

March 20 2013

Dear Mr. Mayor and Councillors of the City of Winnipeg:

Geoffrey L Halroyd, a scientist from Environment Canada, says “the science is unequivocal, the prairies are going to hell in a hand basket”. Professor Nicola Koper from the U of M says “the prairie grasses are one of the most critically endangered ecosystems in the world”.

We may, in fact, have a world class Ecosystem that we are destroying. Manitoba contains almost all of Canada’s Tall Grass Prairie, yet has lost a greater percentage of its tall grass prairies than any other state or province. The status of remnant tall grass prairie patches in Manitoba is, therefore, an extremely serious conservation concern.

The Transit report says there is no concern. Based on what? Tell me which is the more credible a report...written by a transit official, or by a scientist who has dedicated his or her life to studying the environment? We may have one of the largest remnants of Tall Grass Prairie right here on the Parker Wetlands, and yet you are casually contemplating voting to destroy this natural Heritage, the heritage that belongs to our children and grandchildren.

The wetlands of the Parker area are, as far as we know, the biggest wetlands to be found anywhere within city limits. There is approximately 80 acres of grasses, forest, and wetlands, about half of which is forested, while the other half is wetlands and prairie. This wetland of approximately 40 acres diverts millions of gallons of water away from the river.

What will happen when you drain the land to put in Rapid Transit? Are you willing to tell the people down the river, “hey we got rapid transit, you can have your basements flooded, and we don’t care”? Sure, in the overall scheme of things, draining the property may not add that much water to the river, but it may well be the proverbial straw that broke the camels back. Are you willing to play Russian roulette, to throw the dice and gamble that it will not happen? If you care about scientific literature at all, you will know that draining wetlands is about the worst thing you can do for flood prevention. The Manitoba government recognizes this and, as a consequence, has fairly strict rules about draining wetlands. We believe that they have every intention of enforcing the rules for the wetlands...all wetlands are their jurisdiction not that of the City.

The wetlands, grasslands, and forests are the lungs of the city. When we destroy them we destroy our own health. But even more, we destroy the health and wellbeing of our children and grandchildren. When your grandchildren or great-grandchildren come in wheezing and puffing because they can’t breathe the smoke smuggered air of the city, are you proudly going to thump your chest and say “listen here kid, we got rapid transit, we got it cheep, and I don’t care that we had to destroy the natural world, so

get over it”? I believe the students of our cities will not stand for this kind of future. I believe they will stand up and say they will not ride a transit system that deliberately destroys the natural heritage that we are responsible to pass on to them.

And finally, by voting to send the busses screeching through the Parker wetlands, you are voting to destroy the last remnant of the Métis towns known as Rooster town and tin town.

Up until the late 1950's, the land between present-day Grant Avenue and McGillivray Boulevard, just west of Pembina Highway, supported a vibrant Métis community known as Rooster Town and its “suburb” called Tin Town. The homes in this area were old boxcars and corrugated tin-covered shanties scattered among the aspen bush, tall-grass prairie, and wetlands. What it lacked in city services, it made up for in community spirit. By 1959, the city drove out the residents and destroyed the shanty communities. The University of Winnipeg and the Louis Riel Institute of the Manitoba Métis Federation are actively collecting stories about this part of Winnipeg's forgotten past.

The Parker lands represent the last remnant of the natural landscape that supported this unique community. If City Council pushes forward with its agenda to have the Parker lands developed as a part of the rapid transit route, it will destroy the last physical vestiges of this part of Métis history and the unique opportunity to establish a city park that pays tribute to Métis culture, history, and lifestyle. In light of the recent Supreme Court decision, it would be short-sighted for City Council to approve the Parker route as the only option for rapid transit line without consultation with the Métis community and other local residents on the future of the Parker lands.

Anytime we lose another chunk of wetlands or forest, we lose another part of our soul. This is why we have almost 1,000 signatures to date asking you to consider taking another route and why we will soon have many thousand more signatures. This is why we believe that the Provincial Government will not take kindly to having the wetlands drained. This is why students will refuse to ride on a bus route that destroys an endangered ecosystem. This is why we believe the Federal Government will wish to consult with the Métis community, as the Supreme Court has instructed them to do, before they dish out the money. A wise man once asked “what does it profit someone to gain a whole new rapid transit system but lose their own soul?”

So here is the conundrum that is facing you. If you vote to study only the Parker route, you may discover that the route is really not an option...what do you do then? In that case, the City may have lost any chance of getting Rapid Transit. However, if you vote to leave the Letellier line on the table as an option to be studied, then we may still have a viable option that will allow us to proceed with Rapid transit. Please don't destroy the chance of getting Rapid Transit by looking only at one option.

Thank you.

Additional context:

In 2009, Winnipeg City Council swapped the city-owned Parker lands to a developer.

When the city swapped the city-owned Parker lands to a developer in 2009, the agreement included the option to purchase back part of the land for rapid transit. It now argues that the rapid transit must follow this route because it will stimulate the development of these lands. If Council accepts the recommendation from EPC to sink all of its eggs into the Parker route, it would effectively eliminate any further consideration of a rapid transit route along Pembina Highway. There is insufficient information at this time (environmental impact analysis, consultation with the community, etc.) for the city to pursue a single option as if the development of the Parker lands is a foregone conclusion. But perhaps the city thinks it is . . .

2000 – The city identified the Parker Lands as high quality ecologically sensitive lands in Plan Winnipeg – but no steps were taken to protect it even though it was owned by the city

2001 – The city removed Policy Plate D (a map showing the locations of ecologically-sensitive lands) from Plan Winnipeg 2020 arguing that “the city has little means or authority to protect, preserve, or acquire these lands.”

2001 – The province directs the city to include a policy plate with accompanying text that designates natural areas that are environmentally-sensitive or significant and to complete a sensitive lands plan by December 2003 (later extended to 2005)

February 2007 – Council approves an Ecologically Significant Natural Lands Strategy – with no map/policy plate

July 2009 – Despite its identification as high quality (city-owned) ecologically-sensitive land since 2000, Council swaps the city-owned Parker lands (that it had both the means and ability to protect) to a developer without any public consultation. Council specified that a “developer-led” secondary plan must be developed for the site and that a front-end consultation with the public be conducted.

March 19, 2013 – To date, no secondary plan or comprehensive “front-end” consultation has been conducted regarding the future development of the Parker lands. The city is on the brink of pursuing the Parker route as the only possible route for the next leg of bus rapid transit – a plan whose ridership and viability is tied to the conversion of the Parker lands to new housing. If it does not keep the Pembina Highway options on the table for more detailed study, the city itself will be the key proponent for the destruction of these ecologically and historically significant lands – without consultation.