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# FAST FACTS

**December 22, 2011**

## Selling City Golf Courses to Developers: A Permanent Loss

October 26, 2011 was the deadline for developers to make proposals for seven large pieces of prime real estate scattered across Winnipeg. Unsurprisingly there were lots of proposals, although the City won't let us see them yet.

The potential sale of so much public space should be of great concern to Winnipeggers. Why sell it? Who wins and who loses? What alternatives may there be to selling these properties? These questions need to be answered before any decisions are made.

The lands under the hammer are seven City owned golf courses: Windsor Park on the Seine River; Crescent Drive, Canoe Club and Kildonan Park on the Red River; and John Blumberg on the Assiniboine River, as well as Harbourview in North Kildonan and Tuxedo across from Assiniboine Park. Taken together, they are the most attractive opportunities Winnipeg developers have seen in decades. It doesn't take a property developer to imagine the upmarket condos on the riverfront lots, or the suburban housing across from Assiniboine Park, or even the new strip malls or shopping centres. There's clearly a lot of money to be made.

The decision to sell off these urban green spaces we have collectively owned for decades and in some cases almost a century flows from

a consultant's report commissioned by this administration. The report concluded that "Winnipeg has a surplus of open park space..." and that "...surplus property can...be sold for commercial or residential development." It's not clear what 'surplus' green space means, but it is easy to know what 'sold for commercial or residential development' means. And it won't be low income housing or rental accommodations for the working poor.

Our current Mayor and Council were eager to hear this song. They responded by putting out requests for "Expressions of Interest" for the use and development of these seven properties. In various statements in Council and to the media, the City's leading politicians and administrators have made clear that they have in mind the sale of the properties for commercial and residential development.

Little more than a month to put together proposals and a \$50,000 deposit requirement ensured that the process didn't get cluttered up by proposals from sports associations, golfers, community clubs or naturalists. In fact, it appears that only the Nordic Ski Association, which currently operates out of the Windsor Park Golf Course, made a non-commercial proposal.



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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Mayor Katz and Chief Administrative Officer Phil Sheegl have argued that selling the property would bring in cash that could be used for other good purposes as well as increase the tax base. Both are doubtless true, at least in the short term. The same could be said for selling every inch of green space in Winnipeg.

The question is why sell these properties and why now? Perhaps they hoped there would be little sympathy for golfers. Perhaps they think Winnipeg has become so poor under their guidance that we can no longer afford the amenities that we could afford in the 1920s or 1960s, when these courses were built. Perhaps they just see a once in a lifetime opportunity for someone to make a stack of money off a quick sale of some prime real estate. Not themselves, of course, but perhaps they can think of people who would like to do this.

For residents and wildlife, these are priceless community resources. And there is no doubt that any decision to sell and develop these lands will be permanent. Once they have been built on, there is no way future generations will be able to afford to buy them back for recreational use.

But there is another approach. Instead of asking who we should sell them to, we could ask some different questions first. And instead of limiting the discussion to developers and City Hall, we could involve the community in finding answers.

Are golf courses the best use of these lands? If they are to remain golf courses, can we find more imaginative mixed uses – such as the Nordic Ski Club's use of the Windsor Park course in the winter? Could the courses be modified to make them friendlier to wildlife, hikers and riparian ecosystems? Just thinking about these questions shows how outrageous the City's plans for these urban gems are. It's good to periodically review our common possessions, such as these golf courses and rethink how we use them. But

that is the discussion we should be having as a community.

Let's have some real consultation, where all of us have a chance to put forward suggestions, so we can be proud when we pass these lands on to future generations. Let's look at ways to make them the focus of healthy communities, where people want higher densities, because it allows easy access to such wonderful green spaces. And let's look at how to create opportunities for new housing through developing some of the decaying or abandoned commercial and industrial areas of the city, even – dare we dream it – the Weston Rail Yards.

A local group has been formed to fight for just such a public discussion. Outdoor Urban Recreational Spaces (OURS) is fighting this attempt to sell off these urban jewels on the quiet. They are gathering signatures calling for a halt to these sales until a proper community discussion can take place. Anyone interested in OURS or their petition can find them at: [www.ours-winnipeg.com](http://www.ours-winnipeg.com).

This proposed sell off will not survive a public debate. Only slipping it through quickly and quietly will work. It's up to Winnipeggers to react fast enough to stop to it.

*Dave Hall is retired, and spends his time enjoying family, friends, and Winnipeg's green spaces. He doesn't use a golf club in his walks, but understands those who do.*



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