



# FAST FACTS



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb • 309-323 Portage Ave. • Winnipeg, MB • Canada R3B 2C1  
 ph: (204) 927-3200 • fax: (204) 927-3201 • ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca • www.policyalternatives.ca/mb

July 26, 2005

## The Capital Region Partnership Act

This spring the Manitoba government adopted the *Capital Region Partnership Act*. The press release accompanying the Act's introduction quoted from the 2003 Regional Planning Advisory Committee report to support the government's direction. The Act's apparent intent is to nudge the 16 Winnipeg-region municipalities—Winnipeg, Selkirk, Stonewall and 13 rural municipalities—towards a partnership that, according to the government's press release, would:

- enable regional solutions to be found on such issues as land-use planning, infrastructure development, environmental protection, and water quality and supply;
- create a forum for the sharing of information as well as the discussion and resolution of regional issues;
- promote co-operation between the partners;
- promote tourism and sustainable economic development; and
- conduct research on capital-region issues and foster public awareness.

The Act says the 16 mayors and reeves must meet and report their recommendations regarding membership, organization and governance structure of the partnership to Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Scott Smith. Once the minister receives this report, he may recommend that cabinet establish a Capital Region Partnership. Furthermore, the cabinet could make regulations to force a capital region organizational and governance structure.

The Act contains nothing about openness or accountability to citizens, nothing about fair representation or meaningful consultation with residents.

It is worth looking at this Act in the context of two other new Acts, the *Planning Act* and the *Water Protection Act*, and also in the context of the current political en-

vironment within the New Democratic Party government.

The Manitoba government, particularly the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs, is ultimately responsible for Manitoba's 198 municipalities. Each one, including Winnipeg, is a creature of the province. The province enacted the *City of Winnipeg Charter Act*, which applies to Winnipeg while every other municipality comes under the *Planning Act*.

Through the previous *Planning Act* there has been a push on to encourage municipalities to amalgamate and/or to join together to form planning districts to work together on land-use plans that cover larger areas. The new *Planning Act* goes further, authorizing planning districts and municipalities to develop regional strategies that would coordinate development and promote cooperation in delivering services and developing infrastructure. Each municipality's development plan would have to conform to the regional strategy once the latter is adopted.

The *Water Protection Act* introduces the idea of watershed planning and water management areas. However, the Act hinges on regulations that are as yet unwritten. These unknown regulations could have a major impact on municipal governance and land-use planning. Even though Winnipeg is located at the point where five rivers meet, politicians and administrators seem to want to have the Capital Region as a single planning entity.

There are other reasons why the provincial government is pointing Winnipeg-region municipalities towards more regional decision-making. It is onerous for the province and the city to say "no" to urban sprawl development. Municipalities circulate their planning intentions to one another but no one really wants to speak out against a neighbour's plans. The member municipalities' development plans contain different policies and different land-use



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definitions. Most of the region's rural municipalities feel they have a right to more residential development but are limited by costly infrastructure—roads, municipal piped water and sewer systems—which the province co-funds outside Winnipeg but not inside the city.

Provincial subsidies help perpetuate lower property taxes in the rural municipalities. If Winnipeg politicians comply with ex-urban development, they know that, in a slow-growing region, it will come at Winnipeg's expense.

A regional partnership implies all the partners are of a similar size and heft. Yet, according to the 2001 census, approximately, 87% of the region's 712,000 residents live inside city boundaries. Over the last six years, Mayors Murray and Katz and Councillors Desmedt, Thomas and Eadie have represented Winnipeggers. Now it is primarily Councillor Desmedt who attends regional meetings. Most other Winnipeg politicians appear to be too busy with their own large wards to take regional planning and governance matters seriously. By contrast, the ninety or so reeves and councillors of the Association of Rural Municipalities (Winnipeg Region) have a long tradition of private, monthly dinner meetings to hear from an invited guest, often a minister. Two other groups also meet behind closed doors to discuss regional matters. They are the Mayors and Reeves of the Capital Region, Inc. (started in 1999) and the Capital Region Committee whose members include the mayors and reeves plus the provincial ministers of Intergovernmental Affairs and Water Stewardship. None of these three groups of elected officials publicly distributes its capital region minutes although the Mayors and Reeves apparently intend to post theirs at [www.wmcrp.com](http://www.wmcrp.com).

At the end of the day, the provincial government determines land use and economic development in the region. A determined NDP government gained planning approval from the city to redesignate 3,000 acres of prime agricultural land in Waverley West in south-west Winnipeg from a "Rural" to a "Neighbourhood" policy area. Manitoba Housing Renewal Corporation (MHRC), a Crown corporation run by senior Department of Family Services and Housing officials, is the largest Waverley West landowner.

In 2000, as citizens of Winnipeg were engaged in the statutory review of its long-term blueprint for development, Plan Winnipeg, and while the provincial government was approving the current Plan Winnipeg, the same government was secretly planning to develop its Waverley West land bank. Five months after City Council approved Plan Winnipeg Vision 2020, the Minister for Housing announced that his government wanted to develop Waverley West.

The government and Ladco then applied for the

largest amendment in the history of Plan Winnipeg. They reportedly paid consultants half a million dollars for studies and to lobby politicians. Minister Smith refused to refer 22 letters of objection to Waverley West to the Manitoba Municipal Board for a public hearing. Instead, the minister simply wrote a letter of approval to the city which then gave third and final reading. This is not a government that honours or respects citizen engagement in the planning process.

There are now plans for expensive expressways to carve through Waverley West to serve MHRC Town and Ladco Town. This, in a city which grew by 1,067 people (0.17%) between 1996 and 2001. This, as enrolment in Winnipeg school divisions decreased by 1,140 students between September 2003 and September 2004.

This blatant corruption of the planning process makes it impossible to predict how top-down and heavy-handed the government will be when it comes to any capital region partnership. Will the NDP government be content to see reduced friction between the region's municipalities? Will it push to develop its own lands first? Will it push for more urban-level services and development in the extensive rural area surrounding Winnipeg? Manitobans will have to wait to see the NDP government's true intentions.

*Elizabeth Fleming*

*Elizabeth Fleming has observed and commented on land use planning in Manitoba since 1985. She was appointed to the Capital Region Review Panel in 1998 and resigned September 1999. She has lived in Winnipeg since 1982.*

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