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Waterfront historical sites lost?

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Two foundational events in our city's history took place along what is now Waterfront Drive, but, sadly, these events are all but invisible to residents and visitors.

Two hundred years ago, the Selkirk Settlers landed on the banks of the Red River, establishing the settlement that would become Winnipeg. Almost 100 years ago during the Winnipeg General Strike, a small patch of green called Victoria Park was the gathering place for thousands of workers demonstrating for human rights, fair wages, safe working conditions and a decent life for their families.

Other than a plaque and a walking tour, our city and provincial officials have consistently resisted recognizing these sites as signature cultural heritage attractions.

Tourists and other visitors come and go with no opportunity to visit this area and learn about our unique cultural heritage and the events that shaped our city's character.

Thanks to the Scottish community, the Selkirk Settlers are at least acknowledged with a cairn. Victoria Park and the Winnipeg General Strike, however, have no physical presence.

In part, thanks to Danny Schur's theatrical interpretations of early immigrant Winnipeg and the 1919 strike, there is a growing public awareness and interest in this important period of Winnipeg history.

Neglected and left to deteriorate for years, these historic sites are now being sold off piece by piece to the highest bidder, turning historical property into condos and a boutique hotel.

The potential to showcase our unique history is being squandered. There is no doubt that we need to build housing to rejuvenate the Exchange and Waterfront areas and meet housing demand. There is, however, plenty of other infill space for condo or hotel development.

The Alexander Docks area and the James Avenue Pumping Station in particular could be developed as world-class attractions that will add valuable amenities, interpretive features and expand green space to attract both locals and tourists.

The James Avenue Pumping Station is an engineering marvel and has considerable tourism value.

Developing these historic properties would build our reputation in the international community, be complementary to the new human rights museum, and help establish our credibility with UNESCO.

Our research shows heritage parks are relatively low-cost investments (no \$1-billion monolithic buildings required) and they return long-term revenue by adding vibrancy and attracting a whole array of local businesses -- coffee shops, restaurants, speciality bookstores and souvenir shops. Commemoration of

Victoria Park and the Winnipeg General Strike would attract cultural tourists, students of history and finally tell the full story of this internationally recognized event.

Such heritage development along Waterfront Drive would create an exciting, cultural corridor to complement the Exchange District, the theatre district and the character of South Point Douglas.

One of three original city parks, Victoria Park became the symbolic centre of the struggle of the 35,000 workers who walked off their jobs on May 15, 1919, to fight for a better life in Canada. The park was destroyed shortly after the strike at the insistence of influential business owners, and replaced with a steam plant. That plant has been dismantled and the property sold. Today, Sky Condos sits on what was the centre of the park, its lobby the exact site of the old bandstand.

In spite of previous proposals, multiple appeals and its own planning documents that encourage heritage preservation, the city continues to destroy the last remnants of the park and its historic value.

American centres like New Orleans, New York and Boston, to name just a few, are famous for their historic sites. They invest in them and reap considerable benefits from doing so. European cities large and small preserve their historic sites for future generations and showcase what makes them unique.

A permanent cultural heritage site to commemorate the Winnipeg General Strike is vital to ensuring our unique history is preserved and accurately transmitted to future generations.

This issue raises many questions: why has the city resisted developing this historic property to tell the story of the general strike, why it happened, what it accomplished and what did we learn?

Why can't city officials see past short-term profits to the long-term social and economic potential of showcasing our history?

How can irreplaceable, historic, public property simply be sold without public debate?

What we know for sure is the Winnipeg General Strike is a seminal event in our history and its impact went far beyond provincial borders. This relevant and exciting history has been invisible for far too long.

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www.victoriapark1919.ca

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