Winnipeg Needs a More Humane and Responsive System for Public Space Management
Issue Summary

The City of Winnipeg has a responsibility to maintain public spaces so they remain safe, accessible, sanitary and usable. However, the current approach to managing the impacts of unsheltered homelessness is not meeting the scale or complexity of the need.

Residents reasonably expect the City to respond when parks, pathways, sidewalks, transit facilities and other public spaces are significantly affected. They are asking for a more responsive system, with clear responsibility, adequate staffing and coordinated outreach, sanitation and cleanup services that can respond at defined service intervals.

The lack of housing, shelter and addictions services cannot be used to excuse declining public-space maintenance. People experiencing homelessness also deserve a response that reduces risk, rather than allowing unsafe conditions to persist or simply moving impacts from one location to another.

Winnipeg's current approach to encampments and unsheltered homelessness is leaving public-space impacts unresolved. For example, if garbage and debris are removed primarily when an encampment is "cleared" meaning only when people are housed, sheltered or moved the sanitation and safety issues can persist or reoccur. This contributes to dangerous conditions, including fires and the burning of garbage when other services are not available. The issue with the presentation of city data in encampment reports is not simply how many have been "cleared." The City needs to know whether the underlying public-space impact has actually been addressed, whether the space has been restored in any sustainable manner, meaning whether the improvement can be sustained or other interventions will be needed in short order.

These impacts are also not limited to public property. Locally business districts have stepped up significantly through various safety initiatives, patrols, and litter pick up, but there is growing concern that business is shouldering the costs and similarly local property owners.

This summer, Winnipeg bylaw officers ordered private landlord Marvin Sharp to clean up extensive garbage and hazardous debris associated with a long-standing encampment along the boundary between his property and the public riverbank. The situation illustrates how gaps in public-space management can shift costs and impacts onto adjacent private property owners. Public safety cannot rely solely on enforcement. It also requires prevention, outreach, housing supports, addictions treatment, mental health response capacity, and community partnerships.

Current Status

Across Canada, municipalities are increasingly developing coordinated approaches that connect public-space stewardship with outreach, sanitation, safety, service coordination, data and measurable outcomes.

Edmonton - has strengthened coordination between outreach, bylaw, public safety and City Operations, including additional City Operations positions to expedite cleanup. Its approach also recognizes that private property owners can be affected by encampments and that hazardous materials may require specialized municipal cleanup capacity.

Vancouver - has developed partnerships that support cleanup and low-barrier employment in areas affected by unsheltered homelessness, including spaces adjacent to public property, and has used municipal resources to address bulky waste impacts.

Ottawa - has introduced a coordinated model developed with community partners, service providers and people with lived and living experience of homelessness, with the goal of improving both the response to encampments and stewardship of public spaces.

Calgary - connects public safety, social-disorder response, outreach and cleanup through coordinated operations, supported by dedicated investments in day spaces, outreach and community cleanup.

Montréal - uses a site-specific protocol that assesses risks such as fire, health, criminal activity and dangerous locations, and then mobilizes the appropriate municipal and community resources, including public-works cleanliness teams and frontline staff.
While the approaches differ, the common principle is clear: public-space management are not artificially separated from social and operational realities affecting those spaces. Winnipeg does not currently have a comparable, comprehensive system with clear service standards, coordinated responsibility, measurable outcomes and sufficient capacity to respond proportionately to the scale and persistence of impacts.

Recommendation
Create a Public Space Management Plan that provides a coordinated, proportionate and measurable framework for responding to impacts on public and, where appropriate, adjacent private spaces.

The Plan should:

- establish clear service standards for garbage and debris removal, sanitation, hazardous materials, accessibility, repairs, safety and restoration;
- prioritize responses according to the scale, frequency, severity and persistence of impacts;
- identify clear responsibility and service intervals across relevant City departments and community partners;
- distinguish between temporary clearance, relocation, restoration and sustained resolution of ongoing situations such as the defacto designated encampments that have persisted over a decade without consistent service; and
- publicly report on whether interventions are actually reducing or resolving impacts over time.
- Ensure the City of Winnipeg is leading on a good neighbour policy between housed and unhoused residents.

The objective is to establish a humane, responsive and accountable system of public-space stewardship that protects access and safety, supports people experiencing homelessness, reduces impacts on surrounding neighbourhoods and ensures City resources are directed where they are needed.