to use taxpayer dollars to top up the Parks Budget but hey, I think most of us would go for that. Especially those us who live in city centre and pay the lion's share of the city's property taxes.

By doing that council would honour the promises it made as a signatory of Montreal Biodiversity Pledge to create a healthier greener city.

Something I would whole-heartedly support.