



The Lemay Forest

Private Property Vs The Public Good

Over the years I've been advocating for urban Nature and a healthier greener environment for our city. Sometimes I've experienced wins, but many campaigns I've participated in have been lost.

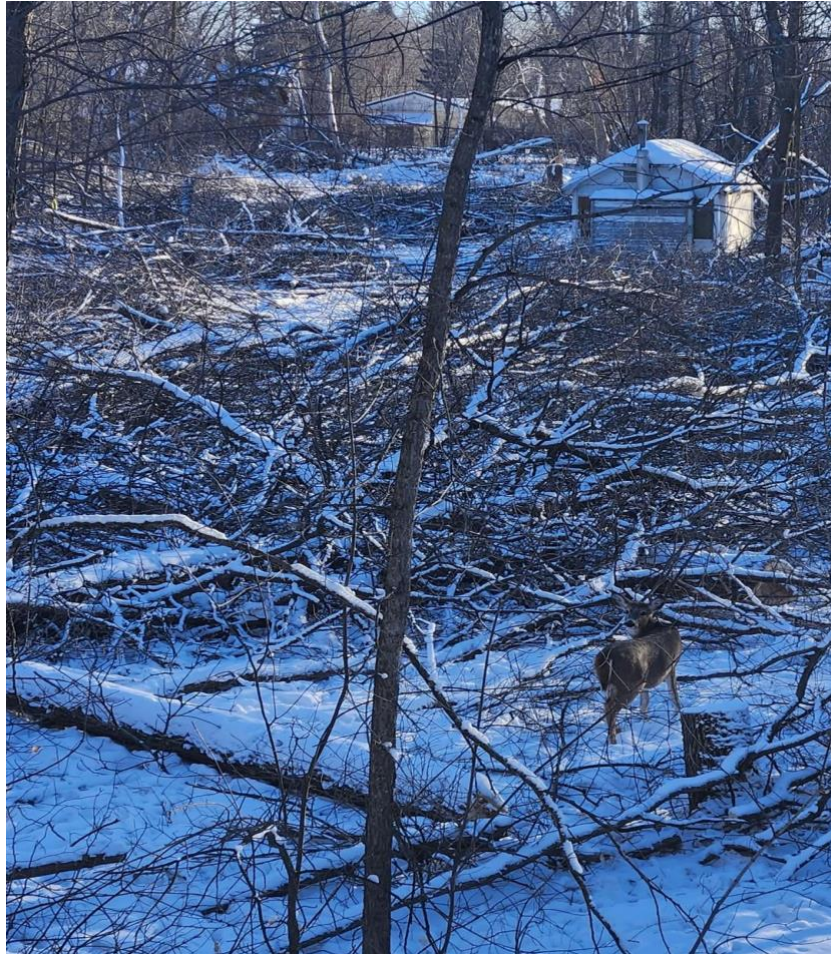
And as the losses pile up, so does my anger – anger toward elected officials who don't seem to care and a system that stacks the deck in favour of money, whether doled out by oil and gas lobbyists or developers.

I've tried to keep my anger in check, but as the months and years of inaction on climate and the environment drag on, the rage builds. So I find myself feeling not unlike George Monbiot, an environmentalist and journalist with The Guardian, who's been at this game a lot longer than me.

Once upon a time, Monbiot's articles about rewilding Britain and addressing the climate crisis sounded almost optimistic. After decades of global meetings on climate and biodiversity producing little change, he's beginning to sound like a raging voice calling out from what little is left of the wilderness.

It's a similar anger being felt by people from across this city - Indigenous, Metis and non-Indigenous – who have been gathering on the streets adjacent to the Lemay

Forest, protesting the destruction of one of Winnipeg's few remaining intact tree canopies.



More than an acre of the Lemay forest has already been destroyed.

The fact that protestors are dismissed as NIMBYS and accused by trolls of being “privileged” whiners - read here white and wealthy - trying to protect their little backyard forest does little to mitigate the anger.

What lies beneath that anger is grief – grief at the potential loss of some 19,000 mature trees and a habitat that provides one of the few safe urban homes and corridors for a host of animals, from deer and foxes to owls and migrating birds.

Grief for generations of children, many of them too poor to enjoy nature outside the city, being denied the opportunity to experience it within city boundaries.

The protestors are not alone in their grief nor in their demands that the tree cutting stop and the land be protected. Their voices have been joined by the Manitoba Metis Federation, Manitoba Wilderness Committee and heritage organizations, including the

Manitoba Historical Society, Heritage Winnipeg and the Manitoba Archaeological Society.

The latter organizations are outraged that the historically significant Aisle Ritchot cemetery, which lies beside and beneath the forest canopy, is being desecrated by tree felling, in contravention of the Provincial Cemeteries Act and the Heritage Resources Act. A cemetery that contains the unmarked remains of as many as 2300 infants and children who died at the nearby Aisle Ritchot orphanage and home for unwed mothers, between 1904 and 1948.

Yet despite the environmental and historical significance of the Lemay forest, the city's zoning Dept. has not suspended the developer's tree cutting permit, even to allow for a review of existing laws that might prohibit further tree cutting. Although the department was recently given thirty days to explore the acquisition and rezoning of the area as parkland.

And what of Tochal Development's Toronto-based CEO, Mayzar Yahyapour and his Winnipeg-based project manager and spokesperson, John Wintrup?

Well, just a few weeks ago, Mr. Yahyapour refused an offer to purchase the Lemay for \$5.25 million, almost 4 times what he paid for the land. Mr. Wintrup was then quoted as saying that whether Tochal's development plans were approved or not approved, the Lemay Forest was coming down.

If that sounds like a hollow threat, it isn't. Mr. Wintrup has consulted on two projects – the Parker Lands and the old Shriner's Hospital site - where trees were clear cut prior to development approval.

Those actions are happening under the guise of something called "pre-development," a word which is neither defined, nor referenced, in the city charter.

So why won't the city expropriate the land to build a park just as they do for roads? Why do the private property rights of some consistently trump what is obviously a public good – acres of forest that absorb storm water, reduce heat, sequester carbon and sustain urban wildlife?

Am I angry? You bet I am. But my anger doesn't mean much unless all of you are angry too. Angry enough to email or call your elected representatives to express not only your outrage, but your love - for Winnipeg, for Nature and for all the children who may one day inherit a city where every intact forest has fallen to the developers' ax.



Just two of the animals that make the Lemay Forest their home.

All photographs courtesy of members of the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest.