Submission - Michele Kading

Subject: Proposed sale of John Blumberg Golf Course – A Different Perspective

As an environmental advocate for urban greenspace in Winnipeg since the mid-1990s, I have been following the fate of the city's parks and open spaces and the city's commitment to the conservation of ecologically-sensitive natural lands. This includes John Blumberg Golf Course.

I am here today to share my perspective on the proposed sale of this particular golf course. Even though I live five minutes from Kildonan Golf Course and Shooters Golf Course, I was a regular golfer on Saturday mornings at John Blumberg from 1993 through 2012 so I know the golf course very well. Like many Winnipeggers, I consider it mine.

One of the reasons that I enjoy golf is because I am also a keen birder and I have found that golf courses are excellent for birding. This is due to their large size, diversity of habitat (wetlands, streams, ponds, open fields of grass, shrubs, and mature forest) often located beside rivers that serve as migration corridors. Many courses around the world are open to birders as a compatible activity and have even built infrastructure to enhance the viewing opportunities on the course.

While golfing in Jasper, I watched in awe as a goldeneye duck flew directly into its tree cavity nest overlooking the tee box. Here in Winnipeg, I saw my first red-headed woodpeckers on a golf course near the airport. But my most significant sighting was the bird that I saw while golfing at John Blumberg. I was walking between two holes near the highway when I saw it perched on a short tree on the fairway near a small stream. This was the only time I have ever seen this species.

This remarkable bird and its close relative the Northern Shrike are unique among songbirds. Shrikes are sometimes called "butcher birds" because they catch small mammals, birds, insects, amphibians, or reptiles. They kill them with their bills and then impale the food on a thorn or barbed wire fence. Shrikes do not have talons like a hawk or falcon to tear the food apart so they have evolved this rather barbaric feeding technique.

The Loggerhead Shrike migrates to southern Manitoba to live and nest in open rural landscapes between May and September.

- "Shrikes are not alarmed by human activity often choosing to hunt and nest in (rural) front yards, parks and golf courses, heavily-grazed pastures, and along busy roads."

Why was this sighting so important? The bird I observed was a Loggerhead Shrike – one of the most endangered birds in Canada. It was hunting on its territory, and there was a strong likelihood that it was nesting on the golf course. Once commonly seen through prairies and parklands of Canada as well as southern Ontario and Quebec, at the time of my sighting, the breeding population in the Winnipeg region was hanging on by a thread. There were only a handful of active nests in the rural landscape north and west of the city (several in West St. Paul and **one in Headingly**). The species was already listed as endangered in Manitoba in 1998 and threatened in western Canada (COSEWIC).

A national recovery program was established to study, monitor, and use captive breeding to restore this vulnerable species to suitable habitat. The City of Winnipeg was a member of the Manitoba Recovery Action Group for this particular endangered species (EMRAG) – as a landowner of critical shrike habitat. Despite efforts to educate the public and landowners, the Winnipeg region population is considered to be extirpated – last observed in 2009.

REASONS GIVEN TO SELL JOHN BLUMBERG GOLF COURSE (AND WHY THEY ARE UNFOUNDED):

1. "A golf course is not a true or valuable greenspace": This argument highlights the urgent need for a Master Plan for Greenspace so everyone is on the same page about definitions for greenspace, parks, open spaces, and natural areas. Golf courses are definitely green spaces. They are dominated by living plants (as opposed to grey or built infrastructure) and they offer more than just a round of golf. They are quiet and peaceful places to experience the sights/sounds/smells of nature, socialize with others, exercise, stay in shape, and relax.
2. "The golf course is rated as a low quality, grade C habitat. It does not provide high quality habitat for wildlife due to the non-native grass and frequency of mowing": The city rates habitats mainly on the level of disturbance and the presence of native species versus weeds. ***For the endangered Loggerhead Shrike, this particular golf course is grade A habitat.***
3. "The development plan will retain the high-quality forest habitat along the river": Retaining only the riverbank forest will not protect the habitat needed by the Loggerhead Shrike. This species prefers to nest in small tree clumps or shelterbelts that have easy access to wide open unfenced spaces with short grass (grazed or mown) for hunting, and thorny shrubs. Suburban developments are too dense and have too many fences.
4. "Turning the golf course into a park would cost the city hundreds of thousands of dollars. We would have to put in trails and plant trees": The golf course already has an access road, parking lot, building with washrooms, and paths for walking between holes. It would cost nothing to return this park to its former status as a park and return it to the jurisdiction of Parks if Council decided not to renew the lease for the golf course. Planting trees would be optional. Encroachment by trees into open spaces is recognized as a threat to loggerhead shrike habitat.

The golf sector has had an image problem with a history as a sport for an exclusive elite, and some people still view golf courses as isolated islands, inaccessible for non-players and biological "deserts." Many golf clubs have also experienced profitability problems due to increasing costs, shrinking member stocks, fewer green fee-guests, and little support from local authorities. (http://www.sterf.org/Media/Get/3052/golf-clubs-as-forerunners)

5. "This golf course is not profitable and costs the city money every year": This argument is a red herring. Regardless of its financial viability, this land is not a "failing golf course." It is a large and valuable park that happens to have a golf course operating on it at this point in time. Every park and golf course owned by the city costs money to operate and maintain as the infrastructure report points out. Park and recreation lands are investments that contribute to our quality of life. Profitability is not a good reason to sell any of them. They are all part of our legacy.
6. "Yes, but this golf course is located outside of Winnipeg": Headingly was part of Winnipeg from 1972 through 1992 and it could be again in the future. The soccer fields and ball diamonds at John Blumberg Park are also outside of the city but are being retained as valuable park assets. Can't have it both ways. Two other large parks are also located outside of the city's current boundary.
7. "It is too far outside Winnipeg to be accessible to all residents and you must get there by car": The baseball diamonds and soccer fields are just as far. Address this gap as part of the Transit Master Plan.
8. "The land can only be used by golfers who pay green fees": It is in your power as city council to make it accessible to a larger number of Winnipeggers. Jurisdictions around the world are **creating multi-functional golf courses** that integrate a variety of other compatible recreational

uses (walking paths, cycling and horseback trails, birding), event spaces (for weddings, club activities), overnight tenting, and even some farming activities (e.g., grazing) – not just winter activities. One document lists 45 possible activities that would broaden the use of a golf course lands to other users. These jurisdictions have overcome the fear of liability.

9. "But we need the money from the sale. We can use it to buy more land for parks inside the city (OurWinnipeg 2045)": Selling 200 acres in Headingly will result in a **net loss of greenspace** that is owned by the city because the real estate prices can be much higher. There are also very few parcels of a comparable size or quality left to purchase within Winnipeg.
10. "Well, we could always use the money from the sale to address the infrastructure deficit in other parks": **This is short-sighted.** The one-time profit from the sale could be spent in a single year. Other **sustainable** sources of funding must be identified for adding and fixing parks without selling land assets. Establish an endowment fund that will generate annual interest.

The discussion of the sale sometimes revolves around the proposed transformative fund and how each ward can get its cut of the profits of the sale of this valuable greenspace land. This important decision should be values-based and the final decision must rise above profit sharing.

REASONS WINNIPEG SHOULD NOT SELL JOHN BLUMBERG GOLF COURSE

1. John Blumberg Park (golf course and soccer/baseball fields) is the fourth largest park that is owned by Winnipeg. It will be virtually impossible to purchase any land of this size or quality in the future. Retaining parks as large as this is very important for the conservation of species. Each nesting pair of Loggerhead Shrikes needs between 25 and 100 acres of space for its territory.
2. **John Blumberg Golf Course was critical habitat for this critically endangered species in the past and it could be again.** To sell this golf course and only retain 38 acres of forest will essentially destroy this as shrike habitat - forever. Habitat loss is a major contributing factor to the decline of almost every endangered species. I prefer not to use the phrase "habitat loss." It is too passive. It makes it sound like the habitat was misplaced by accident when in reality habitat destruction is the result of active choices like the one you are about to make. ***If this golf course is sold for development, the City of Winnipeg will be contributing directly to the potential extinction of this species. The last breeding pair of loggerhead shrikes was observed in the Winnipeg metro region in 2009.*** The recovery team in southern Ontario has proven that captive breeding and release can be successfully used to re-introduce this species to areas with suitable habitat. We already know that John Blumberg Golf Course is suitable habitat and it serve as the focus of a captive breeding program led by the province and the Assiniboine Park Zoo to reintroduce a local population. The climate is also changing and the species could return to the Winnipeg area on its own even without captive breeding as long as suitable habitat remains. Ontario experienced a surprising comeback of the loggerhead shrike in the summer of 2021. This could also happen here. The recovery and survival of this particular endangered species can be compatible with the continuation of golfing but it is not compatible with medium or high density residential developments. ***This endangered species could still recover and return to its former range – as long as we have not knowingly destroyed its habitat.***

- This land should remain within the public realm. If Winnipeg does not want to retain the golf course as park land, it should be given, transferred, or sold to the RM of Headingly so that it can remain in the public trust as park space for conservation and recreation. I am bothered by the fact that the RM's proposal apparently did not make the cut. The City of Winnipeg should not make this decision for the RM by selling the land to a private developer.
- The highest and best use of this land is for conservation and recreation. We cannot continue to set the value of land only through a real estate lens. Land like this golf course provide a full-range of ecological goods and services that must be factored in to every assessment of land value
- It should retained as a major regional park to serve the west side of Winnipeg and Headingly. It has huge potential to be used as a multi-purpose conservation and recreational area to serve the west side of Winnipeg