The Vermette-Seine River Forest: Stewarding the Protection of our Wild Urban Spaces







About the Authour

Erika Blackie is a Masters student in the University of Manitoba's City Planning program. Over the summer of 2013, she worked with Save Our Seine River Environment Inc. (SOS), Riel Parks and Rivers Common (RPARC) and their members contributing her skills and experience in planning and design projects to acquire skills for professional planning practice. Born and raised in Winnipeg, Erika is an advocate for the preservation of our wild urban spaces believing that a personal connection with nature is essential for the development of healthy, resilient communities.

The authour acknowledges that research limitations are present. As an emerging professional, shortcomings exist in knowledge, skills, and expertise. As an 'independent consultant', difficulty accessing information, both oral and written was experienced.

The completion of this report is due to the generous contributions of many individuals. Thank you to: Dave Watson and RPARC members who provided guidance through out the project; Denis DePape and SOS members for welcoming me to their organization; the various Stakeholders for sharing their insights and experience on green space development; the Government of Canada's, Canada Summer Jobs for providing funding; and Save Our Seine for providing printing costs.

Thank you.

Introduction

Within the St. Germain/Vermette Community, a unique habitat exists. With the Seine River as the heart, a green ribbon of riverbottom forest with pockets of oak and aspen forest, wetlands, and prairie fields meanders amongst residential development and agricultural activity. This forest is known as the Vermette-Seine River Forest.



The red dot indicates the approximate location of the Vermette-Seine Forest River in Winnipeg

The Vermette-Seine River Forest is located in the southeast quadrant of Winnipeg, one of the fastest urbanizing areas in Winnipeg. Speculation that a large section of the Vermette-Seine River Forest may be on the market for sale in the not too distant future concerns local residents. Specifically, residents fear that the ecological, cultural, and historical value of the Vermette-Seine River Forest will be overlooked to favour development.

The community of St. Germain Vermette has a unique opportunity- an opportunity to dream, envision, and engage with one another on what they would like the Vermette-Seine River Forest to be. Historically, the residents of St. Germain/ Vermette have been quite involved in guiding development in their neighbourhood. Their passion and interest in development has the potential to significantly shape future uses of the Vermette-Seine River Forest.



A closer view shows the Seine River meandering through the Vermette-Seine River Forest

Although located in St. Germain/ Vermette, development of the Vermette-Seine River Forest affects all Winnipegger's in which the decisions made regarding how the land will be used may set precedents for green space development across the city. To tell the story of the Vermette-Seine River Forest and the process of green space development in Winnipeg, this report identifies an inventory of the lands, historically relevant sites, stakeholders, and guiding documents which influence green space preservation and development.

In all, the intent of the Vermette-Seine River Forest toolkit is to serve as a starting point for community conversations on how best to plan for the Vermette-Seine River Forest.

Who is RPARC?

In the winter of 2013, a group of residents in the southeast quadrant of Winnipeg were concerned about how future residential development may impact the local urban wilderness. Of particular interest is the Vermette-Seine River Forest in the St. Germain/Vermette neighbourhood, an area located south of the Perimeter Highway, east of St. Anne's Road/Four Mile Road, west of Sioux Road and Willowgrove Road., and north of the Duff Roblin Parkway. The group of residents formed a coalition of concerned citizens under the name, Riel Parks and Rivers Commons (RPARC).

RPARC

RPARC is committed to transparent urban planning processes that recognize and incorporate the value and importance of our green spaces and to protecting and enhancing urban forest, wildlife corridors and grasslands.

Each founding member has a history and interest in preserving the natural beauty of our urban forest, prairie habitat, and wildlife corridors.

The founding members include:

Save Our Seine Environment Inc.
Save Our Seine (SOS), was formed in 1990 and over the past 23 years have been advocates of preserving and enhancing the Seine River wilderness corridor. Their efforts has led to considerable enhancements to Winnipeg's Seine River. Most recently, over the course of 3 years, SOS fought to keep a 117-acre area of river bottom forest, marshland, and tall grass prairie from residential development. Today, the Bois des Esprit Forest is the largest remaining riverbank forest in the city and a treasured community asset. If it were not for the perseverance and dedication of SOS, the natural beauty of this land would have been lost. SOS continues to play a vital role as advocates, watchdogs, and environmental activists advocating for awareness and stewardship of the Seine River wilderness corridor.

OURS-Winnipeg
OURS-Winnipeg (Outdoor Urban Recreational Spaces), advocates for good stewardship of the City's green spaces, river and nature corridors and the urban forest. Starting in 2011, OURS-Winnipeg spearheaded a movement in Winnipeg to protect publicly owned golf courses from development. Their campaign was incredibly successfully bringing citizens together leading to a defeat by Council to both the sale and lease of Winnipeg's golf courses. OURS-Winnipeg continues to urge

the City of Winnipeg to both enhance the natural amenities of Winnipeg and to develop a vision and planning document for Winnipeg's urban green spaces.

St. Germain/Vermette Community Association
The St. Germain/Vermette Community Association was formed in the early 1970's when residents became interested in development plans to accommodate their growing population. Working with the City of Winnipeg, a secondary plan for the area was adopted and continues to guide planning efforts in the area. More recently, the St. Germain/Vermette Community Association supported and assisted the l'Union nationale métisse Saint-Joseph du Manitoba in the designation of the old Vermette Community Centre site to become Vermette Park. Today, the St. Germain/Vermette Community Association remains active and interested in the development and preservation of green space in their community.

L'Union nationale métisse Saint-Joseph du Manitoba
L'Union nationale helped lead the way for the dedication of Vermette Park. Located on the banks of the Seine River in St.Germain/Vermette, the land was once part of Pointe Vermette, a collection of Metis-owned land that belonged to the Parish of St. Norbert. Within the last thirty years, the City of Winnipeg took ownership of the old Vermette Community Centre site with an interest to sell the semi-forested land for development. L'Union nationale recognized that the site held cultural, historical, and environmental importance and therefore were interested in preserving it as green space. Working with the City of Winnipeg, the St. Germain/Vermette Community Association, and Save Our Seine, l'Union nationale worked relentlessly to see the site become Vermette Park. Through their continued work of tree plantings, ongoing maintenance, and use of the space, l'Union nationale are true stewards of Vermette Park.

Overall, RPARC and its members advocate for transparent urban planning processes that recognize and incorporate wild urban green spaces, particularly through the protection and enhancement of urban forests, wildlife corridors and grasslands, with a focus on the riverbanks and neighboring lands of the urban Seine River.

The Vermette-Seine River Forest

The Vermette-Seine River Forest is located in the St. Germain/ Vermette neighbourhood of Winnipeg. St.Germain/Vermette is a rural residential neighbourhood located in the southeast quadrant of Winnipeg; an area south of the Perimeter Highway, east of St. Anne's, west of Sioux Road/ Willowgrove Road, and north of the Duff Roblin Parkway Trail.

The majority of land parcels in St.Germain/Vermette are zoned Rural Residential- 5, allowing large-lot rural residential development along with limited agricultural uses. The municipal development plan for the area has adopted a medium to low density zoning bylaw. The bylaw is to accommodate those who prefer rural-residential living as well as provides space for onsite water and sewer as the community is not connected to Winnipeg's water and waste system. Although a few businesses are located in the community, the land use is primarily residential.

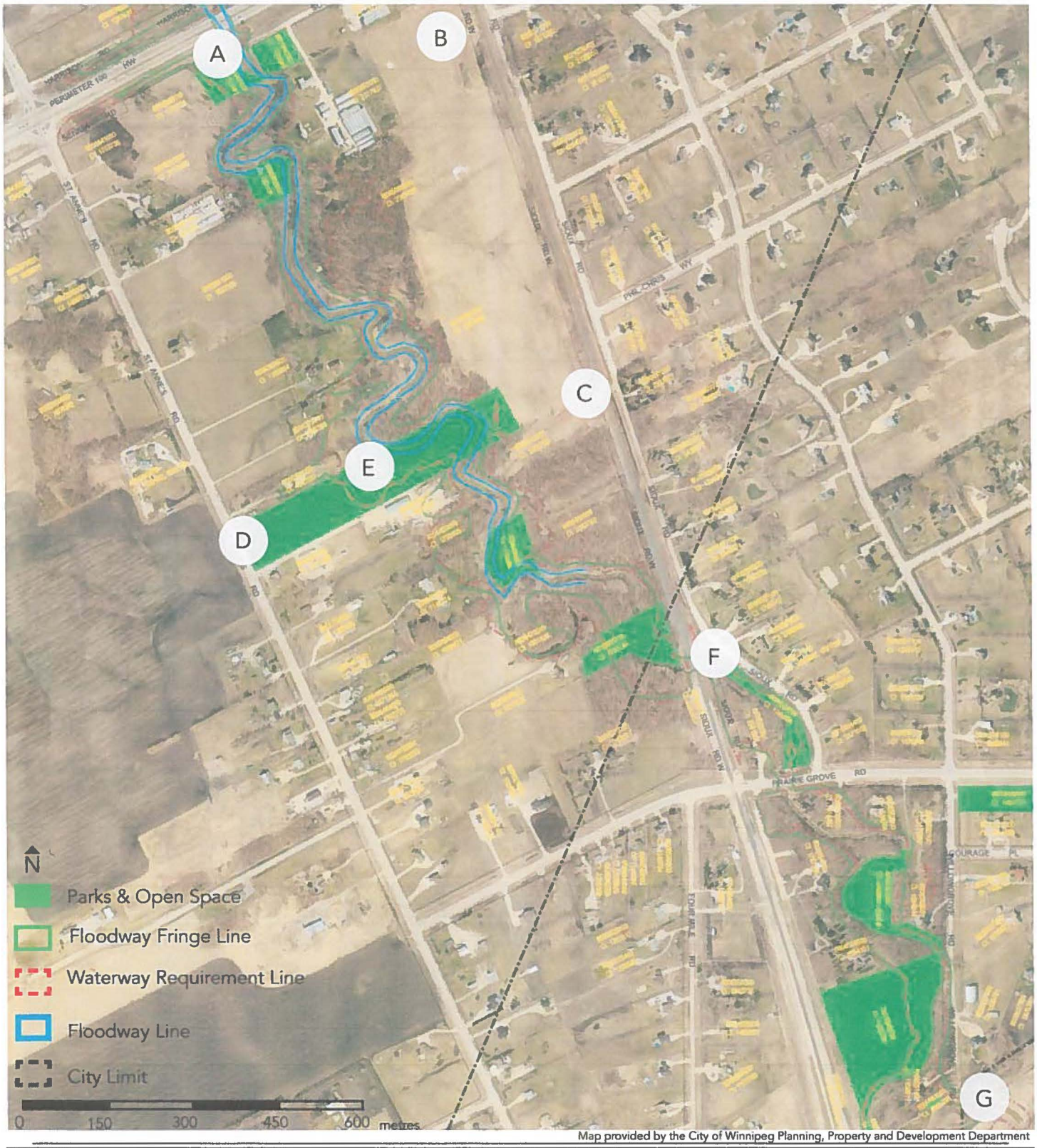
A unique opportunity for land use along the Seine River may be approaching, awakening interest in sustainable and suitable land use for the Vermette-Seine River Forest.

The Seine River meanders through the community and along its shores is an ecological wildlife corridor full of extensive natural habitat, known as the Vermette-Seine River Forest. The Vermette-Seine River Forest crosses 52 properties, with 35 different owners holding title to property. In addition to private landowners, the City of Winnipeg, Her Majesty the Queen, and the Canadian Pacific Railway Company all own land.

A unique opportunity for land use along the Seine River corridor may be approaching. There is speculation amongst community residents that a large section of the Vermette-Seine River Forest may be on the market for sale. The Sumka Brothers Vegetable Market, located off of the Perimeter Highway, just east of St. Anne's, has appeared closed for the past few summers. The landowners of the market own approximately 65.5 acres, of which 9.3 acres include the Vermette-Seine River Forest. Although it is just speculation, the potential sale awakens interest in sustainable and suitable land use for the area. With a commitment to preserving and enhancing the Seine River corridor, RPARC and its members view the potential sale as an opportunity to begin community discussions on future land uses.

The Vermette-Seine River Forest Areas of Interest

This map highlights areas of interest and is intended to create discussion regarding the Vermette-Seine River Forest. Descriptions are found on page 8 & 9.



Map provided by the City of Winnipeg Planning, Property and Development Department



With the Seine River at the heart of the forest, the Vermette-Seine River Forest features numerous ecosystems. Pockets of oak and aspen forest, wetlands, and prairie fields are all found. Infrastructure, such as roads, to service future development has the potential to disrupt Seine River ecosystems.



Looking southeast at the corner of the Perimeter Highway and Sioux Rd, this property is the site of the former Sumka Brothers Vegetable Market. This area includes 4 separate land parcels totaling approximate 65.5 acres zoned Rr5.



Looking north, on the Sumka Brothers Vegetable Market property, the Vermette-Seine River Forest is visible in the background. This section of forest is classified as Grade A Riverbottom Forest by the City of Winnipeg Naturalist Services. RPARC and SOS are concerned that without protection, development could impact the health of the forest.





Vermette Park is a 10 acre site extending across the Seine River, bordering the Sumka property. The Park has tremendous potential to be further developed for community needs. For example, as an outdoor educational classroom or as an anchor connecting trails and recreational opportunities.



The Seine River corridor is an ecologically rich area. Over 90% of riverbank properties are high quality habitat providing bank stabilization, food and habitat for aquatic communities, and natural filtration of nutrients and chemicals caused by surrounding urbanization and agricultural practices.

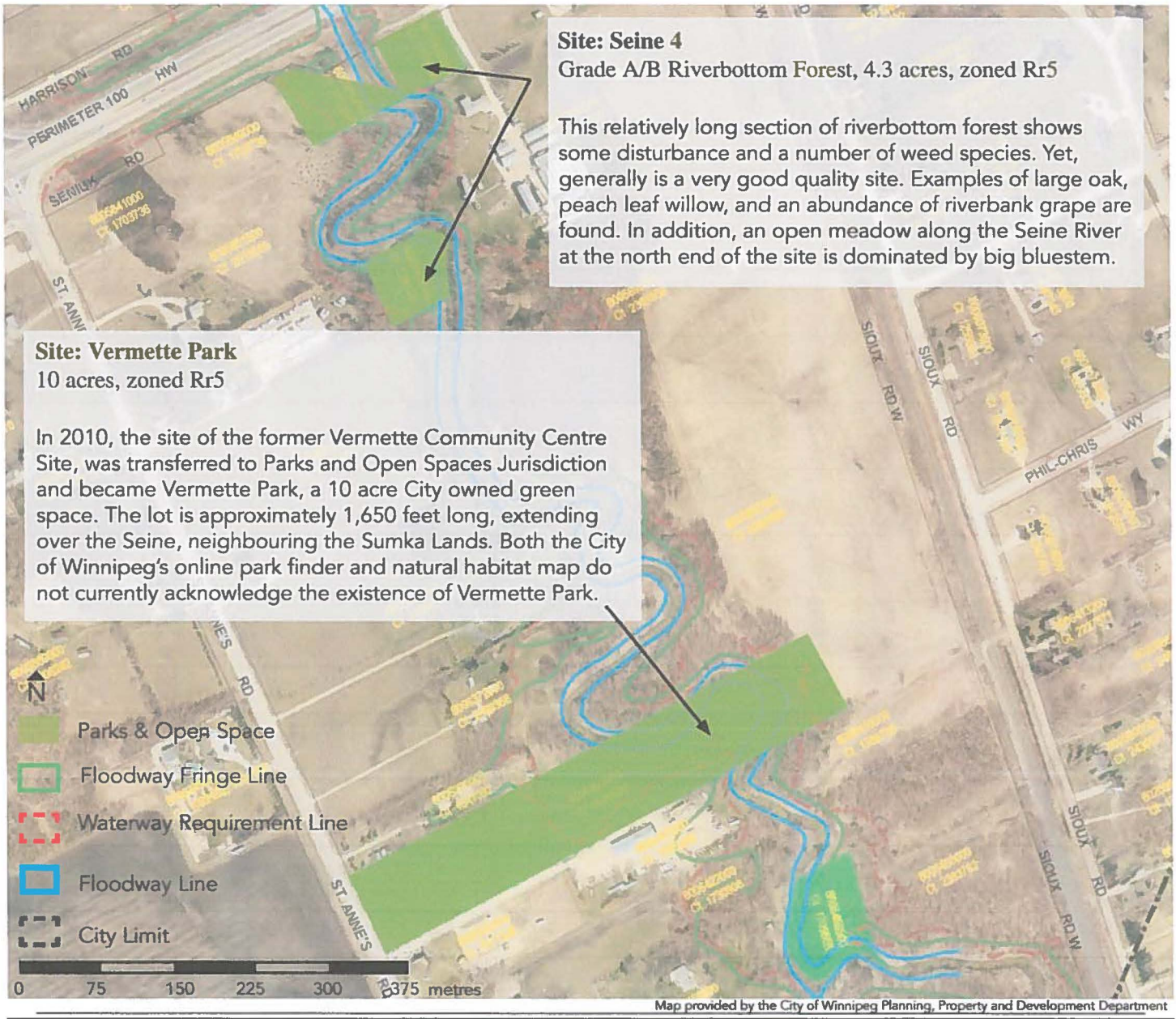


An informal trail leads hikers and cyclists south from the Vermette-Seine River Forest to the Duff Roblin Parkway. The Parkway's vision aligns with RPARC's to create a rich, sustainable greenway along the Seine River with enhanced recreational and educational opportunities.

High Quality Habitat

With the Seine River at the heart of the forest, the Vermette-Seine River Forest features numerous ecosystems. Pockets of oak and aspen forest, wetlands, and prairie fields are found. Over 90% of the riverbank properties are high quality habitat with a large portion being 'A' quality.

Riverbottom forest is the main ecosystem found in the Vermette-Seine River Forest. South of the Perimeter Highway and north of Prairie Grove Road, a relatively long section of riverbottom forest is home to large oaks, peach leaf willows, and riverbank grapes. An open meadow is also located just south of the Perimeter, home to native tall grass prairie. South of Prairie Grove Road and north of the Red River Floodway, the riverbottom forest features oak and aspen forest with a diverse understory. Evidence of disturbance can be found in some sections including an old homestead, metal dumping, old drainage channels, and paths.



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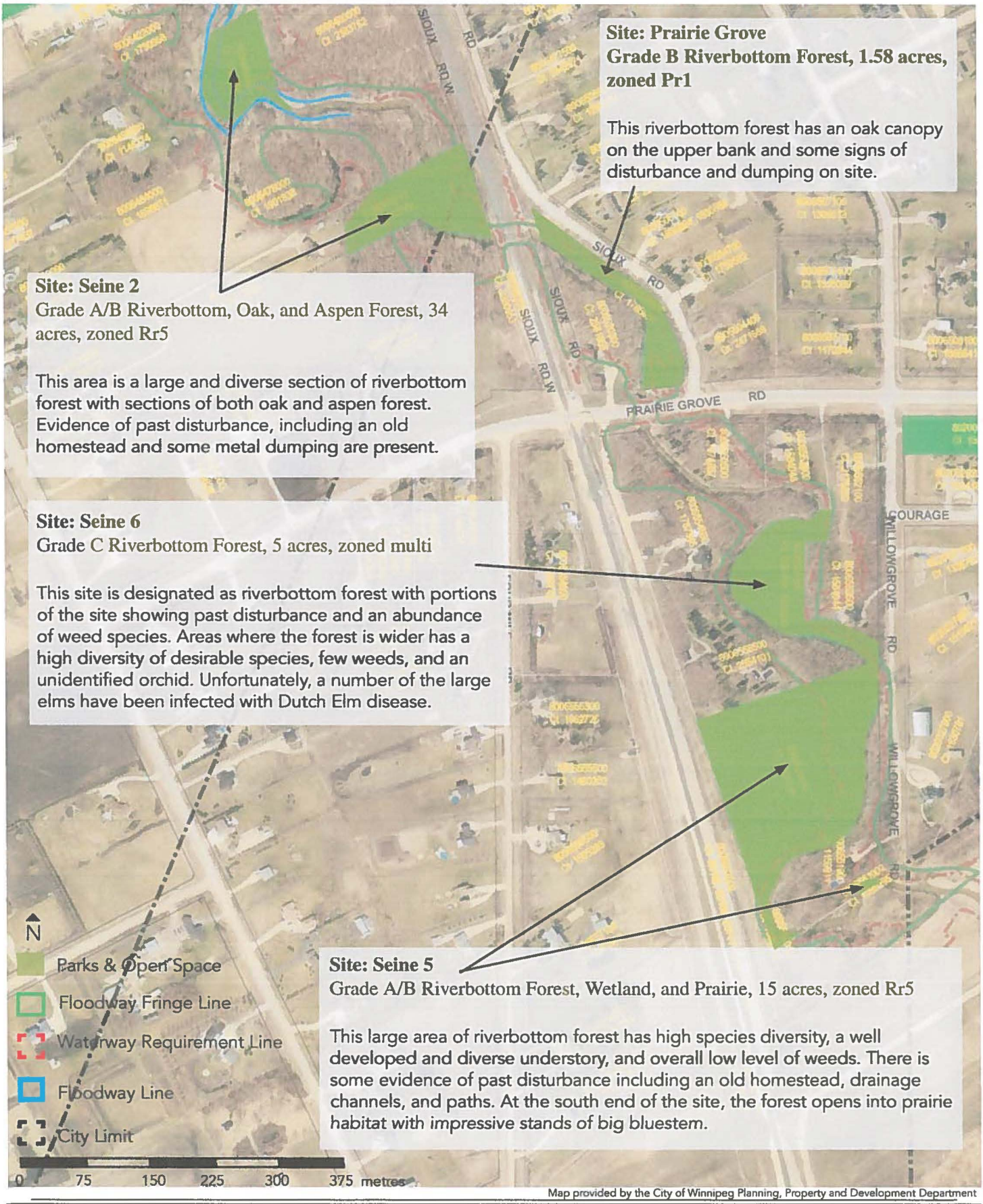


Site: Prairie Grove
Grade B Riverbottom Forest, 1.58 acres, zoned Pr1

This riverbottom forest has an oak canopy on the upper bank and some signs of disturbance and dumping on site.

Site: Seine 2
Grade A/B Riverbottom, Oak, and Aspen Forest, 34 acres, zoned Rr5

This area is a large and diverse section of riverbottom forest with sections of both oak and aspen forest. Evidence of past disturbance, including an old homestead and some metal dumping are present.

Site: Seine 6
Grade C Riverbottom Forest, 5 acres, zoned multi

This site is designated as riverbottom forest with portions of the site showing past disturbance and an abundance of weed species. Areas where the forest is wider has a high diversity of desirable species, few weeds, and an unidentified orchid. Unfortunately, a number of the large elms have been infected with Dutch Elm disease.

Site: Seine 5
Grade A/B Riverbottom Forest, Wetland, and Prairie, 15 acres, zoned Rr5

This large area of riverbottom forest has high species diversity, a well developed and diverse understory, and overall low level of weeds. There is some evidence of past disturbance including an old homestead, drainage channels, and paths. At the south end of the site, the forest opens into prairie habitat with impressive stands of big bluestem.

Map provided by the City of Winnipeg Planning, Property and Development Department

Property Owners

Thirty-five property owners hold title to land that includes sections of the Vermette-Seine River Forest. The majority of the Vermette-Seine River Forest lies across privately owned land; thirty-two landowners are private and two are public. The owner of the Sumka Brothers Vegetable Market is currently the largest landowner of the Vermette-Seine River Forest. The City of Winnipeg owns approximately 70 acres of the Vermette-Seine River Forest, all of which is riverbank and makes up less than 10% of riverbank properties. As a small portion of the Vermette-Seine River Forest is publicly owned, collaboration amongst private landowners is necessary to sustain, preserve, and enhance the forest.

Over 35 property owners hold title to land which includes sections of the Vermette-Seine River Forest. Community involvement is therefore key to move forward in discussions regarding land use.

A unique public policy is in place for the City of Winnipeg to purchase additional land along the Seine River. This policy is known as the Seine River Waterway Requirement. The Seine River Waterway Requirement grants the City of Winnipeg the right to purchase additional river bank property along the Seine River for $15,000/acre. Although the City of Winnipeg currently owns very little property, the waterway requirement is a key component towards initiating targeted conservation and preservation efforts of both the Seine River and the Vermette-Seine River Forest.

Historical Significance

Long before Winnipeg was large enough to include St. Vital as a suburb, St.Germain/Vermette existed. Originally part of the Parish of St. Norbert, St. Germain/Vermette was established around the 1800's. Settlers included market gardeners, mink ranchers, and labourers. As a result of its history, St.Germain/Vermette is rich in cultural and historical landmarks. There are five historic points of interest located close to the Vermette-Seine River Forest.

Pilon House

Built in 1869, the Pilon House is one of the oldest private homes in Winnipeg. The house is named after the Pilon Family, a well-known family in the area who occupied the house well into the early 1900's. Located close to the banks of the Seine River off of St. Anne's, south of the Perimeter Highway in the

Vermette neighbourhood, the house is an excellent example of a late 19th century squared oak Red River construction farm house. The house is vacant and has signs of aging, yet some of the original lathe and plaster exterior cladding is present and the dove-tail joints are in excellent condition.

The Pilon House is designated as a historical building and a municipally designated site. The most recent assessment of the building was conducted in 2004. Although interest exists from community organizations to refurbish and relocate the building, there are currently no plans to do so.

Vermette Post Office

In 1935, Ben Gobin, a community resident, opened a General Store at Lot 157 St. Anne's Road. The General Store was located on the east side of St. Anne's, close to what is currently Rolly's Transfer. To help attract business to his store, Mr. Gobin sought help from Dr. Howden, a Norwood resident and Federal Senator, to obtain permission to open a post office. Through the efforts of Mr. Gobin and Dr. Howden the Vermette Post Office was opened for business. In the 1960's, the post office was moved to a local garage owned by Matt Kolodrupski (Lot 161 St. Anne's) and later moved to its present location on St. Anne's Road.

The Former Vermette Community Club

In the early 1940's, a St. Anne's Road resident, Mr. Pozer, identified that the Vermette Community was in need of a space for community events and gatherings. Taking it upon himself, Pozer offered his house and welcomed various community events at his home. Mrs. Keir, a resident of St. Anne's Road, as well as Matt Kolodrupski, Maurice Brabant Sr., Howard Kennedy Sr., and a Mr. Miner, all shared Pozer's vision. Near the end of World War II, Kolodrupski, Miner, Brabant, and Kennedy shared the cost of purchasing ten acres of land on the east side of St. Anne's Road, extending back approximately 1,650 feet across the Seine River. Keir provided the financing for the building itself, and in 1952, the Vermette Community Club was granted community club status by the City of Winnipeg.

St.Germain/Vermette is rich in cultural and historical landmarks which includes a century squared oak farm house, and the sites of the community's first post office, community club, and school.

At the heart of the community, the Vermette Community Club was a hub of activity. From Christmas concerts, hockey tournaments, monthly dances with a live orchestra where youth learned how to dance the waltz and foxtrot, to the annual Midwest Show with a Ferris wheel, merry-go-round and midway.

Unfortunately, age took its toll and the building was torn down. The vacated Vermette Community School was moved on site and used as the community club until age resulted in its demolition as well. Today a small building in poor condition is on the premises. Although its origin is unknown it remains used by the Winnipeg Fancy Pigeon Association with a sign at the small entrance of the building welcoming you to the "Vermette Community Club".

In the 1950's, the 10 acre Community Club site was donated to the City of St. Vital in trust for the community of Vermette, to be held and used for the community's benefit. The community of Vermette owned the land until the City of Winnipeg acquired the title to the property in 1997. The land was transferred from the Planning, Property and Development Department to the Parks and Open Space department. In 2011, the space was rezoned to PR 1, a passive park space, and today is known as Vermette Park.

The Former Vermette School

In the late 1920's, a community resident named William Vermette, donated some of his land as a building site for a new school. The site was located at 1540 St. Anne's Road, south of the Perimeter Highway and on the west side of St. Anne's Road. When the school first opened, classes were conducted in French with religion as an integral part of the curriculum. English language was later introduced as Anglophones moved into the area. The new school was incorporated as the Vermette School District No. 970, yet later amalgamated with the St. Vital School Division, and the school was closed. The vacant school was then moved and served as the Vermette Community Club after the original community club building was torn down due to age.

Community Planning

To truly identify a vision for the Vermette-Seine River Forest public consultation must occur with key stakeholders. Stakeholders are a person or organization with an interest because they will be affected or may have some influence in the planning process. Stakeholders typically include local residents and businesses, civic departments, and organizations.

It is widely recognized and accepted that the key to true, meaningful public consultation is in the hands-on involvement of local residents in community planning. Community planning is a favourable, and for some, the only way towards community residents having meaningful involvement shaping their surroundings in the way they want.

The terms 'community planning' and 'local involvement' are intentionally used to describe the method of public input for the Vermette-Seine River Forest. Community planning reinforces that the hopes, fears, dreams, and desires for a community comes from active participation of the end users, the local residents.

The key to true community input is in the hands-on involvement of local residents. The articulation of a community members hopes, fears, dreams, and desires reinforces decisions made ultimately reflecting local residents.

The approach adopted towards local involvement is different for every community, as each place needs to devise its own strategy to suite local needs and conditions. In addition, the principles, methods, and scenarios used for community planning will likely be different for each stakeholder group. As a result, each community planning session must be tailored to the interests and needs of the stakeholder group. Established principles, methods, and scenarios can be drawn on for inspiration.

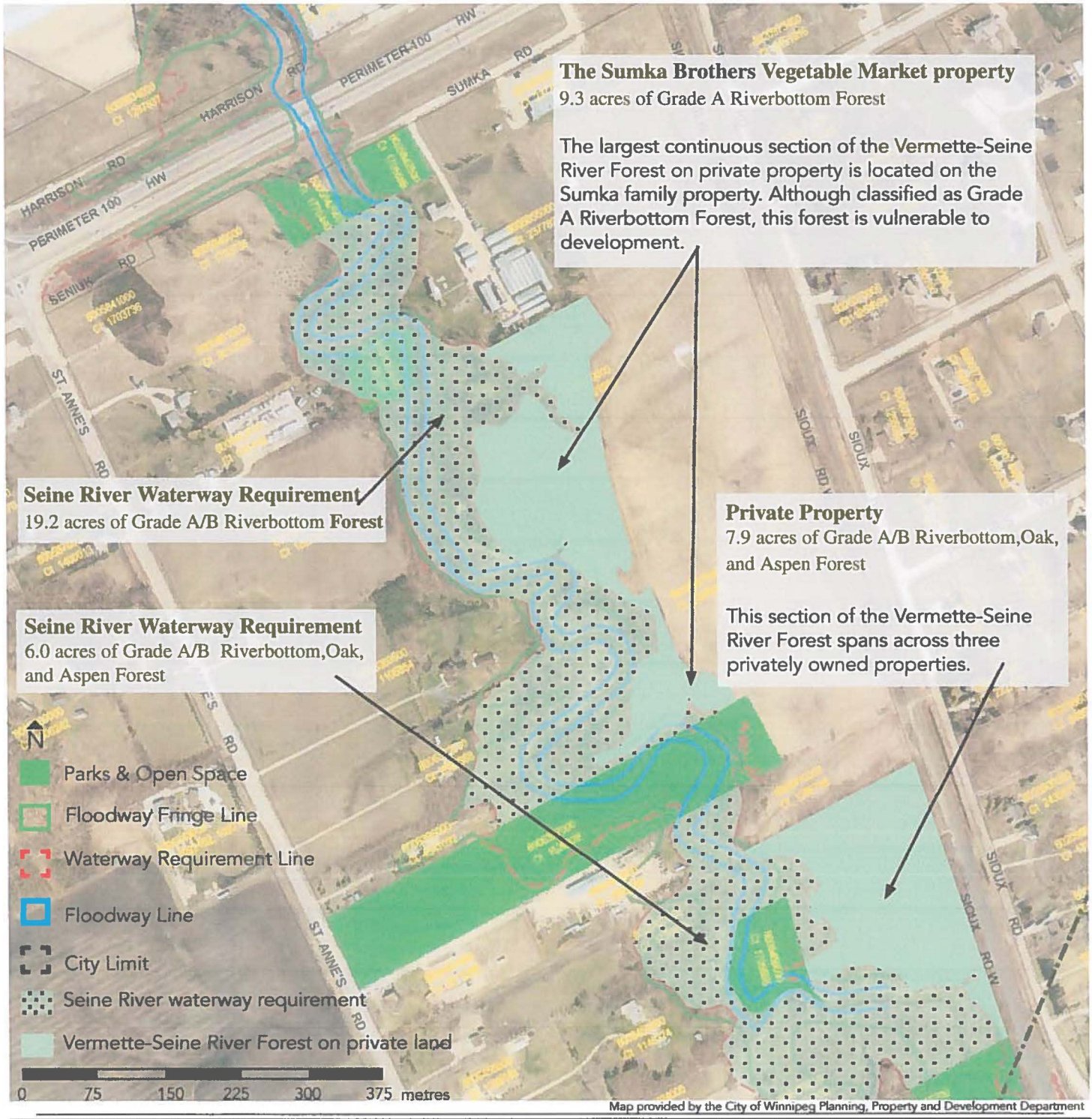
Regardless of the approach, the overall intent of community planning sessions should be to ultimately determine:

- What is the vision for the area?
- What are the values for the area?
- What are the guiding principles?

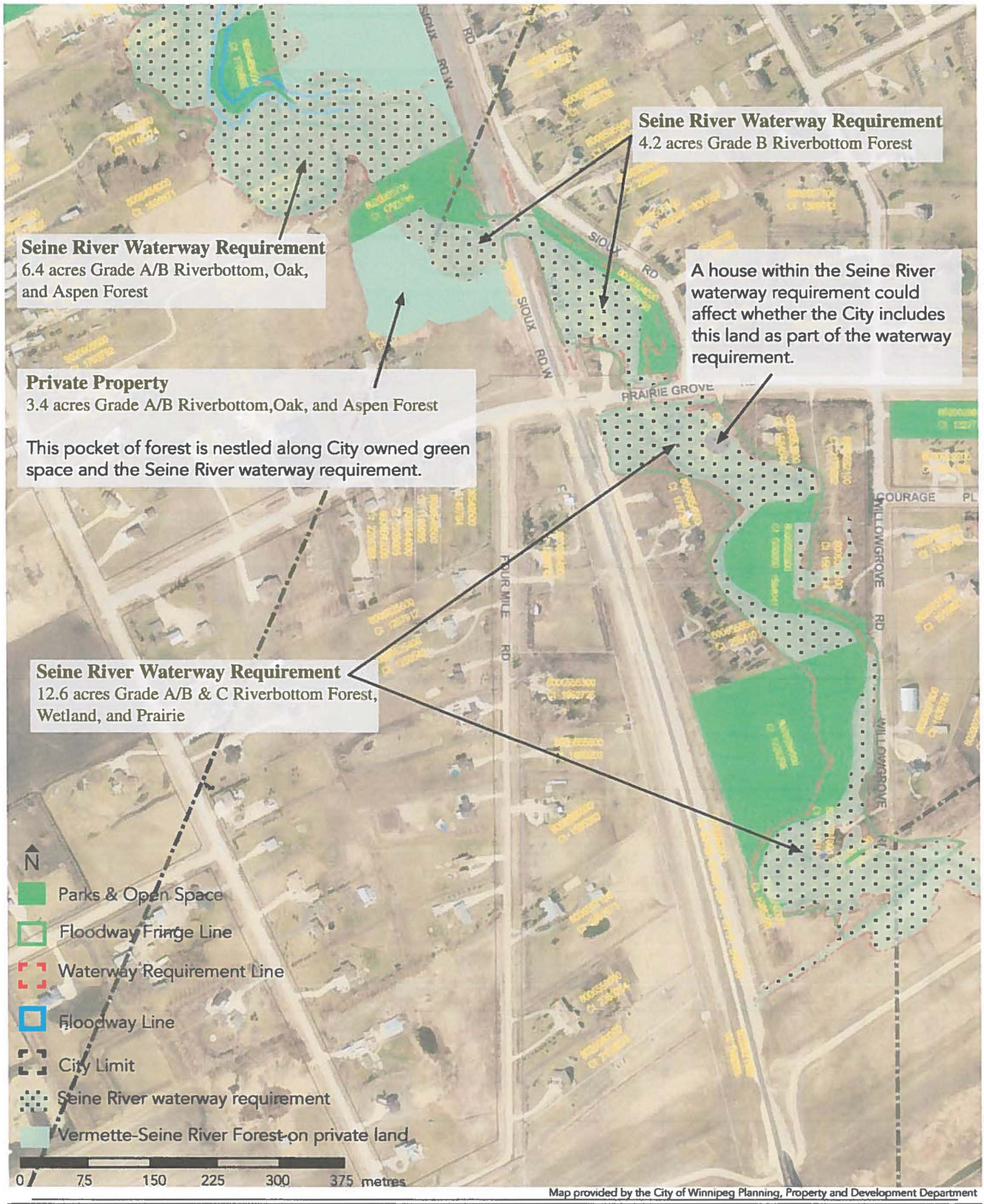
Responses to these three questions can help provide direction for stakeholders and citizens alike, working together, cooperating and collaborating to preserve and/or sensitively develop the Vermette-Seine River Forest.

Privately Owned Areas of the Vermette-Seine River Forest

Community planning is particularly important for the Vermette-Seine River Forest as the majority of the forest is on privately owned land. Landowners must be consulted and potentially compensated. The map illustrates privately owned land that includes sections of the Vermette-Seine River Forest as well as sections of the forest that could be protected under the Seine River waterway requirement.



Map provided by the City of Winnipeg Planning, Property and Development Department



Map provided by the City of Winnipeg Planning, Property and Development Department

Green Space Conservation and Development

It is important to understand how and why green space conservation and development occurs. An understanding of the how and why can mobilize individuals to seek change if change is viewed as desirable. Green space conservation and development in Winnipeg is guided by both development plans and policies. A few of the key plans and policies directing green space conservation and development are outlined.

OurWinnipeg

In 2011, *OurWinnnipeg* took effect as the city's official municipal development plan guiding growth and change for the city. *OurWinnipeg* outlines numerous visions related to green space conservation and development. For example, below are a few applicable direction strategies pulled from *OurWinnipeg* relating to green space:

OurWinnipeg: A City that Works, Recreation

- Direction 1: Promote and enable opportunities for all age groups to be active as part of their daily lives
- Direction 2: Work with community partners to provide services that are responsive to the community's recreation and leisure needs

Complete Communities: New Communities

- Direction 5: Encourage green development and conserve natural areas to develop new communities in a sustainable manner
- Direction 6: Reflect heritage in the development of new communities

A Sustainable Winnipeg

- Direction 2: Recognize and preserve Winnipeg's parks, green spaces, and riverbanks as green oases in our urban setting
- Direction 6: Enable the protection of ecologically significant lands
- Direction 7: Promote the use of rivers and riverbanks

Winnipeg's municipal development plan, OurWinnipeg states numerous visions related to green space conservation and development. Yet, OurWinnipeg is criticized as lacking weight in applying its visions to development plans.

The direction strategies of *OurWinnipeg* have good intentions yet the application of these strategies in Precinct Plans remain unclear. A Precinct Plan is the "blueprint" for future development in areas identified by the City of Winnipeg as under-developed, called Precincts. An example of a Precinct

is the area south of Island Lakes, designated by the City as Precinct K. The development of these precincts is to be guided by a comprehensive planning process, the Precinct Plan, which reflects the strategies of *OurWinnipeg*. Although legally recognized as Winnipeg's municipal development plan, *OurWinnipeg* is often criticized in lacking weight and authority in determining the content of Precinct Plans. If the *OurWinnipeg* strategies for green space conservation and development are limited in Precinct Plans, what then is directing green spaces conservation and development?

Public Park Reserve Strategy

To provide community green space, the City of Winnipeg has an established practice referred to as the Public Park Reserve Strategy. The Public Park Reserve Strategy states that:

Winnipeg's Public Park Reserve Strategy states that developers must dedicate a minimum of 8% of the net land area for public purposes, or the developer shall pay the City 10% of the appraised value of the land.

A. The Developer shall dedicate a minimum of 8% of the net area for public park purposes and pay the remaining 2% in cash. Or,

B. If land is not dedicated for public purposes, the Developer shall provide cash payment representing 10% of the appraised value of the Development Application as determined by the City and prior to the release of subdivision mylars by the City.

The cash in lieu of land dedication occurs when the dedication is deemed unnecessary or undesirable due to the geographical context of the area (size, external pressures, location).

The Public Park Reserve Strategy addresses the quantity of green space and does not explicitly address issues regarding the quality of green space.

The City of Winnipeg public park reserves strategy reflects the amount of green space that will be available to residents. While the amount of green space is an important concern, the City of Winnipeg's public park reserve strategy does not consider the following issues:

- Quality of landscape design
- Ecological health and biodiversity
- Appropriateness of design for diverse users and activities
- Interpretive and educational programming
- Connectivity

Residents, organizations, and communities across Canada and in Winnipeg are recognizing the value in identifying and utilizing more performance-based approaches to parkland needs assessments.

Ecologically Significant Natural Lands Strategy & Policy

The City of Winnipeg employs the Ecologically Significant Natural Lands Strategy & Policy to protect Winnipeg's natural lands. Under this policy, natural lands are identified as all lands that support native plants and animals, and are a representative of the natural ecology of the region. During the development of a precinct plan, the presence of natural areas is reviewed. Using an established method, a City of Winnipeg surveyor conducts an assessment of natural lands within the precinct. The method rates characteristics of the natural habitat and includes: the presence of native species, natural habitats, and degree of disturbance. If the site is deemed worthy of protection, options are considered in cooperation with the developer of the land.

Natural land assessments, of publicly owned lands, including the assessments of the Vermette-Seine River Forest, can be found online: http://www.winnipeg.ca/publicworks/naturalist/ns/Natural_Areas/default.asp.

The Canadian Ecological Gifts Program

In addition to municipal policies, green space conservation and development can occur through tax incentive programs. The Canadian Ecological Gifts Program is an example of a tax incentive program. Canadians who own ecologically sensitive land can gift it to a qualified recipient, such as a municipality or environmental organization. When the land is gifted, a covenant or conservation easement is placed on the land ensuring that the lands environmental heritage is conserved in perpetuity. In return to donating ecologically sensitive land, the Income Tax Act of Canada provides significant tax benefits through the program. Pollock Island of King's Park is a local example of a property donated under the eco-gift program to the City of Winnipeg. Further information about the Canadian Ecological Gifts Program can be accessed at: www.ec.gc.ca/pde-egp.

The Next Steps

Over the past six months, RPARC and its members have taken the lead towards establishing and initiating a conversation for future land use of the Vermette-Seine River Forest. The Vermette-Seine River Forest is in relatively good ecological condition warranting protection from development. It is the hope that by sharing their knowledge, a dialogue between RPARC and community residents can begin. RPARC identifies that this report is just the beginning towards the development of a community-led planning process and that to continue this momentum further action is required. RPARC invites and urges community residents who share a similar passion in protection of our urban wilderness to engage in dialogue with friends and neighbors, speak with local politicians, and become active to steward the future of the Vermette-Seine River Forest.

