I believe Councillors and the Mayor are fully aware of the human and environmental catastrophe unfolding in the protected riverbank forest within Fort Douglas Park and adjacent to the North Winnipeg Parkway, yet have proposed no action to avert it.

Instead, we have the encampment garbage pick-up pilot project which, as proposed, is a completely inadequate, bylaw-contravening, band-aid solution to an ever-growing disaster.

Not only is the City willfully contravening its own parks bylaws with this proposed pilot project, it is also completely ignoring its Ecologically Significant Natural Lands Strategy.

Can anyone explain how that could even be considered a good option, never mind the City's preferred plan after years of inaction on this file?

Despite pleas for action and suggested solutions from East Exchange residents going back years, the City appears once again content to perpetuate and further enable an untenable situation to continue unabated.

As a child of the 1960s and an advocate for social change, I have been raising my voice in support of civil rights, human rights and equal rights for women since I was in junior high school. I continue to speak out against discrimination in all its forms and champion every Canadian's right to decent housing.

I am also a proponent of common sense.

I have to believe that the human rights declaration related to people who are homeless was not meant to be absolute, but rather allows for common sense to prevail according to circumstances. I doubt that the champions for people who live unsheltered in urban environments intended– or perhaps even expected – that, in the name of human rights, cities would look the other way as their infrastructure, public amenities, parks, and protected natural habitats were compromised and private property destroyed by encampments.

That solves nothing and doesn't do anyone any good. It's both socially divisive and potentially dangerous.

It's an approach devoid of common sense.

The City of Winnipeg did finally allow common sense to prevail in deciding to no longer allow people to occupy and live in bus shelters as it had the previous three years. Why then would this same common sense approach not factor into the preservation of city parks and protected urban forests?

If alternate accommodation could be found for people who had been living in bus shelters, then why would the same effort not be made for people living on other City-owned property?

Any encampment -- no matter its condition -- and the people who occupy it are going to contribute to the destruction of a natural environment just by virtue of being there.

Dozens of encampments and upwards of 100 campers last summer brought the very existence of the East Exchange District's riverbank forest to the tipping point – to the point of no return. No garbage

pick-ups -- especially “mindful” ones -- are going to save it if encampments continue to infiltrate the forest in large numbers.

Trees will continue to be cut down for fire wood and structural supports, while new growth/the next generation of trees will be burned by out-of-control fires and trampled by foot traffic, including the feet of garbage clean-up crews. Again in the fall, there will be massive destruction -- decapitated trees, broken limbs, uprooted saplings and chewed-up ground cover -- when heavy machinery moves in to remove abandoned structures once again.

Yet, no one on seems to see the urgency to stop any of that – including area social agencies or our Mayor and area Councillor who toured this forest with Exchange residents a year ago. Our warnings that the City’s negligence was a recipe for destruction of the forest, in the park and, by association, in the East Exchange neighbourhood, continue to go unheeded.

Where is the common sense in that?

For these reasons, prohibiting encampments in parks and protected spaces must be a non-negotiable component of this pilot project in order to prevent the destruction of this urban forest, an ecologically vulnerable natural habitat, and public park amenities. A decision must be made to enforce the City’s own bylaws and stop any new encampments from being built in the protected riverbank forest, while ensuring garbage already accumulated is removed. Vigilance will be required on the part of city employees and social agency workers to ensure success in returning the forest to its original, natural state.

It’s our right as taxpayers to expect that our elected officials take that action; it’s their civic responsibility to do so.

The City has the tools, the authority and the responsibility to save the forest while also ensuring that all citizens have a safe, sanitary and dignified place to sleep at night, as is their human right.

Living on a riverbank without water, sanitation and safe, secure shelter and, in so doing, causing destruction of a protected environment, a park and adjacent neighbourhood, is not a human right.

Anyone with common sense will know that.