

**WINNIPEG:  
ASPIRATIONAL  
PLANNING,  
CHAOTIC  
DEVELOPMENT**

by

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# ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the politics of development in suburban and exurban Winnipeg, showing how the reality of chaotic development is glossed over by specious planning language. Drawing on case studies of two undeveloped or newly-developing areas of the central city, Transcona West and Waverley West, and a developing exurb, Springfield Municipality, the paper shows how municipal infrastructure and services are extended widely and inefficiently across the region in response to developers' demands, and wishful thinking conceals the reality of an unviable network. The city is left with infrastructure and municipal services whose lack of viability becomes manifest in the city's inability to maintain inner-city streets and underground municipal services.

# WINNIPEG:

## ASPIRATIONAL PLANNING, CHAOTIC DEVELOPMENT

### Introduction

Urban sprawl has long been a major preoccupation of the literature on North American urban development. In that literature, a distressing amount of attention has been devoted to definitional discussions, but in these pages, we will skirt that terrain and proceed by *diktat*, defining sprawl as low-density, single-use development: neighbourhoods or sections of cities marked by exclusivity, not only of residential, commercial, industrial or agricultural land uses, but also of low, medium and high densities, and light and heavy commercial and industrial development. In the world of sprawl, these multiple exclusivities are further multiplied by the definition of particular design types, residential wealth gradations, and other specificities of land use.

Much of the literature on sprawl is critical of many of these varieties of exclusivity, maintaining that they kill urbanity, choke off street life and mandate environmentally harmful dependence on automobiles. Thomas Sieverts intervenes in this long-running debate with an observation and a proposition. The observation is that the definition of sprawl advanced here no longer describes an important proportion of newer development. Instead, Sieverts describes current built forms as taking the form of the *Zwischenstadt*, which is characterized by “increasingly fractured... boundaries between urban fabric and open space and nature; the gradual disappearance of the traditional hierarchical pattern; and the mutual penetration of built forms and landscapes.” (Sieverts, 2003: x; Keil *et alia*, 2009; Young *et al*, 2010)

The observation contained in the word *Zwischenstadt*, therefore, is that what was once a comprehensible cityscape, with both centre and periphery well defined, and marked by a clear hierarchy of high-, medium- and low-density uses seems gradually to be becoming a thing of the past. A clear contrast between city and countryside is dissolving into an amorphous landscape of workplaces, residences and places of business, connected by fast means of transportation, but interspersed with the countryside in a way that is no longer clearly identifiable as either urban or rural, and that lacks either an identifiable centre or a clear hierarchy of central, intermediate and peripheral places.

In other words, sprawl's fragmented, but still orderly arrangement of mutually exclusive land uses has fragmented further, to the point where, in many places, there is no longer such a thing as an identifiable city, despite the presence of traditionally urban land uses. While such fragmentation and dispersal clashes

with a conventional planner's idea of what constitutes an orderly distribution of land uses, Sieverts sees nothing to be alarmed about. He argues, on the contrary, that *Zwischenstadt* development patterns are not only not objectionable, they are positively beneficial, because they open up new possibilities for agriculture, and provide, literally and figuratively, a field for potentially groundbreaking advances in design.

Sieverts's *observation* is unlikely to generate serious debate. It describes land use patterns that are familiar to both Europeans and North Americans. His *proposition* - that *Zwischenstadt* patterns need not pose problems, and may well open exciting possibilities - is a different matter. *Zwischenstadt*, which Sieverts translates as "in-between cities" could be less ambiguously translated as "urban land uses between cities".<sup>1</sup> In a European context, he can make a reasonable case that a scattered development of urban land uses across the countryside is not necessarily a cause for alarm, and may open up new possibilities, precisely because Europe already has cities with high concentrations of population and jobs.

In Europe, urban job and population concentrations are high enough:

- To make a viable proposition of rapid, convenient, relatively affordable city and inter-city public transportation;
- To make both city and inter-city transportation by private automobile less convenient than it is in North America; therefore,
- To avoid the additional harm to the environment that is inevitable if public transportation is reduced to the status of a last resort for those in poverty and private transportation becomes virtually everyone else's transportation of choice; and
- To make it feasible to provide a high level of urban public services.

Whatever its merits may be in a European context, in many North American regions the amorphous landscape of workplaces, residences and places of business which Sievert sees as a praiseworthy characteristic of the spaces between cities, becomes an ongoing threat to the environment if it characterizes cities themselves, because it either places obstacles in the way of efficient provision of public transportation and other public services, or indeed makes public transportation entirely unfeasible, and impinges on the viability of other public services. As a consequence, it multiplies the burden imposed on the

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<sup>1</sup> Keil and Young offer a different interpretation. They characterize Canada's "in-between cities" as follows: "In-between the old downtowns and the new suburbs of urban Canada, a hitherto underexposed and under-researched mix of residential, commercial, industrial, educational, agricultural and ecologically protected areas and land uses has become the home and workplace, and increasingly also the playspace of most people in Canada." Their primary concern is with the risk of disaster in these improperly planned regions. (2009, pp. 488 and *passim*)

environment through the discharge of hydrocarbons. Moreover, an amorphous landscape of workplaces, residences and commerce, if it is found in cities, courts the risk that the extension of infrastructure and public services needed to accommodate widespread or universal use of private vehicles will escalate the cost of service provision beyond the limit of viability.

In these pages, we look at land use practices in Winnipeg, a typical example of a sprawling North American metropolitan area, in order to gain a more detailed view of how North America's amorphous urban landscapes are created and what problems they produce. Although sprawl is ubiquitous across urban North America, Winnipeg's situation is in other ways strikingly different from that of the four city-regions that are the primary focus of this volume. Although like all 21st Century cities, it is integrated "into a ...globalized urban network", (Allahwala's and Keil's characterization, in the introduction to this volume, of the four city-regions), its primary connections are more limited.

A metropolitan area with a population that is forecast to reach 782,400 in 2013 (Winnipeg, City of, 2012), Winnipeg is a stand-alone city some 1300 kilometres from Calgary, the nearest comparably-sized city. Located near the geographical centre of North America, it is integrated into a continental transportation network that extends south into Mexico and beyond, as well as to Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic coasts. Its global connections are far more limited than those of Frankfurt, Paris, Montreal and Toronto. Its population is growing slowly and its economy is relatively stable. It boasts a lively and varied arts scene, but, unlike Toronto, does not claim cultural vanguard status.

Nevertheless, Winnipeg has been buffeted by the global winds that have blown through cities across Europe and North America, producing accelerated competitive pressure on local businesses in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement and other globalizing initiatives; consequently, loss of traditional manufacturing jobs, and growth of cheap-labour production and services; and fiscal austerity, the effects of which have been accentuated by the disappearance of regional equalization programs previously sponsored by the federal government.

The focus of the present chapter is not global competitive pressures, but the regional competition over land development that determines metropolitan growth patterns. Like many North American municipalities, Winnipeg, and other rural districts, urbanizing areas and cities in the metropolitan area, publish planning documents which purport to show how a local or provincial (state in the United States) planning process that ensures the efficient and effective delivery of public transportation and other public services guides the growth of the metropolitan area.

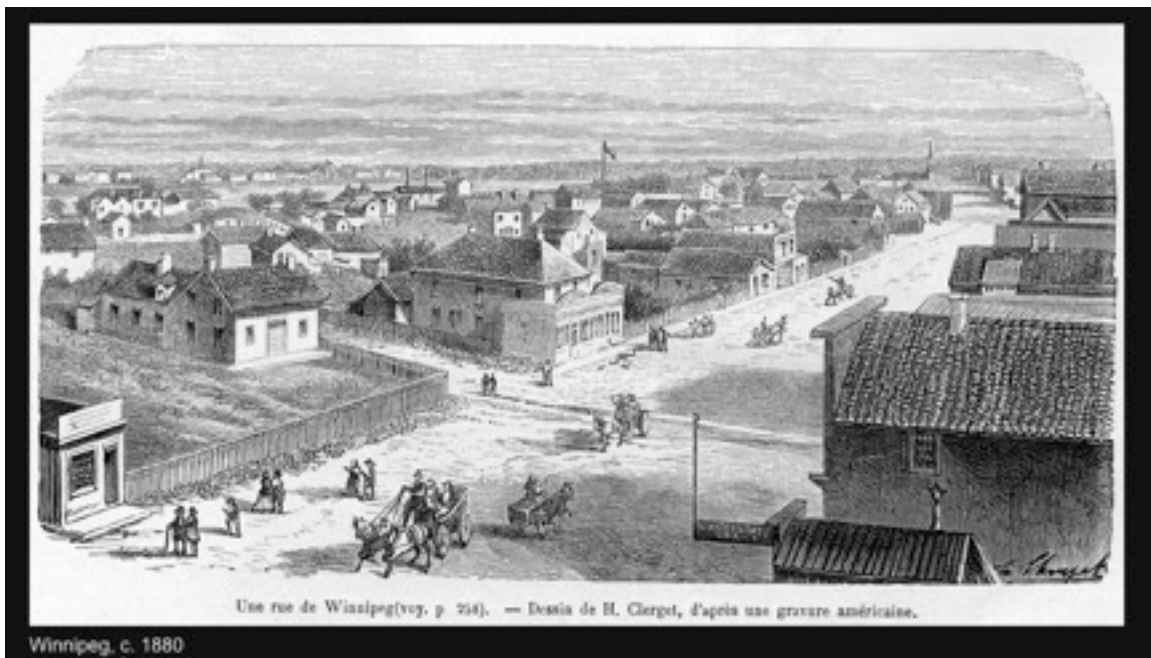
For those who follow the politics and administration of growth day to day, these documents fail to conceal the fact that planning is, in reality, a clean-up operation designed to legitimize decisions that are driven primarily by developers, and that

prioritize the interests of those developers, and of the residents of their new neighbourhoods, over the interest of the city as a whole. A brief look at the city's early growth, and three development case studies, will provide evidence for this statement, and show how the development process works in practice.

## Winnipeg's politics of urban growth

From the beginning, city planning in Winnipeg has been an aspiration, struggling to catch up with reality. A pair of artists' aerial views of Winnipeg from 1880-81, on the following page, nicely illustrate this point. The first, captioned Picture 1, shows a wide, unpaved street flanked on either side by buildings. In the background we see scattered housing, apparently located, oriented and spaced to suit the convenience of the individual property owner, rather than to conform to any set pattern.

Picture 2 provides an overview of the city as it was then, and, superimposed on the same scattering of buildings seemingly located at random, an extensive street grid, likely someone's aspirational view of what it was hoped the city would become. From a distance, it appears that the locations of buildings are uninfluenced by the grid.



**Picture 1**

The two pictures aptly foreshadow the future of planning in Winnipeg. The Department of Planning, Property and Development produces a wealth of planning documents, filled with statements that represent planning correctness (See the entries under References below, entitled *Sustainable Water and Waste: An Our Winnipeg Direction Strategy*; *Sustainable Transportation: An Our Winnipeg Direction Strategy*; *Our Winnipeg: It's Our City, It's Our Plan, It's Our*



**Picture 2**

*Time; Complete Communities: An Our Winnipeg Direction Strategy; Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision: A Long-range Plan for City Council*), but the actual directions for the growth and development of the city are driven by development proposals. Planning documents ratify, and do the best their writers can, to justify what has been decided by developers.

Meanwhile, developers cherry-pick the areas that are the easiest, the most convenient, or the most profitable to develop and bypass others, secure in the knowledge that the city will extend roads and other municipal services as required by the new developments, regardless of the expenses incurred ultimately by Winnipeg taxpayers. That includes, not only roads, sewerage and water lines, but also transit service.

These expensive services have to be extended across lands that generate the low levels of taxation typical of farmland or unoccupied tracts, rather than the much higher taxes that come from urban development. Once occupied, new developments beyond the empty tracts require conveniently located community centres and library branches, and the same response times for fire fighters, police, and paramedics that more densely populated areas of the city enjoy. Street cleaning, snow removal, grass cutting, insect control, and everything else the municipality does have to serve empty parcels of land as well as full ones.

## Waverley West and Transcona West

There are many examples of land that earns minimal revenues, served and/or bypassed, by the full range of municipal services, as we will see, but first, the context: In 2006 Winnipeg City Council was debating how it should respond to developer demands to make a vast new tract of land available for development. The tract, known as Waverley West, contained enough land for decades of future development, but developers, drawing on an analysis produced by the Department of Property, Planning and Development (Winnipeg, Property, Planning and Development, 2004: 13, 18), argued that it must be opened immediately because, without it, the supply of lots available for development would last only 8 to 10 years. City Council acceded to the developers' demands.

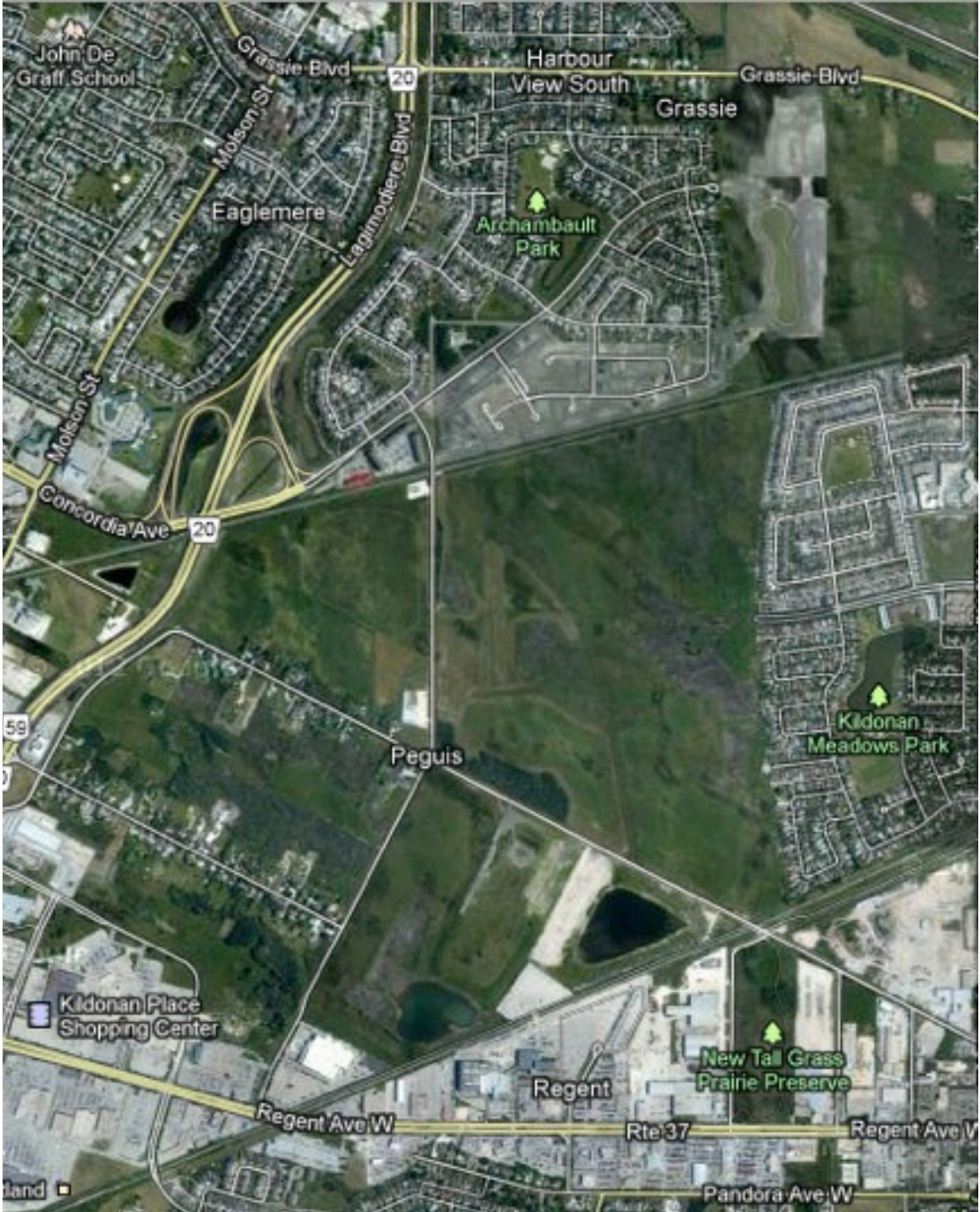
At this writing, six years later, Waverley West is partly developed and developing rapidly - though the bulk of it remains undeveloped - but substantial areas nearer the centre of the city, and by-passed or serviced by older infrastructure and services, remain undeveloped. A particularly clear example - a comparison of Waverley West (10.9 km. from the city centre) with an area called Transcona West (7.6 km. from the centre) - provides visual images that come close to capturing the magnitude of the problem. Following are Google Maps of Waverley West and Transcona West, followed by a photograph of the Transcona West tract, showing a sample of the amount of land available, but unoccupied, there.





**Map 1: Waverley West**

Winnipeg's planning practises are standard issue in North American city planning. A critical assessment of the growth practises of most North American cities would likely produce results not unlike those described in these pages, although Winnipeg may well be a particularly egregious case. The egregiousness is visible in the fact that, while the city's infrastructure budget is lavished on first-class roads, sewers and water lines serving new subdivisions, older infrastructure is allowed to deteriorate radically. Recent news reports in both Winnipeg newspapers, the *Winnipeg Free Press* and the *Winnipeg Sun*, confirm earlier studies. (Leo and Brown, 2000, 201-05; Leo and Anderson, 2006, 181-83)



**Map 2: Transcona West and developed land to the east that must be served by infrastructure and services traversing empty land.**





**Picture 3: Transcona West**

The *Sun* (Turenne, 2011) reported that, by the city's own reckoning, more than 20 per cent of the city's streets are rated in poor condition, the lowest rating, meaning that the street must be completely rebuilt, or at least undergo major rehabilitation. A few days later, the *Free Press* (Skerritt, 2011) added some figures to show that the roads are continually getting worse and that the city is not anywhere near having the resources it needs to repair the streets quickly enough to keep pace with their deterioration. (See Picture 4 and Picture 5 below)

Instead, the city has, in effect, given up on attempts to solve the problem. A public works official admitted to the *Sun* that the city's priorities are shifting away from streets in poor condition to those that have not yet reached that state, on the premise that it is better to maintain what is viable than to salvage what is not. Since the streets in worst condition tend to be those in the poorest neighbourhoods, the neglect of downtown streets is tantamount to the ghettoisation and decay so distressingly familiar in American cities.

Anyone who observes these conditions and then reads *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision* (Winnipeg, City of, 2000) will find himself suffering an attack of cognitive dissonance. The plan, read in isolation from on-the-ground observation, will leave him in no doubt that it is resolved to apply planning profession's best practises.

Using mandatory language, the plan (Winnipeg, City of, 2000, p. 29) promises that:

The city shall promote compact urban form in support of sustainability by:

- i) approving new residential, commercial and industrial subdivisions only when... a full range of municipal infrastructure can be provided in an environmentally-sound, economical, and timely manner;
- ii) evaluating residential, commercial development proposals using benefit-cost analysis to measure long-term revenues, expenditures, and impacts on existing developments within a life-cycle costing framework;
- iii) meeting transportation demand in ways which reduce reliance on the automobile, improve integration of transportation modes, and improve effectiveness of the existing transportation system;
- iv) encouraging infilling of vacant lands and the revitalisation of existing neighbourhoods to maximise the use of existing infrastructure; and compatible with, existing development and which is designed to minimise the spatial use of land.
- v) supporting new development which is adjacent to, and compatible with, existing development and which is designed to minimise the spatial use of land.

It is evident that there is no correspondence between the thought processes that went into the writing of the plan and those that govern actual development. To be sure, point i), the promise to provide "...a full range of municipal infrastructure... in [a]... timely manner..." is kept, but if there were any serious consideration of either environmental soundness or economy, as promised in point i), the idea of ensuring that new development be adjacent to existing development would have suggested itself immediately.

Point ii), the use of benefit-cost analysis, in the conceptions of the Department of Planning, Property and Development, is very straightforward. When a new development is proposed, costs to the city are calculated in three categories: the building or development of roads, parks and underground municipal services. These costs are totalled, and charged to the developer. The developer is then deemed to have covered "all the costs" of the development. Not counted in the calculation are other costs referred to above: The provision of fire, police, and paramedic response times comparable to those that more densely populated areas of the city enjoy; street cleaning, snow removal, grass cutting, insect control, and everything else the municipality does. In short, the benefit-cost

analysis, in effect, counts all the benefits, but overlooks many of the costs. (Leo, 2002, pp. 219-21)



Wayne Glowacki, Winnipeg Free Press

**Picture 4: Winnipeg: Potholes on an inner-city street.**



**Picture 5: Winnipeg, sinkhole on Corydon Avenue, April 26th, 2012. Flickr.com, [7116691177\\_7ed9473e9b\\_z.jpg](https://www.flickr.com/photos/7116691177_7ed9473e9b_z.jpg) Corydon is located in one of the older neighbourhoods surrounding the city centre.**

The reference to reducing “reliance on the automobile, improv[ing] integration of transportation modes, and improv[ing] effectiveness of the existing transportation system” (point iii) is largely humbug. Until recently, the only public transportation Winnipeg offered was an old-fashioned bus system, which - though its officials do an impressive job of making a virtue of their limitations - reduces reliance on automobiles only for that minority of commuters who are willing to put up with the discomfort and inconvenience of buses. The only other gesture toward improved public transportation has been the recent completion of the first half of a single bus rapid transit line (the first of six that have been in the plan for some 40 years).

A glance at Maps 1 and 2 and Picture 3 above is enough to expose the chicanery in the suggestion, in Point iv), that city policy encourages the infilling of vacant lands, maximises “the use of existing infrastructure” or minimises the “spatial use of land.” The only truth in that statement is that the city has been impressively successful in a series of initiatives to revitalise the homes - but not the streets - in older, inner-city neighbourhoods. Point v) essentially repeats the falsehoods in Point iv), and they do not gain veracity in the retelling.

In short, the development of new neighbourhoods - *Plan Winnipeg 2020 Vision* to the contrary - has been guided, not by the theoretical invocation of good planning practise, but by the demands of different developers to develop on their own pieces of land, in their own time and at their own pace. The city has followed their lead obediently, constructing the infrastructure necessary to give them whatever they have asked, largely regardless of cost. The appearance of planning is

constructed retrospectively, to conceal a reality that looks orderly, but lacks the coherence needed to permit the development of a viable and affordable network of services and system of public transportation.

## **Springfield Municipality: A Classic *Zwischenstadt*, Rationalised by Planning Jargon**

Most of the population of the Winnipeg metropolitan area (Map 3) is located in the central municipality of Winnipeg, in which, as our look at maps and photographs has shown, there remains ample space for further development. Surrounding Winnipeg are a small city, Selkirk, a town, Stonewall, and 13 rural municipalities. Most of these municipalities compete with Winnipeg to attract residential and other development. In this section, we look at the development plan for one of those municipalities, Springfield, and contrast it with the reality of the way the municipality is developing.

In their discussion of planning principles, the Winnipeg planners were content to invoke such uncontroversial planning principles as environmental sustainability and spatial compactness, and claim, in defiance of the facts, that these motherhood statements constituted Winnipeg's guiding principles.

Springfield's planners work harder. The plan (Springfield Rural Municipality, 2011) sets out a convincing analysis of Springfield's landforms (Map 4).

- Red River Valley
- Birds Hill Kame Deposit
- Eastern Lake Terrace
- Brokenhead River Basin

This definition is followed up by some sensible general principles, such as

- Preservation of agricultural viability and natural resources
- Separation of heavy industry from other uses
- Concentration of commercial and light industrial uses in urban centres
- Prevention of proliferation of residential development, especially along highways.



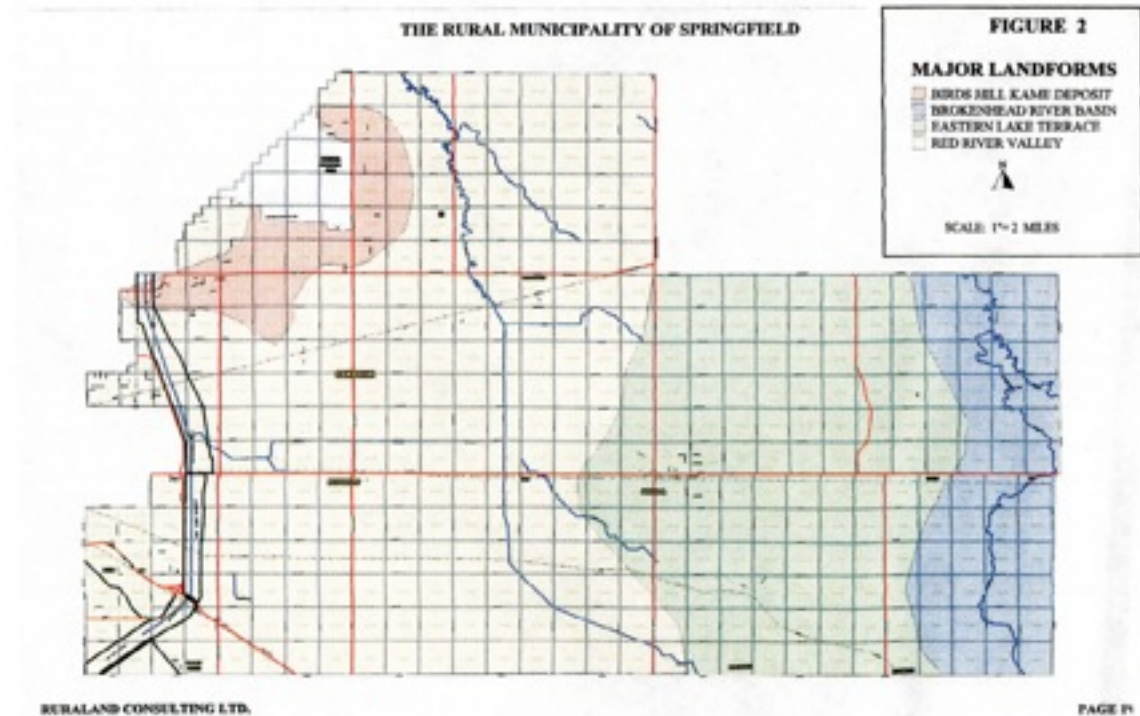


**Map 3: Winnipeg Capital Region**  
**Source: Manitoba Local Government, 2012.**

The four land forms include:

- Two high-potential agricultural areas, the Red River Valley and the Brokenhead River Basin
- The Birds Hill Kame Deposit, near a provincial park, that is the prime source of ground water for the municipality and
- The Eastern Lake Terrace, which is defined as having lower agricultural potential.





**Map 4: Springfield Municipality Landforms**  
**Source: Springfield Rural Municipality, 2012.**

A substantial scholarly literature cites a variety of ways that residential development in farming areas damages the viability of agriculture: complaints from residents about smells, heavy machinery on roads and other perceived nuisances resulting from agriculture; residential activities that interfere with farming operations such as commuter traffic, harassment of farm animals by pets; and escalation of land prices that inflate the cost of farming. (Leo *et al*, 1998)

The proposed Springfield official plan itself states that the growth potential of livestock husbandry has already been limited by past residential development. (Springfield Rural Municipality, 2011, 28) To this point in the plan, therefore, an analysis of land forms has indicated the location of good agricultural areas (See Map 5 below) and important water resources, while statements of objectives have stressed the determination to preserve these assets in the face of urbanization.

However, when we turn to the part of the plan in which proposed zoning categories are set out, it appears that we are reading a different plan. Most of the residential development is in the larger of the two prime agricultural areas and in the area where the major resource of ground water is located. All the residential development on top of the prime water resource relies on septic tanks for sewage disposal, which invariably poses a greater risk to ground water than a

community sewage system. There is a cluster of residential development planned as well in the community of Anola, which is located in the low-potential agricultural area and would therefore seem to be the natural area for urban development if harm to agriculture were to be minimized, but that community can only accommodate a limited amount of development because it has not been provided with the water and sewage services needed for higher concentrations of development.

Nor are there any plans for providing Anola with services, even though the plan states that there is a demand for residential development there. Meanwhile, two urban communities in the middle of the prime agricultural area, Oakbank and Dugald, have been provided with the services required for higher concentrations of urban development. In short, everything possible is done to encourage urban development in those areas which the plan claims a determination to protect, and almost nothing done to encourage development in the area that the plan designates as unsuitable for other purposes.

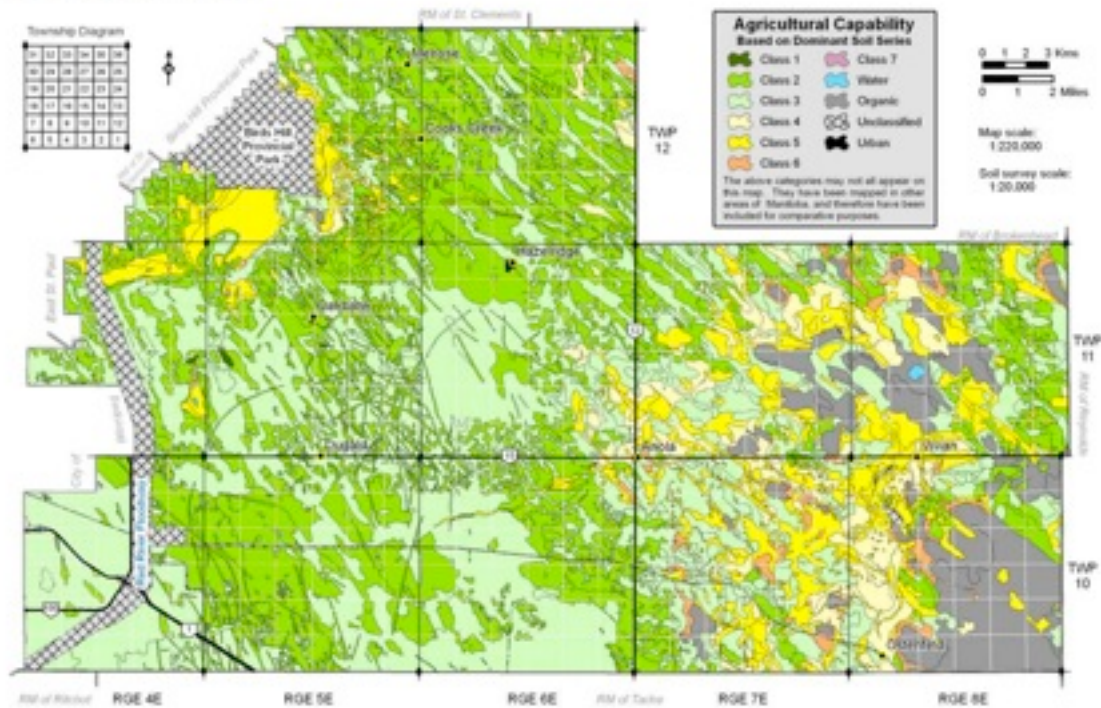
Attendance at two hearings of the municipal board panel (17 May and 24 May 2000) provided insights into the sources of this exercise in appearing to plan without actually doing so. From a variety of statements that were made, it became clear that numerous residents of the municipality had been able to improve their fortunes by subdividing farmland in the past, in order to sell it for residential development, and that others wished, at the time of the hearings, to follow suit. When witnesses at the hearing called attention to the gap in the plan between objectives and proposed outcomes<sup>2</sup> the argument was repeatedly made that, since some had been allowed to subdivide their land, it was not fair to restrict others from doing so.

In short, the municipality was meeting its legal obligations by providing something that resembled a plan, but political pressures from constituents in a community small enough to allow almost anyone to have a personal relationship with her or his representative on council prevented the municipality from adhering to the principles stated in the plan. In a community as small as this one, it is not necessary to imagine overt corruption of decision-makers through the offer of inducements to neglect their duties in order to understand what is happening. In the absence of clear provincial planning guidelines, pressures on council are too immediate and too personal to permit genuine planning. It is those who stand to gain from development that largely determine the way the community will develop. The political realities of the planning process defeat aspirations to sound urban planning.

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<sup>2</sup>I was present at the hearing as a witness, invited to testify as an expert, and I was one of several of those present who pointed to the gap.

Map 2. Agricultural Capability



**Map 5: Springfield Municipality Agricultural Capability**  
Source: Manitoba, Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives, Soil and Landscape Management Section, 2011, p. 16

## Conclusions

Although many of the details of Winnipeg's politics of urban planning differ from those in Springfield Rural Municipality, the fundamental problem is the same in both jurisdictions: The decision-makers are too close to those who will be affected by decisions to allow for a reasonable expectation that development practise will be governed by planning principles. When developers and individual citizens are well-placed to offer or withhold financial or other inducements, including friendship in the case of Springfield, it is unreasonable to expect that good planning practise will trump individual interest. As long as local politicians remain responsible for applying planning principles, planning aspirations will continue to be trumped, and chaotic development will remain the inevitable outcome.

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