Response to the Report on Governance of Assiniboine Park

by The Friends of Assiniboine Park Conservatory

To The Executive Policy Committee

July 19, 2006

The Friends of the Assiniboine Park Conservatory welcome the initiative of the City to consider a new form of government for Assiniboine Park. What follows is our considered expression of concern with the recommendations that have been put forth to date.

The Friends of Assiniboine Park Conservatory are supportive of the work that is occurring with regards to Assiniboine Park and are committed to working with the other non-profit organizations in the Park and The City to further the goals of rejuvenation of the park. However there are issues that need to be addressed and done so quickly. Our concerns about the recommendations in The Acumen Report have previously been stated and are attached to the new report, "Governance of Assiniboine Park". Briefly our concerns were and still remain:

- Continuance of existing Boards within the park governance structure
- The financial responsibility of the City to the citizens of Winnipeg
- Ensured financial support for the park

It has been over a year since The Acumen Report was released. Unfortunately the present report has not appreciatively advanced the governance process during this period. Our concerns about governance are still basically the same. We had hoped that this new report would clarify the issues we have raised and lay some parameters or guidelines for the group that will be working out the details of governance.

We do support the current report, Governance of Assiniboine Park, in its recommendations for:

1. The need for a single delivery unit in the Park
2. Involvement of both the provincial and federal governments. Such involvement is appropriate given that Assiniboine Park is a heritage landscape. It is based on the design principles of Frederick Law Olmsted who designed Central Park, Golden Gate Park, Mount Royal and many others. Assiniboine Park was part of the early twentieth century urban park development in Canada and to have the other two levels of government contribute and involved in the rejuvenation of it would be both appropriate and encouraging.

We also support the motion made July 17, 2006 by the Standing Policy Committee On Protection and Community Services to support some of the principles The Friends presented:

- All citizens shall have free access to Assiniboine Park.
- The Framework Plan, established and approved by City Council in 2004, shall be a "living document," changes to which would require public consultation and agreement between the partners.

As well as: no park assets to be sold for commercial purposes, to examine the Centenary Library model and to proceed with the details of governance in face to face meetings that include CUPE as well as the non-profit organizations in the park.

Concerns

Parks embody a city's public realm. In many ways, how a city embraces its parks and their diverse users reflects its sense of community and its quality of life. If one embraces this perspective when examining the report on the "Governance of Assiniboine Park" the

following picture emerges and is cause for grave concern:

1. **Lack of a clear financial commitment**

If The City is not prepared to state unequivocally its financial commitment to Assinboine Park, why would anyone else do so? The answer: they won't. The result: further deterioration of the park. And why would any municipal government, as this latest report does, even raise the issue of "taxation" and "shared risk" for a non-profit volunteer entity such as a Park Board?

The issue of condos in the park has not been firmly laid to rest. This report provided an opportunity to do so. There needs to be an unequivocal statement that assets and land will not be sold or leased for commerce. There are a number of ways the City can funnel funds to the park. As one City counselor has previously stated that if we must have condos, they could be built on other city property and the profits given directly to fund the park. There are many other ways as well for the City to find financing.

2. **Use of Entrepreneurial Models not Park Governance Models**

Winnipeg Enterprises Corporation, Winnipeg Convention Centre, CentreVenture Development Corporation and The Forks Renewal Corporation are listed as representative examples of successful partnership models. These enterprises became virtually private entities where the public no longer has any say in how they are run. That may be fine for a Convention Centre or a hockey arena but it is a much different thing for a park. Using The Forks as an example is definitely not what we want to see happen at the park – a big commercial enterprise in the middle of Tuxedo. That would not be well received by the residents of Tuxedo but more importantly this park is a public green space that has always been accessible to all Winnipeggers without charge as part of our shared heritage. The Forks example does not instill a sense that this latter point will be respected.

There is a lot of talk about "partnership" but at this stage of the process there is still no clarification on what is meant by partnership. What are we espousing? We should know

by now what type of partnership we are talking about. No details have been forth coming after 14 months of discussion.

What is required are examples of park governance structures. The Acumen Report supports the Park Board as **sole managers**. Many parks are run this way. This form of governance usually entails granting the organization the power to develop and change policies related to the park for which they are responsible. Thus by definition they are responsible for operations and maintenance. Lack of transparency may be a major issue with this model

Currently many parks in the United States have **co-management or dual governance models**. This model typically requires the nonprofits to work collaboratively with the city by working together for the planning, design and implementation of projects. They abide by policies set by their public sector. Responsibilities are shared. There are many variations of this model. Central Park in New York City is one example. A very different example is that of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco where the City has separate contracts with the major venues in that park. The Friends are not aware that a co-management model was even considered for our City Park.

We need a model that recognizes that there are some roles and responsibilities that are better done by government (maintenance, those areas that include economies of scale) and there are those that are better left to a non-profit volunteer based organization (marketing, programming and visitor services, education, fund raising, contributing to capital improvements, advocacy and those areas that pertain to enhancements of parks).

In speaking with a variety of park and conservatory organizations throughout North America, there is one shared struggle that I keep hearing and that is the struggle between relying on revenues generated by privately sponsored park events/amenities, which may bring in funds, but may compromise public access to the park and serving the public interest. The model for our Park Governance must show a partnership that has a strong

financial commitment from The City as well as from corporate/private sponsorship and that does not compromise public access.

3. **Accountability**

This is the second report released about the governance of the park within the past 14 months still there is no clearly stated plan on how the new Board will be accountable to the public. The Friends firmly believe that since the park is owned by The City, this new Board should be accountable to City Council who are the ultimate stewards of the park.

4. **Transparency**

The word "transparency" is mentioned in this latest report but not expanded on as to how this might be achieved. The new Board must have transparency and details developed as to how this will be achieved and maintained.

5. **Inclusiveness**

In the Framework plan approved by The City one of the park values listed is inclusiveness. The current governance report does not make any reference to this value. In fact it sets a tone that could well ignore it. There is constant reference in the report for the need to have corporate, philanthropic backing, which in deed the Park needs, however, this must and can be achieved by honouring the concept of "inclusiveness". Excessive reliance on corporate/private sponsorship may risk transforming our park into a private playground with access by invitation only or access available for only those citizens who can afford it. This we do not want. Those who develop the governance structure need to respect and plan that the park and its amenities honour the value of inclusiveness.

Summary

The Friends of Assiniboine Park Conservatory represent the largest single volunteer organization within the Park with over 400 active volunteers donating over 13.5 staff years of work per year and a total membership of over 1100. In addition to our volunteer contribution which has conservatively been estimated at $500,000 we also have been

successful in raising funds for various projects to enhance both the Conservatory and the Park through volunteer gardens and we contribute to programming and visitor services at the Conservatory and English Garden. We represent and are a strong and vital public interest and support for the Park.

We know that parks are hubs that bring people together: a place for relaxation, an aesthetic experience, for recreation and education activities, a site for arts, music and other community events. Parks not only attract residents and visitors but also draw community members, like ourselves, to participate in park programs and to volunteer our time. Parks cannot be viewed in isolation but as integral parts of the community fabric. They play a pivotal role in community vitality and renewal. The citizens of Winnipeg deserve the best park governance that is innovative and addresses the issues of the twenty first century.

Recommendations for the Governance Structure

Thus we recommend that City Council provide some parameters to those who will work out the details of Park Governance. These parameters must include:

1. A statement supporting a predictable, dedicated source of funding that is exempt from budget negotiations and that provides the necessary money for the maintenance of the park. A non-profit Board is hard pressed to raise funds for an upgrade on sewer lines. Ask any major funder or citizen for money for that and they will say :Isn't that what we pay taxes for?"
2. A clear statement that no assets will be sold or leased for commercial purposes. We recognize that there is a need for commercial entities in parks; however these are usually directly related to visitor services such as food services and gift shops. Admissions to venues and fees some educational programming often occurs but these are usually not for profit but to help offset certain costs. Just a note that some organizations are moving away from admissions, for example, the botanical garden at UBC.

3. An articulation of the major roles and responsibilities (in a broad sense at this point in the process) of The City and the new Park Board.
4. A clear statement how the Board will be accountable for a public space.
5. Guidelines to ensure how transparency will be achieved and maintained.
6. A statement that inclusiveness must be the major component of any decisions made.

Recommendations for the Process of Developing the Governance Structure

As you know there are major developments proposed for the park, none of which can move forward until park governance is dealt with. It is impossible to fund raise for these capital projects without being able to assure major funders how their contributions will be managed and the facilities maintained for future generations. Therefore, the governance structure of the park should receive top priority and be concluded within a few months so that progress can begin on the improvements of the park. The process of developing the governance structure must:

1. Include representatives from the present non- profit Boards in the park, CUPE and The City meeting **together** to formulate the new model. The Framework Plan was developed through joint meetings. Unfortunately, to date, the governance process has not included joint meetings thus allowing for common understandings and a shared vision to emerge.
2. It is also recommended that this group be chaired by an objective skilled negotiator. There are many complex issues and difficult decisions to be made; for example the implications of amalgamation, legalities, etc. This process needs to be lead by someone who has excellent negotiation skills and who is objective.

Respectfully submitted by
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