

Making Assiniboine Park Accessible

Established in 1904, Assiniboine Park is the largest and most established public park in Winnipeg and “crown jewel” of Winnipeg’s parks system.¹ However user fees at Assiniboine Park, particularly at the zoo and new conservatory leave many Winnipeggers out.

Rising Cost of Admission at the Zoo

The Assiniboine Park Zoo was free for most of its first 40 years, before it undertook major renovations to upgrade the enclosures to standard and upgrade the zoo.² The “Journey to Churchill” exhibit was introduced in 2015 along with a fee.

Families are finding the entrance fees to the zoo too high. One mother explains:

We were annual zoo members without fail. Supported them right through the construction. Then we got the slap in the face of the 120% increase in our annual renewal in the mail. I responded by asking about subsidies for those of us who could not afford the fees and I was told that the fee I could not afford was perfectly affordable for low income families. I am a widow with 3 kids and we have been able to afford to go *exactly one* time since the new zoo opened.

Today for a family of four the cost is \$63.50 — \$76.60 plus taxes, depending on the age of children (\$20.50/adults; \$17.75 13–17/seniors and \$11.25 3–12). Rising bus fares make it hard for many to even get to Assiniboine Park. A low-income bus pass like Calgary’s would certainly help (see Transit section).

Several years ago the zoo had lower admission costs on certain days: for example, once a month \$10 “Super Tuesdays” were raised to \$12 and then phased out.

Assiniboine Park gives out free zoo passes via community agencies for those in need. But this charity only goes so far; only so many are

given out. If people do not have a connection to a community agency they can’t get a pass. As *Winnipeg Without Poverty: Calling on the City to Lead*³ finds, poverty exists across all City Wards and therefore targeted initiatives will always leave people out. Moreover, forcing people to rely on free passes removes choice and dignity from their lives.

Initiatives targeted at the “deserving poor” disregard the struggles of the working class, many of whom earn low wages. Research shows that many Manitoba families struggle to get by and 53% live paycheque to paycheque.⁴ Almost half (47%) of Manitobans spend all or more of their net pay.⁵ Spending money on a family day trip to the zoo is not possible, or a rare occurrence, for many working people. A public subsidy could make the zoo available to all people on a weekly basis.

Assiniboine Park is raising an endowment called “Parkshare” to fund low income people’s entry to the zoo in the future. After the park completes the fundraising for the capital improvements for the whole park, management plans on making Parkshare the main focus of its fundraising.⁶ However fundraising for low income entry will be more challenging than fundraising for physical amenities donors can put their names on, see and touch. The endowment will need to become quite large to generate revenue to subsidize entry relative to the demand.

In the future new publicly-funded facilities — such as The Leaf in Canada’s Diversity Gardens, scheduled to be completed in 2020 — need to be carefully considered with respect to whom they are primarily serving — tourists who require a certain “wow” factor and are more expensive to operate, or residents who need a public amenity on a regular basis.

Facilities worldwide are successful without admission charges. The Como Park Zoo and Conservatory in Minnesota operates on voluntary donation basis and people are welcome even if they cannot make a donation. An American

study found one-third of US art galleries did not charge admission.⁷ Many museums and galleries in London, UK are no cost. In Brandon the Museum of Southwestern Manitoba is no charge and the now closed Assiniboine Park Conservatory was free throughout its lifespan.

Governance of Park Lacks Accountability

The concerns about user fees limiting access to publicly-owned Assiniboine Park were foretold by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 500 when Assiniboine Park's management was handed over to a non-profit: the Assiniboine Park Conservancy. The stand-alone entity's entrepreneurial approach does live up to the spirit of a public park.

When presenting to Executive Policy Committee about this governance model in 2007, CUPE 500 stated:

Critically missing from any description of the proposed Corporation, is a reference to adherence to public policy and city principles. It would appear that the Corporation would not be required to follow City regulations and plans as it would be an "independent body." This means it would not be subject to city policies and practice that strive to maintain access to public facilities for people with disabilities that encourage aboriginal people to apply for and get jobs, nor comply with City health and safety standards.

Furthermore, a Corporation will be forced to seek funds in ways that could limit access to the Park by Winnipeggers. When the cost of operations is added to the capital development responsibilities of the Corporation, we predict there will be a move to create and increase admission fees and add extra concession charges.⁸

Assiniboine Park Conservancy (APC) was created in 2008 to steward this public parkland on a 50 year lease. The city retains ownership over the

land and assets in the park. APC has a ten-year agreement with the City of Winnipeg to manage the Park, which is up for renewal in 2019.⁹

Today a board of 12, ten men and two women, govern the park. The Board reports directly to City Council. Board members are ratified each year by Executive Policy Committee. There is no public nominations process to populate the board. The board appoints itself.¹⁰ There are currently no representatives from CUPE 500 on the Board of Directors or representatives from experts in recreation or public health. The representatives are high-profile Winnipeggers, the majority from the private sector.

The accountability back to citizens of the public money in the park is weak. Charity Intelligence, a non-profit service gave APC a "C+" in accountability, "The grade is based on the charity's public reporting of the work it does and the results it achieves".¹¹

Assiniboine Park Conservancy reports annually on its operations to the City Protection, Community Services and Parks. When APC was created, journalist Frances Russell foretold of the accountability problems with huge public assets managed by non-profit boards:

"More and more we're using third parties outside government to deliver programs but we haven't invented sound accountability mechanisms for them. This leaves the public interest and the taxpayer's dollars in the hands of board of directors."¹²

The warnings of CUPE 500 and Russell have come to fruition. While being responsible for millions in public money, APC is introducing user fees for park amenities without consulting Winnipeggers.

Accessibility Key Principle of Public Parks

The park's governance model was changed to streamline management and attract more private investment to subsidize eroding city funding.

Nonetheless city operating and capital funding has actually increased since APC was created to respond to the new “Imagine a Place” park revitalization plan.

APC is seeking more earned revenue to achieve “self-sufficiency”, an elusive goal for non-profit charities. Organizations like APC by their very nature require public funding to fulfill their mandate. In this case, a beautiful park for all Winnipeggers to enjoy.

Assiniboine Park has been transformed in the past ten years with many new amenities. But the introduction of high fees at the zoo and user fees at the new Conservatory will leave many behind.

The Alternative Municipal Budget includes an increase in operating funding targeted specifically at one free day per week entrance fee to

the zoo. One free day per week may have a small impact revenue on days that charge an admission fee, but this must be balanced with immense benefit to families who currently can’t afford the zoo can attend regularly, or those who wish to attend more often.

Total New Expenditure:

- Increase operating grant to accommodate one free admission day/week for Assiniboine Zoo*: \$1.066M

*Note: APC reports 30,000 zoo visitors/ month average. Average daily attendance is 1,000, including children. For the purposes of this estimate the subsidy is based on 1,000 daily adult visitors to offer assurance of revenue to APC.

1 Careless, James. 2014. “Assiniboine Park Winnipeg.” *Heritage Magazine*. Vol XV11, Number 1. http://www.heritagewinnipeg.com/asset_library/HeritageDay2014article.pdf

2 Redmond, Margaret. April 18, 2018. Meeting.

3 Make Poverty History Manitoba. 2018. “Winnipeg without Poverty. Calling on the City to Lead”. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba. Available at: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/winnipeg-without-poverty>

4 Canadian Payroll Association. 2017. National Payroll Week Survey Results.

5 Ibid.

6 Redmond, Margaret. April 18, 2018. Meeting.

7 Grant, Daniel. 2015. “Should Museums offer Free Admission to Everyone?”. November 13, 2015. Boston Globe. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2015/11/13/should-museums-offer-free-admission-everyone/wrL4rDumFGu6ncEIitUkN5O/story.html> ; and: Cortell, Sarah. 2011. Cost of Free Admission: Comparative Study Examining the Feasibility of Eliminating Museum Admission Charges. Thesis. Ohio State University. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/osu1307220379/inline

8 CUPE 500. 2007. “Assiniboine Park Governance: the community option”. Presentation to Executive Policy Committee, March 14, 2007.

9 Agreement/ Lease between Assiniboine Park Conservancy and the City Of Winnipeg. October 2010. Obtained through Freedom of Information Request via CUPE 500.

10 Redmond, Margaret. April 18, 2018. Meeting.

11 Charity Intelligence. 2017. Assiniboine Park Conservancy. <https://www.charityintelligence.ca/charity-details/468-assiniboine-park-conservancy>

12 Winnipeg Free press, 2007: as cited in CUPE 500. 2007. “Assiniboine Park Governance: the community option”. Presentation to Executive Policy Committee, March 14, 2007.