



The Need for Green in Winnipeg's West End

I grew up in West End Winnipeg, on a neighbourly street situated between Wellington Avenue and Notre Dame. And while my neighbours and I enjoyed the glorious shade of what even then were mature boulevard elms - many of them now gone thanks to Dutch Elm Disease - we had virtually no nearby parks, unless you counted treeless school yards and the old city dump as greenspaces. There were no nearby splash pads, but we did have a well-used outdoor pool at Sargeant Park, where we could cool off on hot summer days for a whopping entrance fee of just fifty cents.

Personally, I wasn't all that badly affected by the lack of city nature, because my grandfather, a railway machinist, had the foresight to build a small log cabin on a wilderness lake just outside the Whiteshell. Some years after they married, my mother and father did the same. So, from the time I was able to crawl, I was lucky enough to spend a good part of my summers at the lake, surrounded by black spruce, jack pine, poplars and birch trees, and a rich variety of wildlife.

My contemporaries weren't so lucky. Most 7 to 12 year olds near me faced a half hour to 40 minute walk to the nearest greenspace or pool – a trek forbidden by our parents unless at least five of us were going. As a result, most West End kids played in the backyard, assuming they had one.

I don't think any of us felt particularly hard done by, because we didn't know any better. But I often wonder how much richer our lives might have been if we'd been able to run down the street and play in a grove of trees in a small but beautiful park.

You'd think that things would have changed for the better in my childhood neighborhood, especially given what we now know about the health benefits kids derive from contact with nature. But, as it turns out, kids in the West End have just as little in the way of greenspace now, as we did some 60 years ago.



The West End's Garbage Hill, now called Westview Park, offers little in the way of cooling shade trees.

So, no surprise that local residents are up in arms about the loss of a small greenspace on Sherburn St. which the city has, in its "wisdom," targeted as one of the locations for a supportive housing development. This, when there are dozens of abandoned buildings in

the West End and adjacent neighbourhoods that could be torn down or retrofitted to do the same.

It's even more outrageous when you consider that a recent survey on energy poverty in the Daniel Mac ward, which includes the West End, Spence and West Broadway neighbourhoods, suggests that the lack of greenspace is having a negative impact on the physical and mental health of residents.

That's because there are a greater number of lower income renters and homeowners who simply can't afford air conditioning. That, combined with the lack of greenspace and the decimation of the public tree canopy – more than 3000 public trees lost in the Daniel Mac ward between 2015 and 2021 - has dialed up the heat. Which is only made worse by a lack of free, public cooling centres like libraries and the closure of local pools.

Add to that predictions of more prolonged and intense summer heatwaves thanks to climate change, and you have a city population at serious risk.



The disputed greenspace on Sherburn Street. With a few park benches and a grove of trees it could be great place to play and cool off on hot summer days.

And make no mistake - heatwaves do kill people. In fact, an estimated 12,000 people in the USA are killed every year by heat waves, more than are killed by any other extreme weather event, from hurricanes and tornadoes to wildfires. Numbers that will likely increase across North America as heatwaves intensify.

And by and large it's poor people, many with underlying health conditions like diabetes, heart disease and asthma who will suffer most.

So why, in god's name, is the city considering the destruction of even a small greenspace in the West End? Why isn't council taking steps, not only to preserve and enhance what the neighbourhood has, but finding innovative ways to increase the number of parks and green corridors that would help residents cope with the heat? Greenspaces which, in a sustainable city, would be no more than 3 or 4 city blocks from every home in the neighbourhood.

While it's true the city is doing its best to replace the 1000s of trees lost in the ward, council needs to stop obsessing about wider roads and put serious money into green planning, especially in denser, low income neighbourhoods. Because if they don't, they're essentially saying that the kids and families in those neighbourhoods don't really matter.

And as someone who grew up there, I can tell you this – they do matter. A lot.

Erna Buffie is a writer and filmmaker. Read more @ <https://www.ernabuffie.com/>



The West End Resource Center, one of the neighbourhood's few air conditioned drop in centers.

