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Inspiring waterfront vision for River City

Forks releases 20-year strategy for waterways

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Drawings on display at The Forks show a vision of river development. (WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)



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Deputy mayor Justin Swandel says the city could help boat owners by installing six floating docks at a cost of \$500,000. (PHOTOS BY BORIS MINKEVICH /

A pedestrian bridge over the Red River that connects Norwood to the Southwest Transitway. Wider, pedestrian-friendly paths along Wellington Crescent and Tache Boulevard.

Canoe- and kayak-storage lockers at Fort Gibraltar, the Winnipeg Rowing Club and Bonnycastle Park.

Residential infill projects on the west side of The Forks, near the Manitoba legislature and throughout South Point Douglas.

If this sounds like a fanciful wish list of riverfront improvements in Winnipeg, well, that's exactly what it's supposed to be. On Thursday, officials at The Forks unveiled a 20-year plan for riverfront development with an inspirational goal: Getting Winnipeggers to think about ways to better use our neglected waterways.

"This is a vision. This is 'what could be,' not 'what will happen next year,' " said Paul Jordan, chief operating officer of The Forks, which has spent a year developing a planning framework it calls River City Connections: Reimagining the City's Riverfront.

Unlike a building site plan or a city planning report, the riverfront plan is intentionally pie in the sky. Neighbourhood sketches unveiled Thursday reimagine inner-city Winnipeg as an urbanist utopia with commercial and residential developments that face the Red and Assiniboine instead of turning their back on the two largest rivers.

While Winnipeggers are gradually embracing the rivers during the winter skating-trail season, summer floods in 2005 and 2006 and year-round high water in 2009 and 2010 have hampered recreational efforts, commercial development and the enhancement of the network of riverfront trails.

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"We're starting to get back to where we were," said Jordan, referring to the return of river levels below the 8.5 feet James of the Assiniboine Riverwalk. The return of so-called normal summer levels will allow regular water-taxi service to resume in July, he said.

The plan unveiled Thursday, however, is far more ambitious. The framework calls for medium-density apartment buildings and restaurants replacing practically every industrial plot and empty lot from Point Douglas and North St. Boniface south to Norwood and Riverview.

For example, the vision for the Manitoba legislature grounds calls for a restaurant inside the greenhouse that serves the lieutenant-governor's residence on the north side of the Assiniboine River, with new riverfront apartments next door. South Point Douglas would be repurposed as a mixed-use neighbourhood with a central "large, family-recreation facility" that Forks officials concede is code for an indoor water park.

There are no cost projections attached to any of the amenities. The Forks intends to formally present the plan to city council in September and October and then begin to see what can be implemented in the coming years and decades.

Jordan already has a key ally in deputy mayor Justin Swandel (St. Norbert), city council's riverbank-management chairman, who has been lobbying to create a riverbank-development corporation.

Swandel, who lives along the Red River and owns a 17.5-foot fishing boat, said he believes Winnipeg's riverfronts have a tremendous amount of unrealized recreational and commercial potential. The city could make life easier for boaters immediately by spending \$300,000 to \$500,000 to purchase five or six floating docks that can be installed and dismantled every season, he said.

This would be more economical than spending millions on permanent boat docks, as most boaters only need a place to load and unload, Swandel said.

"It's a matter of simply plopping them in every year. You could probably get someone to sponsor it," he said.

The River City Connections plan is online at www.rivercitywpg.ca .

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