

Speaking up for nature in Winnipeg



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It was a cold April day in 2002 when two passionate land defenders (Marcel Ritchot and Jim Gyselinck) stood in front of bulldozers to stop the destruction of a cherished forest beside the Seine River.

Their desperate actions inspired the community to demand that the forest be protected. It took four more years of dedication and hard work to purchase the final 15 acres of Bois-des-Esprits. Winnipeg is richer today because of their efforts.

Fast forward to July of 2017.

Fifteen years later, another group of land defenders stood in front of giant mulching machines on the Parker lands. The goal of the Rooster Town Blockade was to save a highly-treasured oak forest and wetland landscape with links to Métis heritage. Sadly, their pleas to conserve this ecologically-significant heritage landscape fell on deaf ears. Winnipeg is poorer for this loss.

Critics of the protesters have asked why they did not speak up during the planning process. Planning is the foundation of the orderly development of a city.

So what went wrong?

In both cases, the landowners worked



Photo by Michele Kading

“I wish bees had more flowers to land on.”

closely with the city administration to develop a plan but public participation was limited — by the process, not by a lack of public interest.

If the public is not an equal player in a collaborative planning process, the only recourse is to oppose the plan at its public hearing. In both cases, bulldozers began work before the plans were debated at a public hearing. Public concerns and aspirations were not fully addressed.

Planning involves creating a shared vision for our city. I recently shared my vision as part of the Plan Winnipeg review. It includes an abundance of urban forests, rivers, prairie, and wetlands. To quote the kids in the Canadian Wildlife Federation’s Holiday Wishes video: “I wish there were more but-

terflies to chase . . . I wish bees had more flowers to land on . . . I wish the water in the river was cleaner . . . I wish birds had more trees to live in.”

Most of all, I wish that planning was so collaborative that people would no longer have to stand in front of bulldozers to be heard.

I encourage you to go to www.SpeakUp-Winnipeg.com to share your personal vision for Winnipeg. You can help shape the plan that will guide Winnipeg’s development for the next decade. Don’t miss this chance. It is less risky and stressful than facing down bulldozers.

Michele Kading is a community correspondent for St. Vital and the executive director of Save Our Seine — www.saveourseine.com