



Who Calls The Shots On City Land Use

Everybody thinks it, but no one wants to say it out loud – the fact that for decades, our city council and its administration have, to a large degree, been in thrall to the construction and development industries.

And on one level, you can understand why. After all, these are the folks who build things – everything from high rises, homes and sewer plants to the endless kilometers of roads that service our over-expanded city.

But while the construction and development sectors do, indeed, build our city, they frequently destroy natural lands and intact forests to do it, often with impunity. Winnipeg does little to limit their activities or penalize them for the ecologically sensitive land they destroy.

Nor are they compelled - beyond a 10% land dedication - to fully compensate taxpayers for the mature trees they destroy, the wetlands they pave over or the entire forests they mow down, often for no better reason than that it's expedient and keeps profit margins high.

Indeed, our city representatives seem so concerned about the needs of builders and developers that they're poised to delete an amendment requiring bird friendly windows on new builds because developers opposed it.

Worse still, council is stalling on the development of a private tree bylaw that would protect as many mature trees as possible on private land.

Instead, the city makes it easier for developers to clear cut their forests by issuing tree cutting permits. That's what happened in the case of the Lemay Forest. Tree removal by the developer there was only halted by the efforts of protestors and the province's decision to expropriate the land.



The City of Winnipeg did nothing to stop the destruction of dozens of trees in the Lemay Forest on land owned by Tochal developments

In fact, while the city counts the number of trees lost to disease and attrition it *doesn't* count the ones destroyed to make way for construction. So we don't even *know* how many trees we're losing or how those losses jeopardize the goal to expand our protective tree canopy cover from 17% to 24%.

Ditto for the 100s of hectares of heat-busting, water-guzzling natural lands that have been paved over in recent decades. No-one's keeping track of those losses either.

Even more telling, while the city's property and development dept. is responsible for establishing the city's land use plans, developers can pay a fee to submit their own plans or amendments for areas where they own land, which can then be approved by council.

And if that doesn't sound like a conflict of interest to you, it certainly does to me.

So why are developers given that much power and influence, when the people affected by their actions can only voice their concerns during “public engagements” or at committee meetings, where they’re often ignored.



The site of the old Shriner’s hospital is clear cut to make way for a single housing development on Wellington Crescent

Take the changes made to the St Vital Perimeter South land use plan to accommodate a subdivision on a floodplain property owned by A&S Homes.

After the developer requested changes, councillors agreed to their amendment, and a subdivision of 23, 2 to 3 acre housing lots was approved. This, rather than upholding the city’s original land use plan, which specified that lots should be a minimum of 5 acres, in order to protect the aquifer that provides water to 1800 Winnipeg residents.

To make matters worse, councillors then waived a land dedication to protect a five acre oak forest, in favour of cash.

An appeal of those decisions, to which some 120 residents spoke or wrote in opposition, was subsequently rejected.

And even when the city *does* have policies to protect natural land of ecological and heritage value, like its Environmentally Sensitive Lands Policy, it has no regulatory teeth. So it isn't worth the paper it's written on, unless the mayor, council and developers choose to honour it.

Which sometimes happens but often doesn't. Witness the destruction of the 24 acre Parker Lands forest and wetland. When the city traded that land to a developer in exchange for a mere 2.4 acres of serviced land, the forest subsequently destroyed had already been rated as a Grade A heritage ecosystem.



A heritage forest on the Parker Lands disappears after being clear cut by developer Andrew Marquess.

Now, it's not my intention to characterize the development and construction sectors as the big bad wolf here. They just have well-paid lobbyists and do what they're *allowed* to do by city hall. And while some act in good faith, others don't.

So, here's the thing - is it sufficient to rely on the goodwill of developers to protect natural lands, when their primary goal is maximizing profit? Shouldn't we have bylaws and incentives in place to ensure they *all* do their best to protect as many of our trees and natural assets as possible, or more fully compensate taxpayers for the trees and greenery they destroy?

They're important questions, and the answers impact us all.

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