

sitelines

BY STEVE COHLMeyer

Lack of vision, low standards ruin gov't projects

DURING the 19th and early 20th centuries, the nursery trade in Germany was dominated by demand for slow-growing, long-lived linden, basswood and oak.

This continued through the First World War and the aftermath of the Treaty of Versailles, when the country was in economic ruin. Then, during the 1920s, even with the economy growing healthier, a strange thing happened in the market for trees: No one wanted trees that would take a generation or two to reach maturity, and everyone wanted quick-growing poplars that would fill out quickly, yet die within a generation.

This desire to satisfy only short-term goals, and not to act for future generations, paralleled a general decline in German society during this period.

It is hard to draw direct lessons, but this tale does make one think.

In Manitoba, the provincial government has gone through periods of confidence in the future. These periods have been marked by building of high-quality infrastructure. Pendulums tend to swing, however, and we seem to have moved into a period when inaction — or action of the lowest admissible quality — is deemed to be a duty of responsible government.

A CASE IN POINT:

When Grand Beach Provincial Park was opened, the Department of Parks, and the political will behind the department, felt that this was a first-class place. Excellent planning was carried out. Good roads were built.

And some special, though modest, architecture was created — the public washrooms perched on the dunes, and the entry gateway buildings. There was a message that this place mattered, and that the government was ready to show both the citizens of Manitoba and visitors that this was no provincial province.

Since that original development, things have changed.

About 10 years ago, the province constructed a new park management building.

The building sits in a prime public location, yet it looks more like a standard kit cottage than a civic building. The original gateway buildings at the entries to the beach and campgrounds were handsome, small buildings of concrete, cedar and laminated wooden beams. Some of the original work was repaired two years ago, and instead of rebuilding to the quality of the original work; the Parks Department installed a random collection of lumber and casual carpentry to repair the building. This haphazard construction now greets visitors to the park.

Lack of quality like this in our publicly built environment may have many causes.

I suspect politicians do not want to be seen spending lavishly. I also suspect that to avoid the ire of politicians, senior administrators do not demand more than minimal quality in public works. This fear of pushing beyond the minimum spreads all too easily down the administrative ranks, and soon a culture develops in which the minimum becomes all that is possible.

It is not in the public interest to construct or repair buildings to the extraordinarily low standards that have been set at Grand Beach. The image we project to our citizens and to our visitors suffers dramatically; the level of confidence we have in ourselves falls; and there are true economic costs that come with telling ourselves and the world that we cannot do things well.

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