

The Fight for a City Forest



Last weekend I walked the length and breadth of one of the few remaining intact forests in Winnipeg. It was an incredible day, sunny and bright with newly fallen snow nestling on the tree branches like plump feathery cushions.

Known locally as the Lemay forest, it covers 22 acres and is composed of an estimated 9,000 to 14,000 trees, most of them basswood elm and ash. Bounded on one side by a municipal dike and the red river riparian forest, on the other by an open greenfield and a residential street in St Norbert, it's the perfect spot for a naturalized city-owned greenspace.

Instead, it may be a forest facing extinction. Not because of disease or pests but because it's privately owned by Tochal Developments, a company that wants to use the land to build residential roads and housing. To do that, all or a large portion of the forest would likely be destroyed.

Cat Gauthier is a spokesperson for the Coalition to Save the Lemay Forest, a residents' group formed to protect the trees. For Cat, the fight to preserve this forest and greenspace is beginning to feel like a full time job:

“My phone blew up yesterday. It was just one call after another from residents and the media wanting to know what’s going on. We had hoped the city would acquire the land, but here we are again, fighting to preserve the forest for future generations.”

In fact, Tochal has floated the idea of development before. In 2020 its consultants, Landmark Planning and Design, suggested it as a site for condominiums or a care home, or even a park, if the city was interested in purchasing the land.

As it turned out, City Councillor, Janice Lukes, had already explored the possibility of purchasing the land. In the end, the city decided it simply couldn’t afford it.

Then, as local opposition grew, talk of development seemed to die down, and residents assumed they’d won the battle to protect the Lemay.

At least until they received a letter on October 17th, 2023 from Tochal consultant and former city planner, John Wintrup, advising them that Tochal was once again planning to move forward with development.

In subsequent communications, Mr. Wintrup also indicated that Tochal was open to offers to purchase the land but warned that if none were forthcoming by December 2023, trees would be cut and development would proceed.

So what’s at stake if this forest is destroyed to make way for development?

Well, some 9,000 to 14,000 trees for starters, along with the birds and animals that call this forest home - from coyotes, foxes and deer to barred owls and even a resident pileated woodpecker, a keystone protected species that depends on this forest for food and nesting.

The Lemay trees also happen to be situated on a flood plain and play a key role in keeping heavy spring runoff out of people’s basements. In fact, every mature tree in the Lemay forest can absorb as much as 55,000 gallons of water a year.

Then there’s the work their leaves do to clean the air, capturing the nasty, often toxic particulates associated with air pollution. Add to that the role trees and greenspaces play in offsetting heat island effect, and suddenly this 22 acre forest begins to look a little bit like an ecological goldmine.

And that doesn’t even take into account the carbon dioxide the trees absorb, nor the enormous physical and mental health benefits intact urban forests like this one provide. So much so that some Canadian doctors are prescribing nature walks to relieve anxiety and stress.

Benefits Cat Gauthier understands: “People sometimes dismiss us as NIMBYS, but that’s not what’s going on here. We’re fighting to protect these trees because we understand their value. They need to be preserved, not just for us, but for everyone.”

The only question is - will Winnipeg City Council honour the Montreal Biodiversity Pledge it voted to sign in July and work quickly, partnering with other levels of government, to purchase this forest?

There's a strong motivation to do that, because - let's face it - it would be painfully ironic if a mayor and council that pledged to plant 2 public trees for every tree lost and recently received substantial federal funding to accomplish that goal, then turned around and approved a development that could potentially mow down more than 9,000 trees.

City council now has an opportunity to put its money where its mouth is in its stated plans to develop another 1000 acres of Winnipeg greenspace. In the interests of creating a greener, more climate resilient city, I sincerely hope it finds the cash.

Erna Buffie is a writer and filmmaker. Sign up to read more at <https://www.ernabuffie.com/>