

Bryant, Shellie

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Sent: March 20, 2019 10:27 AM
To: City Council
Subject: Form submission from: Write a Letter to Council

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Date: Wednesday, March 20, 2019
To: His Worship the Mayor and Members of City Council
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Name of the organization or agency you are representing (if applicable): Wild about Saskatoon
Subject: Northeast Swale Agenda item 8.1.6
Meeting (if known): City Council Regular Meeting March 25, 2019
Comments:

I spoke to this issue, on behalf of Wild about Saskatoon, when it came before the SPC on Planning, Development and Community Services on March 11. Sometimes it must seem that conservationist are never satisfied: that we always come asking for MORE. In this note, I try to explain why doing the bare minimum to protect the Swale is functionally equivalent to doing nothing. If we are serious about conserving these increasingly rare fragments of living landscape, then we have to get a lot of things right all at once. Fortunately, there are many good and tangible reasons to do so. These comments take their inspiration from remarks made earlier this month by Councillor Cynthia Block, about her work as council's lead on the Downtown.

"One of the things I've learned," she told members of the Saskatoon Heritage Society, "is that great cities tell great stories." What matters "is how we protect and preserve our collective history." What matters, she continued, is "how we protect the spaces that tell our stories."

My mind immediately flashed to the surviving grassland-wetland complexes in the northeast sector of Saskatoon, the Northeast and Small Swales. The story they have to tell is not just great: it is epic. The Swales speak of the Ice Ages and the retreat of the glaciers. They remember the buffalo prairie and the ancestors who have been coming here, to these bends in the South Saskatchewan River, effectively forever. Even now, the Swales are home to grouse on their dancing grounds, to butcher birds, to the whispered flight of owls. Together with Wanuskewin, these now vanishingly rare corridors of functioning grassland tell the story of this place. Great cities tell great stories. The Swales tell a great story and one that only Saskatoon can tell.

It is tricky enough to conserve a heritage building. You have to fix the leaky roof, the collapsing floor boards; you have to give the place a new purpose and use. But it is even more complex to conserve a living landscape like the Swales.

Remember when you were a kid – you'd catch some fascinating creepy-crawly, put it in a box, bring it a handful of leaves, bed it down all nice and comfy, snap on the lid – and come back a day or two later to discover that it had expired. An ex-caterpillar. Oops, should have put holes in the lid: in addition to everything else, this living thing needed air.

The Northeast and Small Swales are like that. If we want to keep them alive, we have to get everything right: we need to protect their connections to the river valley and the surrounding countryside. We need to provide them with dark skies, appropriate kinds of disturbance, meaningful buffer zones. We need to give them room to breathe

The Swales are bit of a fixer-upper, but you know, the thing is -- they still work. They sequester carbon, support biodiversity, purify water, protect us from floods. They teach us about life in our own special corner of the world, and they give us respite from stress: they support our physical and mental health. Keeping these rare prairie fragments healthy will give us hope and confidence. And we also know, from recent experience in Edmonton and elsewhere, that green spaces can be a spur to investment and development.

If we approach these resilient landscapes with generosity and imagination, I believe we will succeed in keeping them alive, so that the

Swales are here in a hundred years, in two hundred years, heck – in a thousand years – to tell their big story. To borrow a phrase from a former Saskatoon resident, the poet Patrick Lane, “It’s our story now. How do we want it to end?”

Attachments:

The results of this submission may be viewed at:

<https://www.saskatoon.ca/node/398/submission/293108>