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THE LEAF



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OUR 1st SUMMER BOOK DRAW

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“I don’t want any kid to graduate without knowing this history.”

By Terese Taylor

“I can’t believe that we went to school and five blocks away there was a residential school,” says author David Robertson, a former Kelvin High student. “I had no clue.”

Now there are teachers that take students to the former Assiniboia Residential School on Academy Road and tell them about that history — and Robertson is likely one of the reasons why.

While raising his growing family in Wolseley over a 5-year period, he began writing about residential schools. In 2009, his first published book got picked up by school divisions across the country. As of today, the list of titles to his name is 27. The proceeds of one of the books goes entirely to support the Helen Betty Osborne Foundation; almost every book explores the legacy the schools have left.

Robertson had only become aware of residential schools only in his early 20s. Even while studying Native studies courses and Indigenous history at University, there was very little focus on it. “It was a massive failure all around,” he says. “I didn’t learn about it yet my grandmother went to residential school.”

“It wasn’t being discussed enough, it wasn’t being taught,



Allen Olshevski was one of the students at Laura Secord school who painted 214 candles to honour children discovered in a mass grave in a former Indian Residential School in Kamloops BC.

there weren’t enough school resources. My thought was I don’t want any kid to graduate without knowing this history.”

The devastating discovery of 215 children in a mass grave in Kamloops has intensified public interest in

learning about residential schools, and Robertson recently presented on Zoom to a maxed-out audience of 1,000. However, several of the Zoom connections were in classroom setups; likely

Councilors change city's master plan to protect parks

By Mike Maunder

City Council’s near-unanimous vote (one dissenting vote) on June 26 to protect green space and add 1,000 acres of parks as part of the city’s 25-year master plan could be a textbook model of how citizen activism can change city decisions.

Two months ago, it looked like it was all going in the opposite direction.

“Our city dodged the bullet,” says Pam Lucenkiw, co-chair of Outdoor Urban Recreational Spaces (OURS-Winnipeg). “The plan as it

originally existed would have created a very dismal city.”

“When you look back at the city plan last summer, it was such a disaster,” explains Laurie Ringaert, president of Save Our Seine (SOS). “Winnipeg was so far behind any other city in green space planning.”

The master plan last August envisaged a city that would grow to a million, and would do it without too much more outward sprawl. One way to accomplish this was to redefine parklands and golf

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ENVIRONMENT

Councillors change master plan...

courses as “attractive for development” and the plan laid out ground rules by which this could happen.

OURS and SOS led the campaign to change the master plan so it included protection for parks and green spaces.

It is a battle they’ve been fighting for ten years.

OURS was created at an SOS forum 10 years ago in reaction to Sam Katz’s plan to sell off some “uneconomic” city-owned golf courses for residential development. “The consistent message coming from the city was that green spaces like golf courses were drains on the public purse that could be turned into profit-makers through development,” explains Ron Mazur, co-chair, with Lucenkiw, of OURS. “There was no regard for the value of green space itself.”

He contrasts this vision of the city to the vision in the 1960’s when Metro Council passed a motion to add 1,000 acres of park space – and delivered on it.

OURS partially won the golf course battle in 2012 but the larger war was just beginning. Over the next decade, OURS rallied the troops again and again as new threats to green space came from city decisions. Through those campaigns, they formed partnerships with resident groups, environmental organizations, the Social Planning Council, the Planners’ Network and many more. And they evolved a vision of what was needed: a proactive approach, a master green space plan that would shape city planning, rather than constantly reacting to oppose city plans.

Similarly, Save Our Seine (SOS) dreamed of a proactive approach to planning. “So often we’d be consulted by the city on one-off developments –how should we best put in this building?” remembers Ringaert. “But the real answer was, ‘Don’t put in a building at all!’”

By 2018 OURS had held forums and developed the proactive strategy – a “Green Space Matters” vision for the city. It included calls for a citywide biodiversity policy, a river corridor plan for all rivers and streams, and protection for existing green space.

Then the master plan –Our Winnipeg 2045– arrived from the city: documents that did not recognize any of these principles; fancy pictures showing the city’s future in which most of the trees you saw were planted in concrete holes.

However, by this time, OURS had some fancy pictures of its own. The main one was a chart that showed Winnipeg’s green space in comparison to other cities: a paltry 6% – almost the lowest in the

country– compared to a nationwide average of 9%. The 6% green space analysis came from a data analysis by Parks People, a non-profit research organization in Toronto.

“Having that statistic was a major motivator in our campaign,” explained Mazur. “It showed the problem in undeniable terms.”

Both SOS and OURS started networking. SOS had just spent the last year creating a stronger digital presence thanks to tech-savvy board members Eric St. Onge and Victoria Grima. They organized an on-line forum in February that included St. Vital councillor Brian Mayes. At that forum, OURS introduced a “snowflake” method of organizing, in which each participant contacted four others, who contacted others so that the original participant was at the centre of an expanding snowflake of contacts. They emphasized the message that the UN had declared 2021-2030 as the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, in which “Green spaces need to be placed at the heart of urban planning.”

With its expertise on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other platforms, SOS organized a petition on [change.org](https://www.change.org) that eventually collected 5,000 signatures. They framed their message as an imperative in order to get people into the discussion: “Sounding the alarm on Green Space... What we do now has far-reaching effects – we may not get another chance!”

OURS, with its political savvy, walked people through how to write letters to councillors and sign up to speak at the May meeting of Executive Policy Committee (EPC).

Councillors were getting the message. SOS and OURS were able to arrange one-on-one conversations with councillors. “These were deep calls,” explained Ringaert of SOS: “like conversations over coffee. We’d walk them through the documents helping them really understand what was in them. One councillor said it had turned his head around.”

Mazur said he could sense a shift in these talks. “The politicians began to take the lead, rather than the city administration.”

One councillor who responded was Sherri Rollins. “She understood green space the way we understood it,” commented Lucenkiw.

Rollins reached out to the environmental groups to start wording

the amendments that would be needed.

By May, when the city’s Executive Policy Committee (EPC) considered the master plan, over 25 speakers had registered, with Michelle Kading, executive director of SOS stressing that the plans “will hinder and set back conservation efforts, unless significant amendments are made.” The EPC vote was delayed until June. By that time, Rollins had come up with an amendment that required a master green space plan be added to Our Winnipeg 2045. It passed at EPC on June 16.

As fellow councillor Janice Lukes explained in the June 24 council meeting, Rollins had put in hours with councillors “herding, gathering input, crafting amendments, writing and rewriting” to end up with the amendment to the city plan that would add ecosystem planning and prohibit development on existing green spaces.

In a surprise addition, Charleswood councillor Kevin



BACK WHEN IT ALL BEGAN:
Ron Mazur and Pam Lucenkiw
in 2012 at the Save Our Seine forum
that created OURS-Winnipeg.

Kline echoed the Metro vision of the ‘60s by proposing a second amendment that the City acquire 1,000 more acres of park space in the next 25 years.

St. Vital councillor Brian Mayes, who had attended that first forum with SOS and OURS in February, warned that it was now up to the city administration to take council’s direction to add green space planning in a practical way or else the

amendments would simply remain a “bunch of well-intentioned aspirational stuff.”

Mayor Bowman said the amendments marked the first time in Winnipeg’s history that the city lined up with the UN’s declaration that green spaces be at the heart of city planning.

At the June 24th council meeting, just before the two amendments passed, Councillor Rollins gave the final word to

*“I heard the message in the pines,
I heard it travel through the leaves.
It drifted across the land,
On the sweetgrass trail.”*



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