



Another New Subdivision, Another City Problem

So, here we go again folks. We just get the protection of the Lemay forest done and dusted and bingo, there's another proposed subdivision for 23 homes on 2 acre flood plain lots right across the Red River from the Lemay on the old Daman Farm site. A subdivision that will not only result in the destruction of a significant portion of a riparian forest but may also pose a potential threat to the area's groundwater aquifer.

In fact the threat to groundwater is so significant, that the city's own public service has recommended that any new housing lots in the area be at least five acres to avoid increasing the salinity of the well water currently utilized by some 1800 residents in South St. Vital.

So why would their well water become saline? Well, if too many additional wells are dug in the area and the freshwater aquifer drops too low that could break the barrier that keeps brackish mineralized water to the west of the river from infiltrating the freshwater aquifer to the east. And if that barrier *is* breached, you suddenly have well water that's unfit for human consumption.

And you can't fix that.

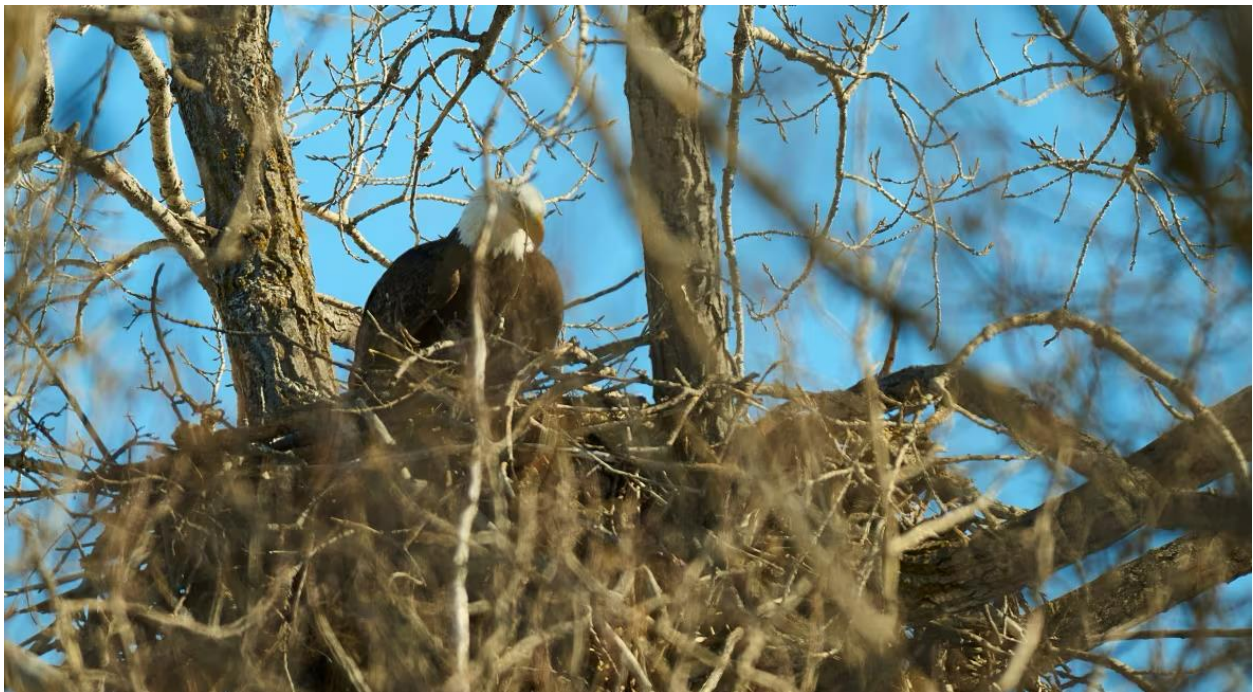
Which doesn't even take into account the potential impact deforestation could have on the quality and volume of available groundwater resources. That's because tree roots help to purify runoff by capturing sediments and toxins and also keep the soil loose and permeable so rainwater can actually be absorbed into the groundwater aquifer.

Cut the number of trees, even by half, then lay down fill, an asphalt road, driveways and concrete foundations and you can create a significant problem. Drill too many wells and you may have a catastrophic problem.

That's why the public service continues to recommend that instead of selling 2 or even 3 acre lots in that area, they should be, at minimum, 5 acres.

And, wonder of wonders, it turns out that the same public service recommendation was made 4 years ago when the same proposal, for the same land, was presented to the public service. At that time the Riel Committee agreed with their inhouse experts and rejected it.

So why are councillors on the Riel and Property and Development Committees now so enthusiastic about this project that they over-ruled the public service and green lit the Daman Farm subdivision just last week?



The tree where this eagle nests now stands alone on the Red River shoreline after all the surrounding trees were clear cut by the developer to dump fill on the site.

Well, in a bid to overcome the five acre minimum rule, the landowner, A&S Homes, and their planners at Landmark Planning and Design have promised that the new lot owners will *not* drill 23 new wells, but will instead, be advised that they must install 23 cisterns. Cisterns that will need to be topped up with trucked-in water, likely twice a month at the new landowner's expense.

So where's the problem, you ask? Why are area residents up in arms about the proposed plan if well digging is prohibited? And why is the city's own public service supporting their opposition to the subdivision?

Well, look at it this way - once those lots are sold there is, at the moment, nothing stopping the new owners from drilling wells to access free groundwater, rather than paying to have cisterns built and water transported in. And human nature being what it is, free water sounds a lot more attractive than water you have to pay for.

In fact, as city planning pointed out, Winnipeg has no way to *stop* those new landowners from digging wells, because groundwater falls under provincial jurisdiction. Simply put, the city has no legal authority to control what happens on those properties water-wise.

Worse still, as Kevin Kowalyk the city's Land Development Engineer observed, even if a caveat against well drilling were written into the property titles, or the city's subdivision agreement was amended to prohibit wells, the public service has neither the framework nor the manpower to enforce those prohibitions. In fact, the city isn't even notified when a new well is drilled, so monitoring the situation is basically impossible!



Outlined in red is the 5 acre oak forest the city could have protected as part of a land dedication but instead opted for cash in lieu.

And once those 23 lots are sold, A&S Homes can walk away from any subsequent problems, claiming they did their best to protect an essential resource.

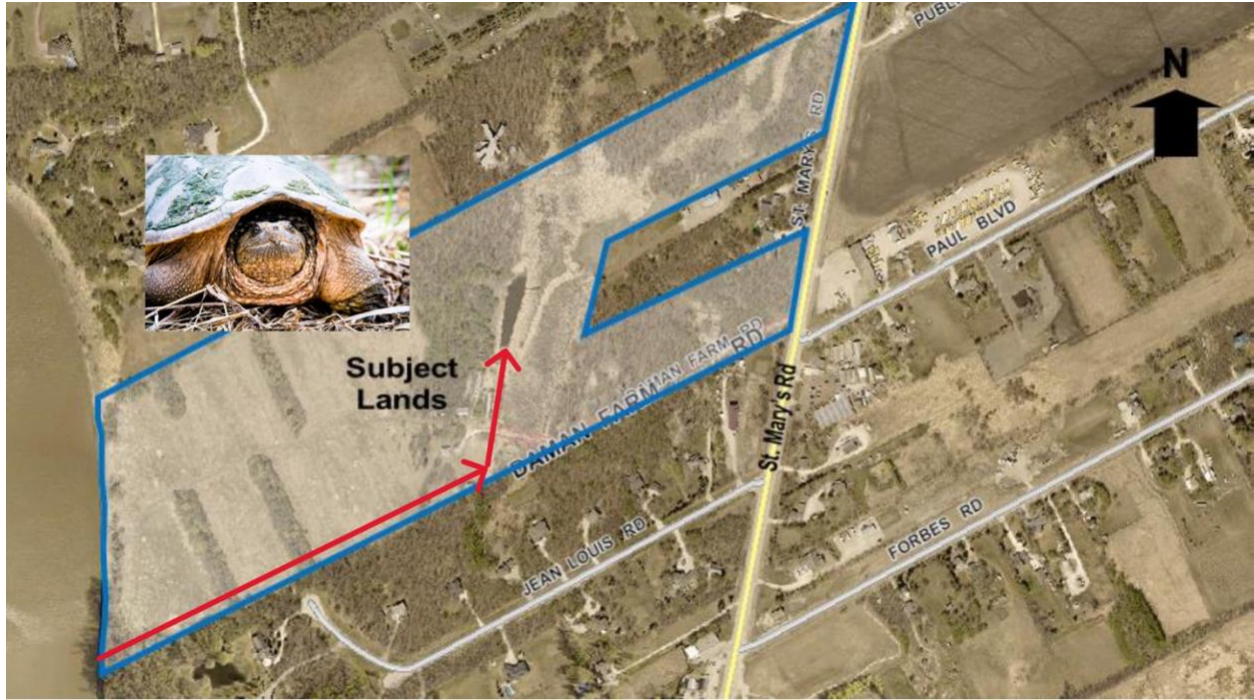
So, here are couple of questions I'd like answered. Do councillors Chambers, Allard and Mayes really believe that their expertise, and that of the landowner and planner, trumps the expertise and concerns of their own public service? Do they really think the city can stop lot owners from drilling new wells on their properties, when the city has no jurisdiction over groundwater?

And why, having rejected this proposal once, is the city now endorsing it, given the potential risks to a precious resource?

I have my own suspicions, but I'll leave it to you, dear readers, to find your own answers.



Coyotes like this one den in the Daman forest. In winter the Red River serves as a wildlife corridor for these predators, connecting the Daman property to the Lemay Forest across the river.



A massive snapping turtle, possibly as old as 100 years, makes the journey up from the Red River to lay her eggs in the Daman Farm slew identified here with a red arrow..

Photos courtesy of M. Olivson