



What Does Our City Value?

I have a question for all of you readers out there.

As you know, a number of swimming and wading pools are being shut down in city center neighbourhoods. Some of the wading pools won't be replaced; others will be kitted out with splash pads. Two pools are scheduled to be shut down, while the Sherbrook Pool, which serves one of the city's low income neighbourhoods, is also on the potential chopping block pending further analysis.

Meanwhile, in Waverley West, the city is about to begin construction on a brand spanking new recreation center, boasted to be "the most expensive rec center in the history of Winnipeg" featuring, among other things, a leisure pool *and* a lap tank, for a whopping \$94 million.

So here's my question – does that sound reasonable to you? Is it reasonable for the city to be spending all that money in Waverley West, while claiming it can't afford \$190,000 to keep Happyland outdoor pool operating? This, after south St Boniface residents scrambled to raise some \$85,000 to keep it open.

Well, it definitely doesn't seem reasonable to me. I mean, I really am sorry that Waverley West and suburbs like Bridgwater don't have a nearby rec center, but if the city can't afford to keep libraries, pools and other amenities open in older neighbourhoods like Brooklands, St Boniface and Spence, why are they spending \$94 million to build a new rec center?

As far as I can see, the reason is fairly simple. They're doing it because they can share the cost of construction with the provincial and federal governments. And it turns out that while all three levels of governments are more than game to fund the kind of shiny new recreation facilities that garner votes, they're not at all enthusiastic about providing funds to maintain older facilities.

Which brings us to the next conundrum. While the feds and province are helping *to build* "the most expensive rec center in Winnipeg history," they won't pay a dime to maintain it – long term maintenance falls squarely on the city.

And ironically, it's residents of the inner city, not the residents of Waverley West, that will pay the lion's share, not only for the city's contribution to building the facility, but also its long term maintenance costs.

How do I figure that?

Well, let me take a moment to explain. The biggest portion of the city's budget comes from property taxes. And surprise, surprise, suburbs like Waverley West don't generate anywhere near the value city center neighbourhoods generate. Bridgwater Forest, for example comes in at \$55.40/sq ft in terms of assessment value, compared to almost \$88.00 in Spence, \$115.00 in West Broadway and Portage-Ellice, which comes in at a whopping \$412.00/sq ft.

So, in fact, it's the inner city that's bankrolling the suburbs.

Not to mention the fact that a few decades from now, Waverley West residents may be in the same spot as St. Boniface residents – raising the funds needed to repair and maintain their facility because the city can't afford it.

And that's because our city continues to be addicted to the new, the big and the bigger - like new roads, wider roads and new suburbs and the roads that serve them - all of which don't just have enormous upfront costs, they also cost a staggering amount to repair and maintain.

And don't even get me started on the combined sewer system overhaul we desperately need and still haven't done.

All of which explains why the city's current infrastructure deficit has reached a staggering \$3.8 billion and rising.

So what's the moral to this story? Well, just like the couple who can't buy a house they can't afford, maybe it's time for the city to stop investing in new infrastructure it can't afford. Maybe it's time to focus first on repairing what we already have. Maybe we need to

start measuring “growth”, not in terms of the new and the bigger, but in terms of human and environmental well-being.

In other words – if we can’t maintain amenities that help to keep our older neighbourhoods livable, vibrant and safe for families and kids, can we really afford new amenities for suburbs we couldn’t afford in the first place.

So while axing facilities like city center swimming pools may seem trivial, when you look at the big picture, and what it says about our city’s priorities, it’s anything but. In a broader context it’s not only evidence of bad financial management, it’s emblematic of what we value. And from my perspective, at least, our values need to change.

After writing this op ed I also responded to comments made by Janice Lukes, Winnipeg’s Deputy Mayor and the councillor spearheading the Waverley West Recreation complex.

Letter to the editor June 3, 2024, Winnipeg Free Press

South of city has facilities

Re: [City votes to take on \\$23M in debt as rec project costs soar](#) (May 30)

I feel the need to take issue with an observation made by Councillor Janice Lukes in regard to the city-owned recreational centre proposed for the Waverley West suburb. In comments made to Joyanne Pursaga, she observed that the area has “I think it’s up to 65,000 people. We have not one pool, not one gym. I’m focused on that ...”

Really? By my counting the suburb does have a perfectly good pool and gym at the Altea complex in the heart of Waverley West, and at least one other within easy driving distance at the Margaret Grant Pool in West Fort Richmond. As for gyms, in addition to the Altea complex there’s at least one other in the immediate area and more than half a dozen gyms in the surrounding area. All of them, admittedly, privately owned, with the exception of Margaret Grant pool.

Indeed, the city actually knows this because it has a report from its previous director of recreation stating that south end Winnipeg has more private recreation facilities than any other part of the city.

So I would argue that Ms. Luke's observation is far from accurate and needs to be corrected, especially when there are inner-city pools, like the one in St. Boniface, that are being closed down, which could be kept open at a small fraction of the \$93-million cost that will be shelled out to build the South Winnipeg Recreation Campus in Waverley West.

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