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OUR PART IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT¹

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Conference Keynote Address

This conference is dedicated to exploring tomorrow, and the challenges that lie ahead will call for new ways of thinking about our world and the role we will play in shaping it. The phrase "think globally, act locally" has become the axiom for the new century.

There is no question in my mind that issues facing municipalities in the western world have been and are being shaped by world events and significant shifts in global thinking. Consider the policies, priorities and initiatives of Reagan, Bush, Thatcher and, of course, Brian Mulroney. They, in turn, have had a profound impact on the policies, priorities and initiatives at the local level.

Let's take a couple of steps back. The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970's were decades dominated by east-west tension; communism vs. capitalism. Wars, real like the Korean and Vietnam wars and intellectual, like the cold war. We entered the nuclear age. We engaged in the arms race. Hawks took on doves. We saw the creation of trading blocks protected by tariffs and affected by embargos and politics. We raced for space and experienced global competitiveness surrounding technological advances in computers, medicine and industry. We entered the information age and new priorities affected industry, commerce, the way people earned their living, and the way they spent the money they earned.

These global issues shaped the way we

thought. They impacted on government priorities. They dominated our educational systems. And they set in motion policies and priorities that are reflected even at the local level.

During this time, urban communities experienced a growth frenzy, often unbridled. Cities developed with little thought to the long-term consequence. The car was king, at least in the western world. We built bigger and longer expressways. We built taller buildings. We developed our city centers, often replacing historically-significant, low-income neighborhoods with yuppie housing and commercial development. The financial bottom line dominated. Remember our role models? Donald Trump. The movie *Wall Street's* Gordon Gecko, and his phrase that so aptly reflected the tenor of the times, "greed is the force that made America great." The rich got richer and the gap between haves and have nots widened, especially during the 1980s. The richest 1 percent of the population now has an after-tax total income almost as big as everyone in the bottom 40 percent of wage earners. In 1980, that figure was half the income of the bottom 40 percent. The U.S. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that Americans in the middle income bracket are getting less of total share of income than at any time since World War II, and I suspect the situation in Canada is similar.

And where did the concept of public parks, recreation and urban forestry programs sit on the priority list? Pretty close to the bottom, I'm afraid. In part, because of the people in power. But in

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our low-priority status was also a byproduct of the way we saw ourselves. I emphasize here that the problem was in our perception, not the perception others had of our profession. We viewed our profession as a soft service, and as such, vulnerable to budget cutbacks. A field of limited importance to municipalities. A field, quite frankly, with little growth potential. We spent much of our time merely fighting to maintain the status quo. And for good reason. We witnessed the near collapse of New York, Proposition 13 in California, and cutbacks in government spending here in Canada. These phenomena shaped our road into a new decade, and unless we rethink our direction, this bottom-line thinking will lead us into the next century. Consider current world events: eastern Europe, the Middle East, and a global realization that our planet has limited resources and that we are in serious trouble. Global warming, acid rain, the destruction of the rain forests, the depletion of the ozone layer. The issue of waste management. Of the three, the latter will, no doubt, have the greatest impact.

We have an opportunity to chart a new course, to impact on the quality of life in our cities, like no other profession. But I am convinced that we will have this impact only if we can accomplish four things:

- Overcome our inferiority complex. Our view that we rank somewhere below public works and infrastructures like housing, health and education. We must make a fundamental mind shift and recognize our potential to shape life in urban centers that is not available to any other profession.
- Deliver a message that will be understood by the masses. Simple, clear, to spell out what is achievable, to spell out how this new path is critical to the health, the future of our children, grandchildren, and the generations to come.
- Develop leadership and effective systems to deliver what we promise. We cannot become mired in traditional reactionary bureaucracies. We need to be entrepreneurial, responsive, pro-active, and prepared to take risks.
- Recognize opportunities presented by the changing economic environment. We know

the changes that occurred as we moved from an agricultural-based economy to an industrial one. We do not yet know the economic effects of moving from an industrial to a service-oriented economy. However, it is becoming clear that we do not need the same large tracts of land for facilities and even where manufacturing continues to be viable, technological advances often mean smaller facilities that also require less land. Large tracts of land may come available--witness the port lands in Toronto--and we must be in a position to anticipate their availability and to have in place new programs to utilize this land appropriately.

These items cannot be achieved by being reactionary, by waiting to be led. We need to show the leadership and that, quite frankly, may be putting your job on the line. Remember the peace movement and the civil rights movement? These movements, which bound together a host of disparate groups, impacted on politics at home and abroad. Presidents underestimated their power and paid dearly. I believe we are experiencing a similar upsurge in popular will. I believe this movement will be far more powerful than people currently give it credit for. And I believe the movement will shape our world more dramatically perhaps than any other single event with the exception of the two world wars. I'm talking, of course, about the environmental movement.

Comparing the environmental movement with the peace and civil rights movements may, indeed, be underestimating its potential to change life as we know it. The peace movement essentially started in one country, the USA, and although it spread throughout the world, it was nevertheless most powerful in North America. In the early stages, it had the support primarily of students and fringe groups. It never really caught fire in the mainstream. It is not a politically-based ideology. Its support crosses all political parties and boundaries, conservative, liberal, and the silent majority. As a result, it has the potential to impact on government policies, corporate strategies, and fundamental community institutions like education, making it a compelling

force of large "P" politics today.

So, we must ask ourselves, how do we play a role in this global phenomenon? The first area of change is the way we view ourselves as professionals. This largely internal change may be the most difficult to deal with. Parks, urban forestry, and recreation practitioners generally think of themselves as offering a soft service. We try to rationalize our value, to reinforce, defend and justify our existence in the face of higher taxes, competition for resources, shrinking municipal dollars that put us in an inferior position.

I've been attending professional conferences for the last 15 years and it doesn't matter whether the association was parks, recreation or urban forestry, the consistent theme inevitably dealt with strategies to do more with less. It's as if we anticipate our resources being cut back, that the demands placed on us will increase, that that we will be caught in the impossible squeeze of attempting to respond to increasing needs without the resources to do so effectively.

Consider this. In 1960, the Toronto Parks and Recreation Department accounted for 10 percent of the city's operating budget; public works accounted for 42 percent. In 1990, parks and recreation grabbed 25 percent, public works, 27 percent. In fact, as a percentage of overall city spending, Toronto Parks and Recreation has enjoyed greater growth than any other operating department.

We fought hard to change the perspective that resulted in those figures. We learned to be a pro-active, progressive organization, to trim the fat, to dismantle an unwieldy and expensive bureaucracy. We do not have to take a back seat to any other municipal government service related to the quality of life in urban centers. But can we dream about expanding our horizons, of responding to needs which are not currently being addressed? How can we talk about what we might accomplish if our focus is on shrinking resources and limiting services?

How many of you have ever explored what your priorities would be if you expanded your services field? If you enjoyed a 10 percent increase in budget? I expect, not many. And

that is precisely what we must do. Obviously, asking for more funds without a clear objective is a losing proposition. But unless we articulate a vision of what could be, and then set out to make that vision reality, it ain't going to happen.

We need to make that fundamental change in the way we view ourselves and the role we play in the life of our communities. We don't need to depend on outside influences. We must simply refocus our reason for being to include a rationale for becoming a positive, productive, essential component of urban life. How do we accomplish that? I don't have any neat, simple answers. But I do know that small victories, challenges on very specific and local issues, are required. So is consistently producing well-formed, rational arguments for protecting greenspace, for protecting trees, for treating trees, for supporting reasonable, sustainable development with adequate greenspace and adequate tree planting programs.

These steps will build a momentum that will force our politicians to accept the notion that tree planting and parks are as essential as public transit, sewers, waste management, and roads and highways. Push at the edges. Refuse to anticipate a political response and then write your report as if it had been delivered. Instead, help shape political and public opinion. You, more than anyone else, know what needs to be done. Deliver the message to your politicians and to your public. Because they are ready to listen and to act. Granted, that wasn't always the case.

Let me tell you a story. Years ago, in India, soldiers were ordered to cut down trees in certain villages to fuel an iron smelter. In one village, the women hugged the trees in protest and the soldiers sawed through them. More offered to come and take their place, the story goes, because the women knew there was no life without trees anyway.

In the beaches area here in Toronto, a local neighborhood that has a long history in the city, a developer proposed a main street development that required cutting down two oak trees, both of which were more than 100 years old. Neighborhood activists chained themselves

to the trees, climbed into the branches, and dared the chainsaw operators to cut the trees down. They didn't.

More recently, a developer anxious to get on with his project, cut down a grove of more than 300 trees, including mature oaks and elms far in advance of any development, far in advance of any proposals for a development plan. We helped focus the media's attention on this destruction and the politicians and the people paid attention. It may be months or years before he receives approval for his project.

This issue has galvanized support for legislation that will have the city control the destruction of trees on private property, and may result in legislation as tough as anywhere in the western world. It may go so far as to require people who want to remove trees to obtain permits similar to the permits required to build new developments. This may be foreign to our neighbors in the United States who are not accustomed to the same level of government control on private property. But this attitude signals a major shift in how Canadian municipalities view natural resources as belonging to everyone, regardless of whether they sit on public or private property.

In 1989, a major developer in downtown Toronto proposed a 56-story office tower as part of a super block development. We requested a significant park space to service the more than 6,000 employees who would be working in this new development. The developer balked, the project was delayed, his offer of incentives to the city grew from roughly \$16 million to almost \$50 million and in the end, the city will have a 0.5 acre plus park and the \$5 million needed to develop it.

This issue was the focus of the last municipal election. We experienced a major shift in the makeup of the city council and the message from the electorate was clear. Responsible development was required, amenities were expected, and reasonable development with public benefits was the only kind of development that would be tolerated.

The power of public support cannot be underestimated. Singly, and in groups, people

are taking up the challenge. They are acting and they are effecting change. We regularly get inquiries like, "I thought you could tell me what to do about this." "My next door neighbor is planning to cut down a tree in her backyard. It's magnificent, and I want to stop her. What can I do?" We deal with it and try to be helpful.

In the USA, the work of the Tree People in Los Angeles stands as a powerful example of what citizens can accomplish as an organized force. Founder Andy Lipkis has helped plant more than 200 million trees in the last 20 years. At 18, he persuaded the California Forestry Division to give him 8,000 tree saplings, which he taught teenagers to plant and care for. Tree People was born. In 1980, the Los Angeles City Planning Department decided to plant 1 million trees over the 20 years. Asked to help, Tree People accomplished the job in time for the 1984 Olympic games.

Once unique, Tree People has inspired similar groups everywhere. Last year the American Forestry Association launched a Global Release Program to help community groups plant 100 million trees and assist states to replant forests. President Bush recently announced a major initiative beginning fiscal 1991 called "America The Beautiful." The program provides an environmental legacy for future generations, enhances existing natural and recreational resources, and addresses mounting public concern about the buildup of atmospheric carbon dioxide. A major component of the initiative is a nationwide multi-year program of tree planting and forestry renewal. Lest you think the responsibility for urban forestry is being assumed only by government on behalf of the people, the initiative calls for a public and private sector cooperative approach with a goal of planting, improving, and maintaining nearly 1 billion additional trees per year in communities and rural areas nationwide. Virtually every state, community, and individual in the USA will have the opportunity to participate.

While there is no denying the impact of the environmental movement on the national psyche, getting the public on our side nevertheless depends on our second challenge, provid-

ing a simple clear message that will capture people's imagination and inspire their support.

We could learn from the clever way leaders like Jerry Rubin and Abby Hoffman in the peace movement manipulated the media and garnered public support. Remember levitating the pentagon, tossing money on the floor of the stock exchange? Whether or not you agree with their message, it was clear and their method was successful in getting that message across.

Let me tell you about another Toronto experience. In the mid-1970s, the federal government created a major waterfront development. In its zeal to become independent and self sustaining, it convinced previous city councils to approve development along the waterfront that effectively blocked access to the lake, privatizing acres of valuable waterfront land. As early as 1985, our parks department identified the problem and demanded that at least 40 acres of the 100-acre development site be dedicated to public parks. We were ridiculed. We were dismissed. We were told we were out of touch with what constituted a modern park. We had too much open space in Toronto, we were told. The land would lie idle during the winter. What we needed were cafes, atriums, commercial development and attractions, including retail shops that would be park-like. Indeed, we were told, a modern-day park should include retail development.

We stood our ground. We held out for those 40 acres. It was a simple message--40 acres of park. Political cartoonists could, and did, identify with the message. The people identified with the message. Politicians eventually identified with the message. Five years later, no politician at the municipal, provincial or federal level would argue that the 40 acres of parkland we identified as absolute is not sacrosanct.

While the samples I have mentioned are site-specific, our actions have had an impact both city- and province-wide. Our department has been approached by other developers who have said quite candidly, "We want to develop, we know that you have goals related to parkland and tree protection; and we want to be able to satisfy those needs."

The payoff, then, has been significant. Developers have accepted that the rules have changed. Developments now need to pass both public and political scrutiny. Public benefits, greening, and environmental sensitivity are part and parcel with doing business in this city.

I mentioned our ability to deliver on what we promise, to provide a responsive service free of bureaucracy and process, a progressive, proactive organization that can deliver the goods.

Let me give you another Toronto example. Toronto Hydro, an agency of the city operated by a quasi-independent board of commissioners, determined the need to upgrade the distribution system in Toronto from 3,000 to 13,000 volts. In their view, the most effective way to do this was to utilize an overhead distribution system increasing the size of hydro poles from 27 to 40 feet, and making this transition city-wide over a 20-year period. Initially, we bought the argument that this was necessary and urgent, and that dire consequences would result if Toronto Hydro was not permitted to proceed.

We were astounded by the destruction of our mature urban forest when Hydro completed its conversion in a community in the east end. We raised the warnings. We asked Hydro to review its plans. We asked Hydro to confirm the urgency and to identify alternatives. These requests fell on deaf ears. Hydro was determined to proceed. As they embarked on the next phase in another community, the public response was loud and clear.

We continued our efforts, but it became clear that we, as a parks and recreation department, needed to know as much, if not more, about Hydro conversion than the people at Toronto Hydro. We attended conferences. We attended seminars. We hired engineers. We hired independent consultants. We did reviews of other world-class cities and at the end of the day, we outworked Hydro at their own game.

We knew what had to be done. We knew the alternatives and despite the fact that the costs were ten times plus to underground the conversion, we were able to make the case that alternatives existed, that they needed to be examined, they needed to be costed and that

the price of doing a "cheap solution" was far too high. It was all out war. Hydro hired forestry consultants to dispute our findings. They forecasted dire consequences if they were not allowed to proceed.

Today, we have a very progressive Toronto Hydro organization and a new general manager, sensitive to the environmental impact of what Hydro does. He is pursuing a plan that will phase the undergrounding of the distribution system in a way that will protect Hydro users, minimize cost impacts to the taxpayer and Hydro user, and protect our precious natural resource.

We didn't do this by ourselves, couldn't have done so. Only with public support identifying and isolating the problem were we successful. Risky? Absolutely! The payoffs? Well, I happen to think that they can't be measured in dollars. They will be measured in how this city looks 10, 15, 25, 50 years from now.

So what does all this mean? To me, it means that the next decade will be an exciting, challenging, and rewarding one for parks and forestry professionals. We will play a major part in ensuring that the urban environment is both livable and sustainable. I don't have to tell you people that trees are the life and lungs of a city. You know all the technical reasons why this is so. But we need to bring that message to the folks who live in these cities, to people who may take their greenspaces for granted; to raise their awareness that without parks and trees anywhere we can plant them, our urban environments will suffer grave consequences. That's really a heavy responsibility. If we take risks and are pro-active, we can make a difference locally and globally. If we don't, we contribute to the demise of this planet.

During the next decade we are faced with incredible opportunities. We can be a change agent in concert with mainstream thinking if we can overcome our own inferiority complex, if we can deliver a simple and effective message, and if we can deliver on what is promised. That, it seems to me, takes us to the last two issues I would like to address, leadership and strategic thinking. And while my comments are focused on municipal practitioners, I believe they have

similar application to people in the commercial tree business, because the payoffs I see for municipalities will be payoffs for the private sector as well.

First and foremost, we need people who are prepared to take risks, people who are prepared to buck current thinking and help shape a new thinking. We need people who, through incremental wins, can slowly help shape the political thinking of the future. How do we do that? That's all fine and good for Toronto, many of you may be thinking. Toronto has a progressive city council, a healthy industrial mix, a rich tax base. A lot of you come from municipalities that are certainly not as economically well-balanced as Toronto and may not have the resources to accomplish some of the advances that I have cited as Toronto examples. But if you push at the edges, push for a little more each time, you are faced with a problem/opportunity that will create incremental achievements and gain momentum.

At no other time in recent history has our field been as focused in the minds of our political masters. No ambitious, responsible and successful politician of the 90s can ignore the environmental and greening issues. Being pragmatic and forthright, we need to take advantage of that.

As you may know, I have been seconded from the parks and recreation department to chair the City of Toronto Olympic Task Force, working on behalf of the city to secure the 1996 Olympics. Despite criticisms of the Olympic movement, of drugs and amateur sport, of the commercialization of the games, I believe that the Olympics continues to promote tolerance and understanding in the context of personal best, bringing together people of diverse cultures and backgrounds in a spirit of friendship and goodwill. I think those goals are worthy of our support.

But I'll be perfectly frank here. The Olympics also offer an opportunity for a public exchange of ideas, a chance for people to tell us what they want, dream of, and hope for. That information helps us shape a future Toronto responsible to the needs of its citizens. And I also believe, as I mentioned as my last point, that events like the

Olympics or Expo 2000, for that matter, which we just lost to Hanover, offer us a chance to provide our people with a lasting parks and recreation legacy they might not enjoy otherwise. I see these projects as opportunities to further our efforts to make the urban environment green, livable, and sound.

Megaprojects like Expo or the Olympics can act as a catalyst to accelerate the development of a municipal infrastructure. They can act as a buffer against inflation, as happened in Calgary. If properly managed, they can foster community pride and community spirit. Most pertinent to us, they can be exploited, in the most positive sense, to help us achieve our goals of parks, greenspace and urban forestry. However, it takes a forward thinking professional to recognize these opportunities when they represent themselves and to design a course of action that will spell success.

Without belaboring the point, I'm proud to tell you about plans to build athletes' and media housing that will become affordable housing after the games, and will come with appropriate parks, greenspace and community centers, and about an Olympic tree program. We are looking at an overall ravine reforestation plan, complete with Olympic train systems, where appropriate. We are reviewing a "going for green" school project that would involve a gently competitive planting program set up among schools city-wide. We think this initiative, which grew out of an opportunity recognized through our Olympic

bid, could result in a minimum of 30,000 additional trees planted between 1991 and 1996. In addition, a substantial number would be given away and planted on private property.

So you see, now is no time to be timid, or regressive, or narrowly focused. The global events of the day are opening doors for us. All we have to do is have the imagination, the courage, and the determination to walk through them. Not blindly, mind you, but purposely, sure of our strategy, objectives, priorities, timetable, and implementation plan.

We can be a major player in shaping urban communities for a new century. Because what we are selling, trees, mean life itself. And if we cannot get the politicians, the people, to listen, then shame on us. Who better than all of us here to lead that fight?

I'd like to leave you with a comment made by President George Bush, in a speech he delivered in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, last year. "Trees can reduce the heat of a summer's day, quiet a highway's noise, feed the hungry, provide shelter from the wind and warmth in the winter. You see, the forests are the sanctuary not only of wildlife, but also of the human spirit, and every tree is a compact between generations."

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