

# Greenspace and the Urban Forest

WINNIPEG IS FILLED with trees and parks, shady rivers, green corridors and leafy boulevards where people, birds and animals live. It has the distinction of having the largest remaining mature urban elm forest in North America. Winnipeggers care deeply about their greenspace and urban forest.

Sustainable cities must prioritize environmental conservation and invest in increasing, protecting, and restoring greenspace and the urban forest. A heightened awareness of the climate crisis and the negative impacts of climate change underline the urgency of investment in these assets that are essential to a livable city. The on-going public health crisis confirms the value of large outdoor greenspaces that enable people to safely gather for recreation and leisure activities.

In 2018 the AMB urged the City of Winnipeg to implement a Master Plan for Greenspace to preserve, protect, and enhance its forests, greenspaces, natural environment and connecting corridors saying that the absence of a clear and coherent plan with proper monitoring and accountability processes would jeopardize the future of our greenspace.<sup>1</sup> Progress towards a Greenspace Master Plan has been made since 2018, with transformative by-law amendments successfully passed in 2021, but work still needs to be done to ensure these policies are acted upon in a timely manner.

This chapter contains two sections: “Master Greenspace and Natural Corridors Plan By-law and Biodiversity Policy” and the “Urban Forest”.



## Coordinating Ecological Plans: Master Greenspace and Natural Corridors Plan By-law

In June 2021, transformative “green” amendments to the City of Winnipeg’s planning documents “OurWinnipeg 2045” and “Complete Communities 2.0” were approved by a near unanimous vote of City Council.<sup>2</sup> The amended documents provide direction to create a Master Greenspace and Natural Corridors Plan By-law that includes a Biodiversity Policy. Further, the City of Winnipeg Budget 2022 included \$700,000 in funding over two years with \$200,000 for 2022 and \$500,000 for 2023 to begin the development of the plan. The City Planning Department is leading the preparation of the plan that is to include a robust public engagement process.

The amendments have set a higher standard for Winnipeg for environmental and ecological protection of greenspace. Planning and investing in greenspace will provide economic, environmental, health and social benefits.

Never has it been more critical than it is today to have a master plan for greenspace and a biodiversity policy. The *IPCC Report 2022* (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) emphasized the role of nature in addressing climate change including ecosystem protection, restoration, and requests that governments prioritize nature in policy decisions.<sup>3</sup>

The WHO (World Health Organization, European Division) defines greenspace as “all urban land covered by vegetation of any kind”. Just as every tree contributes oxygen to the air and stores water and carbon, all greenspace provides services or can provide services if restored. Greenspace includes parks, golf courses, university and school lands, river corridors, wetlands, cemeteries, boulevards, industrial lands, rail and hydro corridors and private and public land.

The Master Greenspace and Natural Corridors Plan By-law will be an overarching by-law coordinating and overseeing matters pertaining to greenspace. The plan will navigate the complexities of three levels of government with differing goals, by-laws, and regulations and provide coordination across city departments. The master plan must permeate into all corners of city decision making that impact greenspace, natural corridors, and biodiversity to achieve highest outcomes. Various existing and future policies, plans and strategies will be informed by the Master Greenspace Plan the Urban Forest Strategy and the Parks Strategy. Coordination will occur between various plans including the Climate Action Plan and those that intersect with greenspace such as land development, bridge and road construction, river corridor and storm water management and street lighting.

Natural corridors connect green spaces and make that greenspace infinitely more valuable, productive, and biodiverse. Natural corridors include all waterways and riparian areas that are inherently ecological areas of importance. The Harte Trail and Bishop Grandin Greenway are examples of natural corridors. Connectivity throughout the city needs to be expanded and enhanced for both people and nature.

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## **Biodiversity Policy**

The Master Greenspace and Natural Corridors Plan By-law is to include a Biodiversity Policy.<sup>4</sup> The green amendments direct that Winnipeg’s Biodiversity Policy include an annual report to Council structured in line with Durban Commitments Local Governments for Biodiversity.<sup>5</sup> In developing the policy existing frameworks from which to draw best practices can be found in Canadian and global cities.

Winnipeg can fast track its plan by benefiting from the existing body of knowledge and best practices. Two Winnipeg based centres of environmental and climate research are the renowned IISD<sup>6</sup> (International Institute of Sustainable Development) and the Prairie Climate Centre<sup>7</sup> and Winnipeg must collaborate with them and utilize their expertise.

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## Greenspace Acquisition

A high priority for the Master Greenspace Plan is the protection and acquisition of existing greenspace. *OurWinnipeg 2045* includes “a commitment to increasing the public reserve land within the City of Winnipeg by taking steps to add another 1,000 acres of public park space in addition to the already existing public reserve lands.”<sup>8</sup> The purchase of an additional 1,000 acres of greenspace over the plan’s 25-year duration must be budgeted with a plan to purchase at least 75 per cent of the land within the next five years while it is still available as greenspace and does not require costly restoration. There are only a few large parcels (about 20 acres in size) of high-quality natural land remaining in the city. The longer the purchase is delayed the higher the cost per acre and the less natural greenspace available for purchase.

The City currently has two options for purchasing park land — the Land Dedication Reserve Fund and the capital budget, neither of which have sufficient funds to achieve this greenspace acquisition goal.

Alternative funding options are available through the Parks Canada, National Urban Parks<sup>9</sup> program and the Canadian Federation of Municipalities Green Municipal Fund.

In 2021 the federal government announced a \$130 million investment to create a network of urban national parks. Parks Canada plans to work with municipalities, provinces, Indigenous partners, and conservation organizations to identify opportunities for creating or expanding national urban parks in urban and near-urban settings across the country. At this time, the City of Winnipeg has signed an agreement of collaboration with Parks Canada to discuss the idea.

The Canadian Federation of Municipalities (CFM)<sup>10</sup> provides a *Green Municipal Fund* dedicated to energy, land use, transportation, waste, and water sustainability initiatives. With over 1,500 approved projects totaling \$1.1 billion in funding, the GMF is a valuable resource our City can use to ease the financial burden of purchasing land. For example, the City of Brantford used the fund in 2015 to clean up a 20-hectare stretch of desolate industrial lands contaminated with fossil fuels and other chemicals. In 2009, New Westminster used the fund to transform an abandoned timber site into an urban riverfront park, reclaiming 3.2-hectares of land and treating 3,500



The Barred Owl is found in Winnipeg



Andrée Forest

Norwood Park

cubic meters of contaminated soil. Winnipeg must consult CFM’s Green Municipal Fund to assist in reaching their green space expansion targets.

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## Ecological Planning

Dedicated Ecological Planners must be added to the City of Winnipeg Planning Department to plan for and fulfill the complex and specialized requirements of the Master Greenspace and Natural Corridors Plan and Biodiversity Policy. The City of Edmonton, a prairie city with years of experience in award-winning environmental and biodiversity planning, employs Ecological Planners. Winnipeg too must follow this model.

Ecological Planners report to the Director of Planning to coordinate activities across all City departments and external partners. They support the development and implementation of municipal policy and strategies, review land development applications, develop performance, support strategic planning activities, and engage the public.

The number of staff budgeted for the Planning Department decreased from 27 to 18 between 2008 and 2020 while the demand for their services

increased. A minimum of two new ecological planner positions are required to accommodate the additional workload.

### **New Expenditure**

Linking Planning to Operational Budget for two additional positions in the Planning Department:

- Senior Ecological Planner: \$100,000
- Ecological Planner: \$75,000

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## **Protecting the Urban Forest**

Despite progress made on greenspace policy, one aspect of greenspace facing rapid degradation is our urban forest. Winnipeg loses, on average, 5,500 public trees every year. Other cities have taken notice of tree loss, responding with targeted investment. Toronto, for one, has decided to put trees to work, with a goal of having 40 per cent of the City's area covered with urban canopy by 2050.<sup>11</sup> According to Winnipeg's State of the Urban Forest report, as of 2020, only 19 per cent of the trees removed in the City have been replaced.<sup>12</sup> And the replacement backlog keeps growing. To address these historical losses and keep up with new losses, a reforestation budget that funds, at minimum, the replanting of two trees for every one removed is needed.

Despite the consistent loss, what accounts for a stable, albeit inadequate, 17 per cent of urban canopy coverage? New trees planted in suburban areas are offset by significant loss of mature trees, which provide the most benefit in older parts of the City. Neighbourhoods like Daniel McIntyre, Point Douglas and Saint Boniface are experiencing the devastating loss of century-old Elm trees. A capital maintenance budget that allows, for example, pruning at a recommended seven-year cycle instead of the current 31-year cycle is essential for keeping mature trees healthy and resilient in the face of disease and extreme weather events.<sup>13</sup>

Amongst the Public Works department's infrastructure responsibilities, the Urban Forestry branch's level of investment within the budget is underwhelming compared to the priority spending on roads and the cost of water and waste system maintenance and upgrades.<sup>14 15</sup> Urban Forestry is under-invested for its place in furthering the City's mission and reflecting the value citizens place on it.<sup>16</sup>

Natural infrastructure cannot be assessed and analyzed for maintenance and capital expenditures the same way as conventional infrastructures like

roads and buildings. Urban Forestry’s capital and operating budget must invest according to the value trees bring to cooling the City, protecting asphalt, sequestering carbon, and capturing rainwater run-off.<sup>17</sup> It is hoped the upcoming Winnipeg Urban Forest Strategy will include a recommendation for a natural infrastructure valuation system.

Council has dedicated considerable funds to canopy restoration in the capital budget. However, additional funding will ensure targets are met without delay. The Canada Community Building Fund provides municipalities with a stable and indexed source of infrastructure funding. From 2019 to 2024, Manitoba has received \$448 million from the fund, 90 per cent of which flows to local governments.<sup>18</sup> Council is currently working with the provincial government to assess and identify potential funding options for the CCBF with projects to be solidified in Spring 2022.

#### **New expenditure:**

- \$6 million for Urban Forest Renewal Program Public Works Capital Project
- Operating cost: \$0.399 million (\$6 million @ 2.75%/20 years)

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## **Endnotes**

- 1 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Alternative Municipal Budget Winnipeg 2018, Greenspace Chapter <https://policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/imagine-winnipeg>
- 2 Winnipeg City Clerks Website, Winnipeg Council Meeting June 24 2021, Report of the Executive Policy Committee June 16 2021, OurWinnipeg 2045 Amendments (starting on page 3 and ending on page 8)
- 3 World Economic Forum. “5 takeaways from the latest IPCC report.” April 5, 2022
- 4 Winnipeg City Clerks Website, Council Meeting Agenda, June 24 2021, Report of the Executive Policy Committee June 16 2021, Complete Communities 2.0 Amendments [clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/ViewDoc.asp?DocId=21053&SectionId=609812&InitUrl=](http://clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/ViewDoc.asp?DocId=21053&SectionId=609812&InitUrl=) page 1
- 5 ICLEI Cities Biodiversity Centre. “Durban Commitment” <https://cbc.iclei.org/durban-commitment/>
- 6 IISD International Institute for Sustainable Development <https://www.iisd.org/>
- 7 Prairie Climate Centre <https://prairieclimatecentre.ca/>
- 8 Winnipeg City Clerks Website, Council Meeting Agenda, June 24, 2021, Report of the Executive Policy Committee June 16 2021, OurWinnipeg 2045 Plan Amendments, Page 2
- 9 Government of Canada. “Government of Canada Invests 130 million to work with partners to create a network of national urban parks.” August 2021.
- 10 Canadian Federation of Municipalities, Green Municipal Fund <https://fcm.ca/en/funding>
- 11 Editorial Board. “How planting trees can cool Canada’s cities in an era of climate heating.” *The Globe and Mail*. July 3, 2021.

**12** City of Winnipeg (2020). State of the Urban Forest Report – At a Glance Report, page 3 “Operational Quick Facts”

**13** Ibid

**14** *Capital Projects Listed by Department. Public Works General Capital Fund. Urban Forest Renewal Program.* Page 86. City of Winnipeg Supplement to the 2022 Preliminary Budget.

**15** Summary of Capital Program. Page 11. City of Winnipeg Supplement to the 2022 Preliminary Budget.

**16** City of Winnipeg vision and corporate mission. <https://winnipeg.ca/cao/vision.stm>

**17** A well-treed neighbourhood can be up to 4 degrees cooler than a neighbourhood without trees. Sources: <https://www.arborday.org/trees/climatechange/fightcommunity.cfm>; <https://canopy.org/tree-info/benefits-of-trees/>

**18** Infrastructure Canada. “Canada Community-Building Fund Allocation Table,” September 6, 2018. <https://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/prog/gtf-fte-tab-eng.html>.