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FAST FACTS

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Victoria Park Remains Contested Territory

Ninety years ago, the competition between public rights and private property erupted into the 1919 General Strike, when the trades unions confronted employers over their right to bargain collectively for wages. While the face of this competition has changed over the decades and today it is not nearly as climactic, these same forces are still competing over Victoria Park.

Very likely, most Winnipeggers don't even know where Victoria Park was located. The Park was one of Winnipeg's three major parks, bought in 1893 and designed as a meeting place for Winnipeg's rapidly growing working families. It is where a new condominium development is now being constructed on Waterfront Drive, between Amy, James, and Pacific Streets.

The park became a significant meeting point during the General Strike, as the Labour Temple located two blocks west on James Street was too small to hold the crowds that came out to take part in this historical event. This is where the strikers met every day to get reports on negotiations with the City and to plan the day's events.

After the Strike, City Council sold the plot of land to Winnipeg Hydro to build a steam heating plant. The steam plant was decommissioned in 1990 and demolished a few years later. Then City Council approved the plan to build a condominium

complex on the land in 2004, sealing its fate; the land would never be used for public purposes again.

Last year, a small group of labour and community individuals, under the auspices of the Winnipeg Labour Council, responded to a call from the City of Winnipeg for "expressions of interest" in developing the area around the Alexander Docks, immediately to the east of where Victoria Park was. The group offered the City a way to retain the historical significance of the area. They proposed a commemorative monument for the area around the Docks, calling it "A Place to Rendezvous and Remember". The proposal was for a virtual museum, commemorative band shell and amphitheatre for live performances, café, parking area and landscaping that would extend Juba Park up to the Scots monument. Their efforts followed a City Planning exercise for North Main in 1997 that recommended a commemoration of the 1919 Strike, and the allocation of funds to develop the Park as a historic site.

The 2008 proposal was encouraged by officials in the Planning and Property Development Department, who then rejected all proposals at the last moment. Another proposal to build a river ecology interpretive centre and office building was initially approved and then rejected. Both



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MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
www.policyalternatives.ca

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proposals were made to the Standing Policy Committee on Property Development in March last year, but were again rejected.

Instead, Centre Venture was apparently instructed to try and to get the two competing proponents to merge their proposals. The two groups made efforts to do so and were prepared to work together towards a modified proposal that would integrate both historical and ecological themes. However it seems that officials were really not interested in either of these proposals, and were actively courting another potential partner with a proposal that had not participated in the call for Expressions of Interest. This third party and proposal had a more commercial concept for the area and one that could therefore generate more revenue than the other two proposals.

Senator Rod Zimmer and another unnamed group came forward with a plan for a \$10 million restaurant and banquet hall development. However, by December of last year he was unable to secure the financing required and lost the option on the land. Instead of coming back to the parties who had viable ideas for the land, City Council once again announced they were looking for private-sector development partners.

According to Centre Venture president Ross McGowan, the agency is considering a proposal for a restaurant/marina. They are also considering making the James Avenue pumping station more attractive to a brew pub group that has already said it isn't interested in the property. At the same time, they are weighing a new proposal from an international group that previously pitched a plan to build a Red River basin interpretive centre. None of these ideas pay attention to the struggle that played such an important part in shaping this community, and in Winnipeg's history, nor to meeting the needs of area condominium residents.

Today Victoria Park exists at www.victoriapark1919.ca. It is a virtual Park, but the internet site is trying to be what the original

park was for the people of Winnipeg – a place for people to meet and exchange views. The site is being maintained by people who believe it is important to have public places to exhibit a people's history, to remember the contribution of common working people to the development of this city, and to be able to express their views and insights about what is happening in the city and in the world around them.

Victoria Park is no longer a geographic part of Winnipeg, but its story reminds us of the competition between those who believe in retaining public access and control of property versus those who want to parcel out property to individual interests. Victoria Park may never be mentioned in City Hall, but it is present whenever elected and hired officials plan to sell off city property or whenever they propose private companies take over ownership of public infrastructure.

The thinking in City Hall today seems very reminiscent of what guided the city fathers in 1919 – that private interests should lead public interests. The Mayor and most of the Councillors seems to think that private profit is a greater motivator and guarantor of public services than city government under the watchful eye of elected officials. The current City regime has contracted out, sold off or given away assets of the City in the guise of seeking "efficient and cost-effective" services.

What a shame that the City has rejected options to develop Victoria Park in a way that would recognize what working people have done for this city, and honour the role public space played in our rich history.

Dennis Lenycky is a local community activist and member of the labour group who put forward the proposal to the City for the "Place to Rendezvous and Remember" project.



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