

Submission – Katharina Stieffenhofer

Expropriation and Rezoning of Lemay Forest (Item 1 - Standing Policy Committee on Property and Development – Notice of Motion)

Submitted: Tue, 03/25/2025 - 09:46

Delegation information

Committee you want to address

Council

Agenda item you want to address (number and title)

Item No. 1 Expropriation and Rezoning of Lemay Forest

Support or oppose recommendations

I support the recommendations

Submit comments in writing checkbox

Submit comments in writing

Comments

Re. March 27, 2025 - COUNCIL Meeting

Notice of Motion Item No. 1, Expropriation and Rezoning of Lemay Forest

Dear Members of Council,

Please note my strong support for Motion Item No. 1, Expropriation and Rezoning of Lemay Forest. The Lemay Forest is irreplaceable in its rich historical, cultural and ecological value. This 22.5-acre riparian forest and greenspace needs to receive heritage status and be rezoned and preserved as a public Heritage Park in perpetuity.

I am part of an increasing number of individuals and organisations opposing any further destruction of the forest for development. Manitoba Historical Society, Heritage Winnipeg and the Manitoba Archaeological Society are calling for “a complete stoppage and moratorium on any incursion, damage, deforestation and alteration of the grounds of the Lemay Forest in this heritage area immediately.” Recent research by respected archivist, Shelley Sweeney, about the 60% child mortality at the Aisle Ritchot Orphanage between 1904 – 1948, revealed the death of 3383 out of 7,365 admitted children. Further research about these children’s burials is needed and ongoing. Children’s and some of their mother’s remains are buried in the former Aisle Ritchot cemetery inside of Lemay Forest and beyond. This fact alone should convince Members of Council, that this land should never be developed and absolutely needs to be “acquired” by any legal means possible and rezoned as a protected public site to remember these forgotten children, who mainly died because of poverty and inadequate care. These children were of all nationalities, but some were of Metis heritage.

The Manitoba Metis Federation has formally called on the City of Winnipeg to acquire and rezone this land in acknowledgement of the profound historical and cultural connection between the Lemay Forest land and the Red River Metis. MMF further support a National Urban Park framework to honour this land’s historical and cultural significance.

The Appellant/Owner’s applications for rezoning & subdivision have already been rejected 4 times by various levels of City of Winnipeg decision makers, because the applications contravene existing City by-laws.

This treed property is not suitable for development because it is land-locked, in a flood plane, and unserved. Housing should be built on properties that are more suitable and do not require the removal of mature healthy trees.

It is my understanding that the city-assessed value of this property is 1.7 Mil. Recently, the owner was offered a purchase price of 5.25 Mil., by the Manitoba Habitat Conservancy, which was rejected, claiming an inflated value of 8 Mil. The Developer then proceeded to clearcut ~ one acre of trees without having any permits to build. An action that does not represent “acting in good faith”, in my opinion.

The acquisition of this greenspace needs to be part of the City of Winnipeg’s Climate Action Plan & Climate Resilience Strategy. It takes a minimum of 20 – 30 years for trees to mature; we no longer have this luxury of time in this accelerating Climate Crisis. Our actions and policies need to reflect the reality of this increasing public health crises.

Indigenous communities have been performing sweat lodge healing ceremonies in the privacy of this forest for over 30 years. These sacred grounds must not be disturbed any further, and ongoing access to these much-needed healing ceremonies need to be guaranteed as a gesture of reconciliation. Please see link to a trailer for a documentary film about Nature, Connection & Healing [in progress], which features one of the sweat lodge keepers, who talks about the completeness of the ceremony and the importance of saving this remaining sacred site [0:46 – 1:18]. The Bald Eagle and deer at the beginning of the trailer also live in the Lemay Forest <https://vimeo.com/1041957286?share=copy>

I respectfully urge the Members of Council to support Motion Item No. 1, to Expropriate and Rezone Lemay Forest.

Thank you for your consideration of my support for this Motion Item No. 1.

Submission for a committee of council

Lemay Forest cemetery should be left undisturbed_Shelley Sweeney_Feb 2025.pdf

Lemay Forest cemetery should be left undisturbed

By: Shelley SweeneyPosted: 2:00 AM CST Thursday, Feb. 27, 2025 Winnipeg Free Press

OPINION

Recently, the Société historique de St-Boniface discovered that fully 3,383 children died out of the 7,365 admitted to the Asile Ritchot orphanage in St. Norbert.

The Asile, run by the Sisters of Misericordia between 1904 and 1948, served small children and babies. It was also a home for unwed mothers. Some of the children had lost their parents, some had parents who could not care for them, some were abandoned.

Although there were Indigenous children at the Asile, primarily Métis, there were children of all ethnicities. Virtually all were there because they were poor.

The horrifying number of deaths occurred for many reasons. Principally, while the sisters were expecting to take care of 30 babies at a time, the numbers of children quickly grew beyond their means.

Lack of staff, poor nutrition, overcrowded quarters, infectious diseases, and possibly because the orphanage was getting fresh water from the Red River, contributed to this high number of deaths.

The Asile had its own cemetery carved out of Lemay Forest. According to the sisters, once a year the children who had died would be buried together in an unmarked communal grave.

Archivists are still determining how many children were buried in the Asile cemetery, but between 1907 and 1912 alone at least 726 babies were buried there. Likely thousands of children who died at the Asile were buried in Lemay Forest. Further research is required.

Stillborn babies from the Misericordia hospital, the sisters, unwed mothers, people associated with the Asile, and female pensioners who previously lived at the Misericordia hospital, were also buried in the cemetery in Lemay Forest.

Two maps, two aerial photos, and steel posts placed at the corners of the cemetery have established the exact location.

So what is the problem with developing Lemay Forest? No one knows for sure how many and where exactly the children and adults were buried. Remote sensing by the Historic Resources Branch indicates two burial pits that may fall outside of the cemetery proper.

In addition, past practice has shown that people tended to bring their loved ones to be buried close to cemeteries. The Historic Resources Branch has stated that a 50-metre buffer zone around the cemetery must be left untouched and they have asked for a plan for what the developer intends to do with other bones found in the rest of the forest.

In 1974 the sisters abruptly decided to move the identified human remains to the St. Boniface Cemetery on Archibald Street. Desjardins Funeral Home conducted the removal but listed only 15 bodies as having been moved.

The sisters make no mention of moving the children or of any deconsecration ceremony.

The funeral home would have needed sieves and water to pluck the thousands of tiny bones and teeth from the earth. There would not have been any osteo-archaeologist to help Desjardins identify juvenile human remains in 1974.

The details of these deaths is particularly sad. For instance, neighbours of the Asile stated that during the summer when the windows of the Asile were open, they could hear the children crying in the night. There were not enough staff and resources to care for and comfort them.

How have we become so numb that the deaths of nearly 3,400 children is not considered a tragedy of monumental proportions?

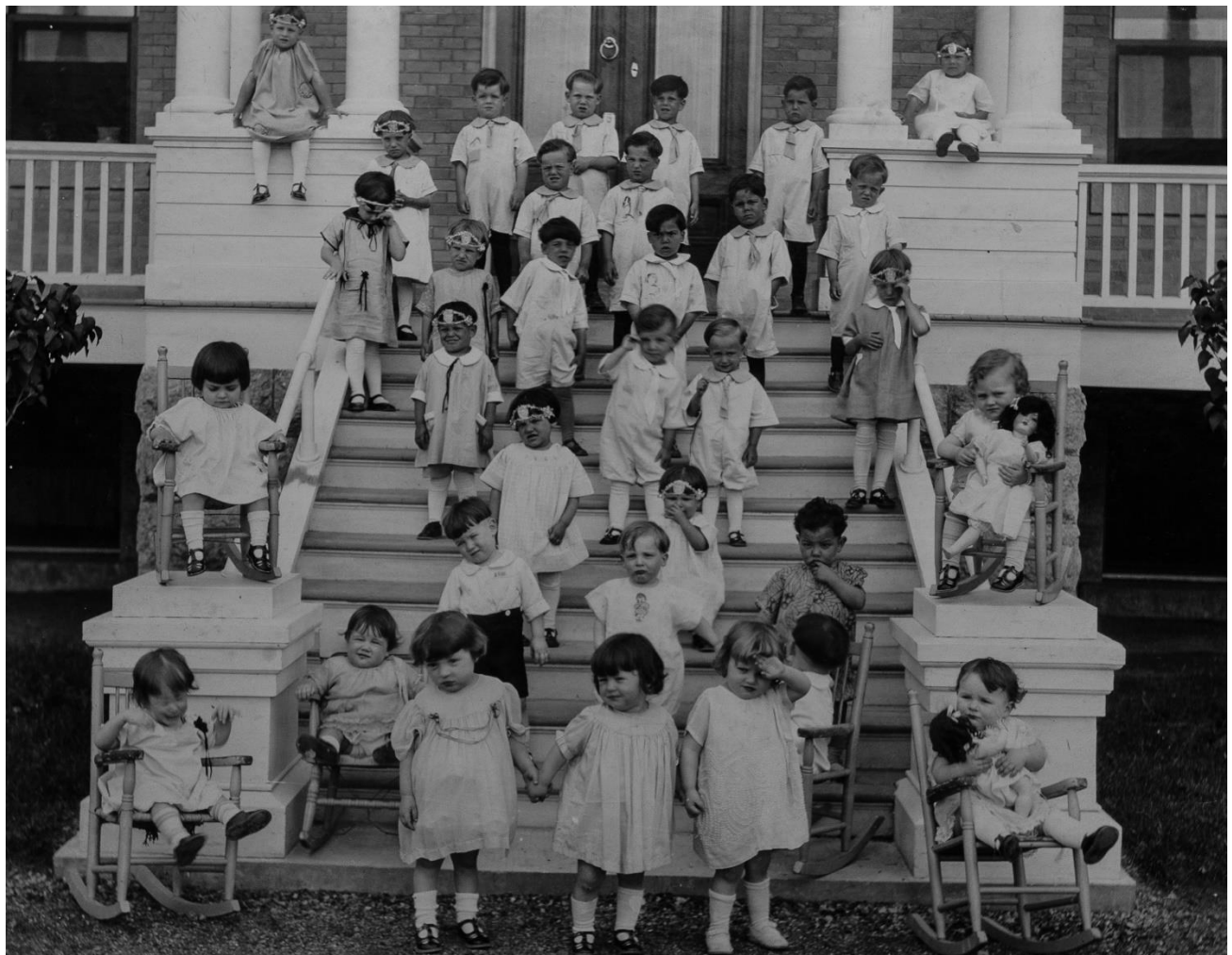
The developer has stated that they will find “hot spots” and narrow down any buffer zone. They insist on building a 2,500-unit facility on the remaining land around the cemetery, even though they will need to bring in lots of dirt because Lemay Forest regularly floods from overland water. This will push all the water into the cemetery.

The developer has vowed to chop down all the trees in Lemay Forest. Bringing heavy machinery in will churn up the remains.

We should not disturb this cemetery and the surrounding area. We need to acknowledge the harm to the children, consult with those who lived or had relatives in the Asile, and do something appropriate to acknowledge this terrible history.

Above all the cemetery should not be “private property with public access” as the developer has stated and the children should never be forgotten again.

Dr. Shelley Sweeney is archivist emerita, University of Manitoba and archives and special collections.



Aisle Ritchot children