



Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

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432 Ellice Ave, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 1Y4
Telephone: (204) 943-2561 | Fax: (204) 942-3221
E-mail: info@spcw.mb.ca | Website: www.spcw.mb.ca

March 26th, 2025

Mayor Gillingham,
Members of Council
City of Winnipeg

Re.: Preserving Lemay Forest

Dear Mayor and Council:

The Lemay Forest is important culturally, historically, environmentally, and a place where people come together to spend time on the land. The impact of losing the Lemay Forest would be profound:

- 1) There are potential human remains from a cemetery of the Asile Ritchot;
- 2) It is the likely home of a protected species;
- 3) It is a riparian Forest.

The Asile Ritchot orphanage operated between 1904 to 1948 by the Soeurs de Misericorde to house the infants of unwed mothers and poor families.[1] According to preliminary quantitative analysis there are 3,383 deaths associated with Asile Ritchot, including at least 31 identified as Metis.[1] Historical records indicate that there was a cemetery on the land, and two burial records show that 726 children aged 1 and under were buried between 1907 and 1912.[1] According to the Save the Lemay Forest Coalition, even though the cemetery was deconsecrated and moved, it is unlikely that many of the children's remains were moved because "it would have required the assistance of osteoarchaeologists specializing in neonatal remains and no such professionals existed in the province at that time as far as can be determined".[2] The City of Winnipeg has stated that "no building can occur over the cemetery itself and further suggests that no building occur within a 50 m buffer zone around the cemetery as recommended by the province because of the likelihood that individuals would have buried their loved ones next to the cemetery".[2]

The Lemay Forest is also an area of riparian vegetation or River-bottom forest along its rivers.[3] According to the City of Winnipeg's website this type of forest depends "on the spring floods to deposit silt and replenish the soil with nutrients" and "in return, their roots stabilize stream and riverbanks, helping to reduce erosion".[4] These types of forests are very diverse and are home to a variety of plant and animal species and are "by far the most diverse ecological area in St Norbert, and indeed the prairie habitat".[3,4] The "river bottom forest is home to the majority of the plant and animals species found in the area" believed to "have one of the highest species diversity levels of any riparian landscape.[3]

In addition, according to documents filed in the Court of King's Bench, the developer was asked by Environment and Climate Change Canada about the due diligence and measures taken to meet the obligation under the Migratory Birds Regulations.[5] The federal Migratory Bird Regulations indicate that if any nests of the Pileated Woodpecker or other listed species had been found they would need "year-round protection until they can be deemed abandoned".[6] Abandonment is considered after a period of 12 to 36 months, and is 36 months in the case of the Pileated Woodpecker.[6] It is prohibited under the MBR to "to damage, destroy, disturb or remove migratory bird nests when they contain a live bird or viable egg" in the case of active nests.[6]

In the backdrop of all of this, the City of Winnipeg signed on to the Montreal Pledge on July 13, 2023, making a commitment to protecting biodiversity and ecosystems.[7] The City of Winnipeg is currently in the planning stages of their Greenspace Plan and Biodiversity Policies, where they define greenspaces as including parks, cemeteries, forests and trails, all of which the Lemay Forest is or might be.[7] They also state that the Greenspace Plan will aim to expand greenspaces, protect ecologically significant land, and engage with community and stakeholders, while the Biodiversity Policy will "make biodiversity and greenspace protection, restoration, and growth a priority in City processes".[7] According to the City of Winnipeg "the Greenspace Plan and the Biodiversity Policy will reflect the knowledge, interests and values of the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples.[7]"

These are compelling arguments for the City of Winnipeg to acquire or rezone the land to create an area for public use, to respect those buried on the site by protecting the cemetery area, and to protect the habitat and home of a variety of species. Various levels of governments have indicated a past willingness to support financially in the endeavour of creating the park.[8,9]

Therefore, we join the coalition voices asking Mayor and Council to consider just how important the Lemay Forest is, the history and the dignity of the cemetery and how voting to preserve it will help uphold your commitment to the Montreal Pledge.

Thank you for your time and attention. If you would like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to reach out to me at kkehler@spcw.mb.ca.

Sincerely,



Executive Director

References

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2. *History – The Coalition to Save Lemay Forest*. <https://savelemayforest.ca/history-2/>.
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4. “Riverbottom Forest.” *Naturalist Services - Parks and Open Space - Public Works*, City of Winnipeg, 5 Mar. 2020, <https://legacy.winnipeg.ca/publicworks/parksOpenSpace/NaturalistServices/NaturalAreas/Riverbottom.stm>.
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7. *Greenspace Plan & Biodiversity Policy*. City of Winnipeg, 25 Mar. 2025, <https://engage.winnipeg.ca/greenspace-plan>.
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9. Liewicki, Nathan. “Manitoba Habitat Conservancy Makes \$5.25M Offer to Buy Lemay Forest.” *CBC News*, 4 Jan. 2025. *CBC.ca*, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-habitat-conservancy-offer-lemay-forest-1.7422721>.