



ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

Manitoba's absence of stormwater treatment laws compromises the environment by letting commercial developers do whatever they want.

By Sean McNeely

The Province of Manitoba has put together a snazzy new campaign with the slogan “Spirited Energy” to enhance its image.

While catchy, Manitoba's lack of stormwater treatment regulations amid strong commercial growth is depleting that energy at an alarming rate. In fact, this absence may cause environmental problems that could cost the province millions to repair in the future.

Running through the heart of Winnipeg, the Red River contributes 10 per cent of Lake Winnipeg's water (by volume) but contributes over 60 per cent of the lake's pollutants. As a result, Lake Winnipeg is suffering from severe eutrophication problems with algae blooms suffocating tens of square miles with phosphates and other nutrients.

Though a serious problem, the province is somewhat handcuffed dealing with what could potentially be an even more pressing issue for Winnipeg residents—the city's aging combined sewer system where wastewater pipes and stormwater pipes are one and the same.

Installed in older areas of the city between 1880 and 1960, Winnipeg's combined sewers cover 1,280 kilometres. During

wet weather, combined wastewater and stormwater floods the system, bypasses any wastewater treatment measures and flows directly into nearby rivers—this is known as a combined sewer overflow (CSO).

CSOs happen an average of 18 times a year between May and September, and there are 79 locations where combined sewers discharge bacteria and floating debris, oil, fertilizers and animal waste into rivers.

To alleviate this problem, the city plans to separate the two pipe systems, with the province and city committing over a billion dollars over the next 15 years to construct new piping and a modern wastewater treatment plant.

While completing this task will be a vast improvement in infrastructure, it's only a partial solution when addressing stormwater pollution. Diverting it is a good start, but treating it—installing a stormwater treatment system to remove oil, grease, sediment and other pollutants—is essential.

However, Winnipeg and Manitoba have yet to establish or implement stormwater regulations for commercial development, which could seriously hinder any lake recovery or water treatment efforts.

Without firm stormwater regulations in

place, developers continue to build shopping malls, factories and other businesses without installing stormwater management systems that help protect natural water resources by capturing pollutants washed from paved surfaces during rainfall.

Taking advantage of the lack of regulations, some developers are removing stormwater treatment systems from their construction plans to save money. And some Manitoba consultants are encouraging developers to strike out stormwater treatment systems from their construction budgets, claiming such devices are a needless expense.

“There is a big game being played here,” said Roger, a Manitoba water industry expert who asked his real name not be used. “The general attitude is that if it's not required, why put it in? But every commercial development should have a stormwater treatment system,” he stressed.

“The government should implement regulations, especially considering the condition of Manitoba's major lakes,” added Roger.

What frustrates Roger is that he sees national chains construct new stores or businesses in other provinces and install stormwater treatment systems and then

completely abandon such efforts in Manitoba for identical projects.

“Any commercial development that goes on just about anywhere else in Canada, the requirements call for an oil/grit remover. So there’s recognition that it’s the right thing to do, but it’s coming down to the bottom line,” said Roger, who noted even the most high-profile corporate giants are guilty.

“We’re not talking about a lot of money. We’re talking an extra \$50,000 to \$100,000. It’s a minute cost if you’re putting up an outdoor shopping mall that costs \$10 million. And developers can’t complain they’re being forced to swallow unnecessary costs when they automatically include these costs with

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similar developments in other provinces.”

Dwight Williamson, the director of the water, science and management branch for Manitoba’s Department of Water Stewardship, recognizes there is not much in terms of government legislation to ward off stormwater pollution for commercial areas.

“At the present time, I’m afraid we don’t really have a piece of legislation that would directly apply to stormwater,” he said. “But it’s certainly a concern for us in terms of the potential nutrient load being contributed to downstream waters from land drainage.”

However, though no regulations exist, developers are certainly aware of the issue of stormwater pollution, believes Williamson.

“We’re trying very hard to create an atmosphere in Manitoba where everyone realizes they have responsibility to do the very best possible job they can,” he said. “We have a number of large initiatives underway to reduce nutrient contributions to Lake Winnipeg.

“I would say there are few developers in Manitoba that are unaware of this. It’s their responsibility to try to do what is reasonably possible in the context of playing their part.”

And if developers have worked in other provinces where such regulations are in place, “it would be expected they would bring the same sense of responsibility to their operations in Manitoba,” said Williamson.

But Roger wonders if expecting developers to comply simply on moral grounds is enough. “A lot of developers have a conscience and will install stormwater management systems, but a lot of them won’t because they can save money,” he said.

“Manitoba doesn’t have to reinvent the wheel,” he continued. “It would benefit from reviewing regulations from other provinces

and adopting something similar. But there is a bit of a political game being played as to which level of government is responsible.”

“This is an area that we will be moving into, but we’re not quite there yet,” said Williamson. “But within the next year we fully expect to have appropriate regulations in place.” ♣



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