OURS-Winnipeg (Outdoor Urban Recreational Spaces - Winnipeg)

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To: City of Winnipeg Executive Policy Committee

OURS-Winnipeg (Outdoor Urban Recreational Spaces - Winnipeg) is a community based organization started in Dec., 2011 to protect municipal golf courses from commercial or residential development.
OURS-Winnipeg has since evolved to become a green space advocate organization with a focus on urban green spaces, river and nature corridors and the urban forests of Winnipeg.

OURS-Winnipeg urges the City of Winnipeg to produce new comprehensive planning documents that specifically preserve, protect and enhance the natural green spaces, river corridors and forest amenities of Winnipeg.
OURS-Winnipeg calls on City Council to develop an urban green space vision for Winnipeg that includes:

1. An Urban River Corridor Plan that includes all rivers and streams
2. An Urban Green Space Plan
3. An Urban Forest Management Plan

OURS-Winnipeg has consistently called for timely and meaningful public consultations involving wide participation by citizens prior to any significant decisions on development being taken by the City of Winnipeg. In 2012, OURS-Winnipeg asked for timely and meaningful consultations regarding the planned sale of municipal golf courses for commercial and residential development.

OURS-Winnipeg organized forums and circulated petitions to protect urban green spaces and to protect public golf courses from sale or development. Over 8500 people signed the OURS petition within two months.
We congratulate the City of Winnipeg for withdrawing the Expression of Interest regarding the planned sale and development of municipal golf courses .

The OURS-Winnipeg campaign to protect outdoor urban recreational spaces demonstrated that effective civic engagement is possible.

Citizens of Winnipeg want and demand timely and meaningful consultations regarding decisions that affect the future of their city, including decisions on the route alignment of rapid transit.

Issues and concerns with respect to the proposed Southwest Rapid Transit Stage 2 alignment through the Parker Lands, include the lack of meaningful community consultation and the certainty of destruction of green spaces, class A/B Aspen forest lands and unique urban wetlands.

If you proceed to approve an alignment route now, you will do so without adequate community consultations and without adequate environmental impact studies. You will further damage the remaining trust that citizens have in City Council.

OURS-Winnipeg respectfully requests a pause in the alignment approval process to allow meaningful community consultations prior to any further decisions on rapid transit route alignment and prior to amendments to the Winnipeg Transportation Master Plan regarding Southwest Rapid Transit .

The Southwest Rapid Transit Stage 2 Alignment Study is deficient in the public consultation area because the consultation process engaged a very limited number of participants (376). The Alignment Study states (page 48):
"Transit hosted two Open Houses on Wednesday, September 19 and Saturday, September 22, 2012. 375 individuals signed the attendance register at the Open Houses; 237 on Wednesday and 139 on Saturday."
(Note that in the Report, these figures do not even add up correctly.

The Alignment Study received a limited number of survey responses (331): "331 surveys were completed; 193 on paper at the public meetings and 138 online."

By contrast, OURS-Winnipeg, a volunteer community organization with no government funding, conducted a community engagement that gathered over 8500 individual responses at public forums, on-line and by door-to-door contact.

OURS organized a number of Public Forums across the City involving up to 400 people at a single event. The participation and responses came from citizens from across Winnipeg and they strongly supported the protection and preservation of urban green spaces.

I suggest that 375 attendees at an Open House does not constitute an effective public consultation for a project that will cost over $300 million dollars.

The two Councillors whose wards are directly affected by the next phase of rapid transit, Councillors Orlikow and Swandel, both opposed a decision favouring the Parker route and asked for further study of alternatives. If Councillors voices reflect community voices and concerns, surely those community voices should be given greater attention than has occurred to date.

The Southwest Rapid Transit Stage 2 Alignment Study is also deficient in the assessment of the intrinsic value of the unique Parker Wetlands and the A/B quality Aspen Forest.

In "8.2 Summary of Evaluation" on Page 64, the Stage 2 Alignment Study gives a weighting of "LOW" for the "Environmental" category. This weighting of "low" is not consistent with the following quote from the Alignment Study on page 50:

"Most respondents, favouring all alignment options, view the Parker Lands as valuable green space and emphasize the importance of the wetlands, aspen forest, dog park and community gardens. They are concerned the environmental value will not be respected in the decision."

The weighting of "low" for the environment is also not consistent with the views expressed to OURS-Winnipeg by citizens at numerous public forums across the City and through on-line contact and door-to-door contact.

OURS-Winnipeg therefore requests substantive and meaningful consultations prior to any further Rapid Transit route alignment decisions. Rapid Transit belongs to all citizens. The stakeholder groups involved in a meaningful consultation process on rapid transit should include people from across the city.

City of Winnipeg planning documents identify parts of the Parker Lands as Ecologically Significant Lands. The inter-relationship of forest, wetlands and the wildlife in the Parker Lands should make preservation of this unique green space ecosystem a priority, not an after-thought.

Therefore, OURS-Winnipeg requests that an up-to-date, comprehensive Environmental Assessment of all the Parker Lands, both public and private, be completed prior to any decisions by the City of Winnipeg regarding the Southwest Rapid Transit Stage 2 alignment.

A large part of the Parker Land area is now private, but those lands were once public. The Fort Rouge/Parker land swap that converted part of these lands from public to private ownership is currently part of an independent real estate audit. OURS-Winnipeg suggests that the City of Winnipeg, at the very least, should wait for the independent real estate audit findings and recommendations before making any irreversible long-term decisions regarding the Southwest Rapid Transit route alignment.

OURS-Winnipeg endorses the request made by Councillor John Orlikow at the Standing Committee on Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works (Feb.26,2013): "A Functional Design Committee for the SWBRT can take into account the multiple issues and projects surrounding and impacting this project, such as water management, integrated development, roads, protection of natural habitat and green space, traffic and active transportation, connectivity and station location,"

OURS-Winnipeg calls for a Secondary Area Plan as a prior requirement to any development decisions that takes place and we note that the Southwest Rapid Transit Route alignment decision constitutes the first step in development. OURS-Winnipeg contends that a proper Area Plan is therefore required BEFORE final decisions are made regarding Southwest Rapid Transit Stage 2 alignment.

OURS-Winnipeg contends that the Area Plan must include consideration of the all natural areas, forests, wetlands and the green spaces of the Parker Lands under both public and private ownership.
The process of developing an Area Plan must fully engage the area residents and area businesses as well as other stakeholders.

OURS-Winnipeg presents the following points for consideration:

Compensation for loss of ecological integrity is not possible as the loss is permanent.

Draining wetland has huge social and environmental consequences.

Natural urban wetlands are key areas for environmental education and they also have great value from a social point of view. The Parker Wetlands are unique natural wetlands in the City of Winnipeg.

The City has a requirement for due diligence to consult with its constituents. The Public Consultation process provided minimum interchange opportunity - that is not what voters expect of their politicians.

Lack of meaningful public consultations leads to a lack of trust and to cynicism. This fosters a democracy deficit in Winnipeg. The disengagement of citizens in the decision process results in views that special interests are more engaged while ordinary citizens less engaged. A report that recommends running a rapid transit route away from where people live and through high value, unique urban wetlands and Class A/B forests clearly requires further analysis and debate.

The City must take the time to make the right decision, not the expedient one whose timing may be influenced more by cost-shared opportunities rather than environmental concerns.

"We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children"
- Chief Seattle – Suquamish Nation-