

Winnipeg Fails The “Greenness” Test (793 words)

Well, I knew it was bad, folks, but I didn’t realize it was quite this bad. According to Statistics Canada, Winnipeg leads the pack of large Canadian cities in terms of “greenness” loss - greenness being defined as “the presence and health of vegetation in urban areas” as a measure of urban ecosystem health

The Stats Canada Urban Greenness Study, conducted over 18 years, targeted 2001, 2011 and 2019 as their key survey years. Over that time, Winnipeg’s ratio of green areas relative to population size dropped to 38%, while cities like Toronto and Edmonton stood at 70% and 60% respectively as of 2019.

In other words, Winnipeg is a lot greyer and browner than most other major Canadian cities, now, than it was in 2001.

So what, exactly, is behind the loss? Well, the fact that we’re losing an average of 5500 public trees every year, in part due to pests and diseases, may have something to do with our diminishing “greenness.” Not to mention the fact that in 2021 only 19% of those trees were replaced. But the bigger issues related to greenness loss in Winnipeg, according to Stats Canada, are the combined impacts of urbanization and prolonged drought.

And that’s where a vicious cycle begins. If a city like Winnipeg sacrifices too many mature trees, intact forests and green spaces to development, especially during a period of prolonged drought, the impacts are multiplied. Because the city doesn’t just lose the cooling effect of the trees and green spaces that are destroyed to make way for roads and development. Their loss accelerates the damage caused by drought on other green areas across the city, by exacerbating what scientists call “the heat island” effect. A bubble of heat that forms over cities as a result of too little heat mitigating green and too much heat absorbing asphalt, concrete and buildings.

In other words, the fewer the trees and green areas, the higher temperatures, the more severe the heat island effect becomes. And it’s not just humans that suffer - trees, greenspaces and wildlife across the city become stressed and are placed at risk.

But wait a minute you say – you can’t stop progress and growth. Winnipeg’s population is predicted to keep expanding. People need housing, we need more roads and shopping malls and parking lots. Life can’t stop, right?

Well, here’s the thing – is that really the life we want? Do we really need more malls and parking lots, or do we need more trees and greenspaces where we and our kids can play and enjoy the shade and wildlife, on a hot summer day. Should we be sacrificing valuable intact forests and the cooling services they provide for overpasses? Do we really want a downtown core with nary a tree or blade of grass in sight?

In other words - is growth and progress, as we know it, really the be all and end all of life?

Well, in a climate change context, our 19th century take on the virtues of “limitless growth and progress” may well be the “end all.” According to the Prairie Climate Center, hot dry summers are quickly becoming the norm in Winnipeg, thanks to climate change. And if our city’s greenness keeps shrinking, life is going to get a whole lot tougher. Because the more greenness we lose, the more we stand to lose, and the worse our chances of mitigating the impact of prolonged droughts.

There are signs that the city is waking up to this reality, given council’s recent commitments to produce a Master Greenspace Plan and add another 1000s acres to city parkland. But is that enough?

No, it’s not. Not by a long shot.

What we really need is a major shift in attitude at city hall. A shift in which city councillors and urban planners start focusing on a different kind of progress and growth. Progress measured in terms of climate resiliency, and growth that is gauged, not only in terms of urban forest and greenspace protection and expansion, but also in the implementation and promotion of green building codes, tree protection bylaws and green technology, from electric vehicles to alternative energy.

And it’s also long past time this city started getting serious about our carbon reduction goals and viewing the urban forest and greenspace expansion as way to help achieve those goals. If we don’t, I shudder to think where our “greenness’ rating will be by 2030, the year in which we’re expected to reduce our carbon emissions by 40-45 percent, below 2005 levels.

To put it bluntly - perhaps it’s time this city transformed itself from a national loser into a national leader in urban “greenness,” in every sense of the word.

