



Mayor Scott Gillingham and Finance Chair, Jeff Browaty, of “Joe Lunchbox” fame.

## **Time For a Shake Up at City Hall**

I don't know how many of you remember this, but our current mayor, Scott Gillingham, won his position in the 2022 civic election with just 27% of the vote, the smallest vote share for any mayor in recent history. Some 53% of Winnipeg voters chose, instead, to cast their ballots for one of the more progressive center-left candidates.

And if the two progressive mayoral candidates hadn't split the vote, we might be looking at a very different urban landscape from the one I find myself staring at, somewhat dumbfoundedly, today.

Now, to be fair, Gillingham seemed to be on the right track at first. He was consulting with more progressive city players like Shaun Loney and even seemed to be contemplating revamping or eliminating council's Executive Policy Committee.

Under his tenure, the city's 20 Year Urban Forestry Strategy was approved, and council ensured the budget needed to sustainably maintain and replace our public trees. Winnipeg also signed on to the Housing Accelerator Fund; a federal program aimed at increasing housing density. A hugely positive step given that increased density can play a major role in reducing carbon emissions and urban sprawl.

That's assuming, of course, that increased density is paired with green planning, affordability and investments in the repair of existing sidewalks and roads that would ensure walkable, bikeable, liveable infill neighbourhoods.

And therein lies the rub. Because based on what I've witnessed, our mayor and city council are not prioritizing green planning, let alone repairing, restoring and protecting what we have.

If they were, they wouldn't be selling off publicly owned riverbank properties to developers or approving subdivisions that potentially threaten groundwater resources. Nor would they be charging developers a buck to destroy a much-loved, publicly owned greenspace for new supportive housing, rather than buying and renovating one of the area's boarded up apartment blocks for that purpose, at a fraction of the cost



West End Greenspace on Sherburn St. destined for demolition

They would, instead, be pushing for the immediate completion of a Greenspace Master Plan and Biodiversity Policy first announced 4 long years ago, with little to show for it. An undertaking that would protect urban biodiversity by protecting our mature trees, remaining natural forests, wildlife corridors and wetlands.

They'd be demanding that bylaws governing the protection of both public and private trees, recommended in the 20 year urban forestry strategy, be fast tracked, instead of repeatedly delayed.

And rather than investing more than a billion of dollars in new roads – over \$750 million just to widen Kenaston – they'd be investing in energy efficient city buildings and increased budgets for Parks and Naturalization. Increases that would lever the Federal funds needed to buy what remains of the natural landscapes that protect us.

They'd also be working with developers to get them onside by offering incentives to retain as many trees and as much greenspace on their private land as possible. Or failing that, require they replace the trees and greenery they destroy on or around their buildings, or on public land and right of ways.

Equally important, council would be enacting policies that penalized developers who refuse to comply and instead clear cut their properties and destroy wetlands.

And if you think that's imposing an egregious burden on a multi-billion dollar construction and development industry then tell me this: why are those same industries thriving in other cities – from Singapore and Vancouver to Chattanooga, Tennessee – that have many of those regulations in place? Cities that recognize their necessity in a world plagued by climate change and extreme weather.



Chattanooga Tenn. once considered among the dirtiest cities in the USA is now a National Park City with tree canopy cover of 52% well above the recommended 30%.

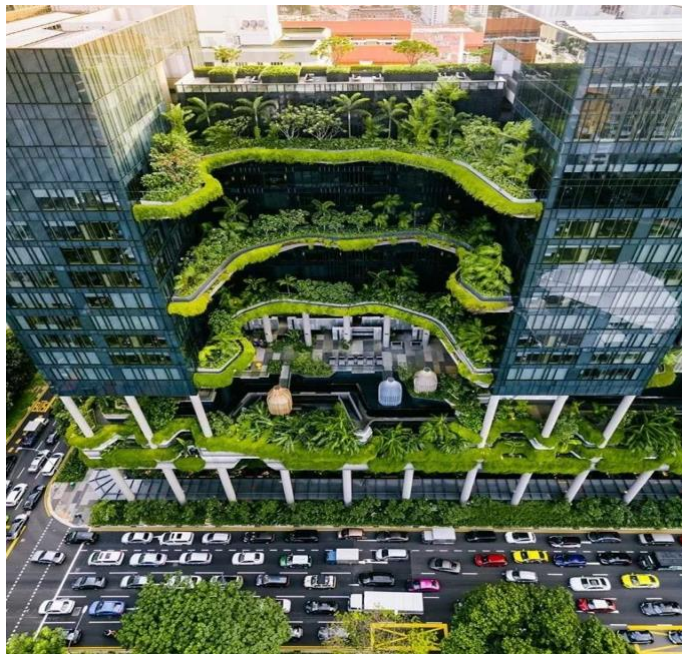
So why isn't Winnipeg following suit? Why don't we repair, restore and protect what we have – whether it's our sewer pipes, sidewalks, housing or natural landscapes? Why does our city continue in its obsession with bigger, newer and rarely better?

In a nutshell, it's because our mayor and many city councillors remain addicted to a definition of success defined, almost exclusively, by GDP and a deluded notion of infinite growth, rather than other, critically important measures, like sustainability, livability and a healthier, greener environment.

So, do I think we need a shake-up at city hall?

You bet I do. In no small part because, over the past year, Mr. Gillingham's true political stripes have emerged from behind the benign pastor facade. What has materialized is a deeply conservative mayor who doesn't welcome dissent, eschews transparency and has fully consolidated power in the Mayor's office and Executive Policy Committee.

And that's why I'm thinking about the next civic election even though it's months away. Because we need to find candidates now, who will champion our values and concerns, instead of re-electing people who are shackled to an outdated and dangerous version of the same old, same old.



One of hundreds of green buildings in Singapore, the world's first "garden city."

