



# The IUS *In-Brief* Series



## Going Old School Activism Reborn in Winnipeg's Inner City





THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WINNIPEG

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The IUS *In-Brief* series provides new space for thought on urban issues from a variety of perspectives: from academic research to journalistic investigation, from editorial comments to public stories. The *In-Brief* series is intended to provide concise comment, thought and informed discussion on a range of urban issues. We invite submissions: [ius@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:ius@uwinnipeg.ca)

The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

# Foreword

Community tension is often a good thing, a sign that people care about their neighbourhoods and the things that make them great. Often, this tension pits various players against one another on a host of contentious local issues. In our first In-Brief discussion, IUS and Mike Maunder team up to explore a longstanding issue facing a local Winnipeg high school trying to secure much needed green space. In this brief discussion, what emerges is a story about how ordinary citizens and others worked collectively to make a difference in the community. We see that getting involved using “old school activism” still works, especially when you introduce modern social media to get the word out.

The battle over the Gordon Bell field saw community members, students, government and school officials tussling for years, but finally ending up working together to ensure the right thing was done for a prime inner city parcel of land that would have otherwise been redeveloped. While there were many important people involved in this story, our In-Brief discussion focuses on a few whose story is important to share. We feel it important to focus on the grassroots approach that helped kick-start a successful campaign that won the hearts of many Winnipeggers and gave the school a field. The truth is, this field would not exist if not for the efforts of those highlighted in this paper.

Jino Distasio, Director of the Institute of Urban Studies

## Going Old School Activism Reborn in Winnipeg’s Inner City

Kids, parents and community members from an inner-city high school in Winnipeg have shown that activism – “old school” style – still works. Their dream of acquiring a 2.5 acre property next to their school for much-needed greenspace is a classic story of how citizen activists, including kids, can prod several large-scale bureaucracies into community action.

The story began in September 2008, with an article — “Dream of Fields” by Nancy Chippendale — in the Winnipeg Free Press. Nancy argued that a green field should be developed for her Alma Mater — Gordon Bell High School — an inner city high school which had always had to make do with a small asphalt playing surface.

Nancy was passionate about this cause. Her work in palliative care, an inner city soup kitchen and a youth agency had given her experience in social advocacy. She saw the disparity between suburban and inner city schools everyday as she commuted from her suburban home to her job at a nearby inner city youth centre.

“I’d go past Kelvin High School, with green fields, kids lying on the grass and playing under the elm trees, football team practicing in their red and white uniforms. Then I’d cross the river and a few blocks away was

Gordon Bell, in the inner city, no green field at all. Over 800 students and all they had was a tiny asphalt court. It just seemed so wrong.” (A comparison of School Division 1 greenspace is located on page 4.)

Nancy’s article focused on an ideal property adjacent to the school – 2.5 acres, a former auto dealership that had recently been sold to Canada Post who were relocating as they decentralized their old downtown headquarters.

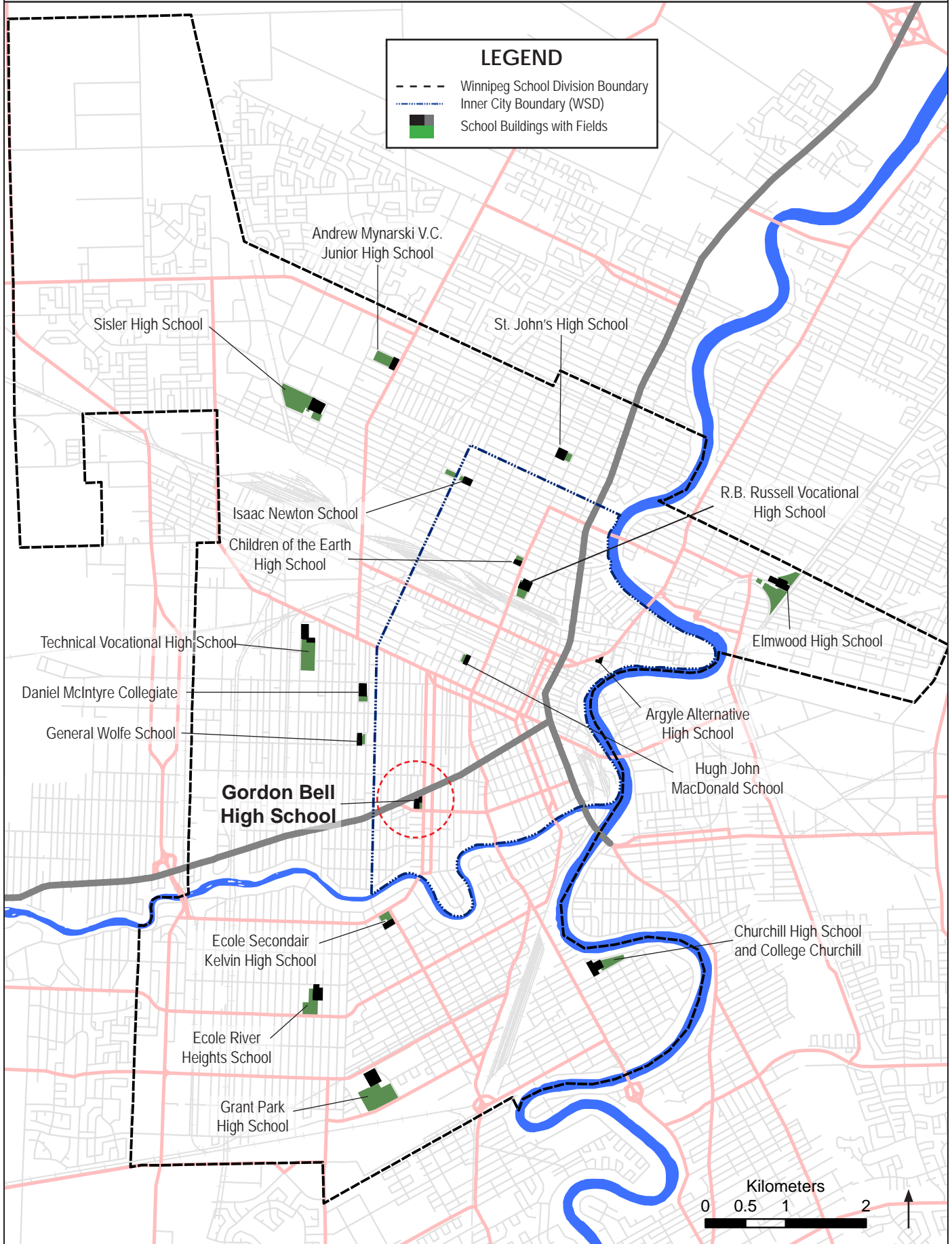
The Free Press article was the first step in gaining allies for a significant struggle against the inertia of several levels of bureaucracy.

The first response to the article came from NDP federal MP for the area, Pat Martin – himself no stranger to old school activism. He e-mailed support to Nancy that day and said he would do what he could in Ottawa.

A Free Press follow-up story in October began laying out the main bureaucratic obstacle: Canada Post couldn’t even consider giving up the field without a formal request from the school division. And a spokeswoman for the school division acknowledged the argument for the field was coming exclusively from the community.

Nancy needed allies in the school system.

# Junior and High Schools, with Greenspace: WSD



The first to come was Brian McKinnon, a retired teacher who'd long been a radical in his school jobs. Most recently, he was involved with Gordon Bell in a program he'd pioneered which allowed kids from inner-city schools to get free memberships to the downtown Y.

Then, in early December, Nancy got the first nibble of interest from the school itself – Linda McLaren, co-chair of the school's parent council, asked her to bring community representatives to a Dec. 17 meeting at the school. Linda shared Nancy's passion. In the spring of 2007, she and other parents had come out of a parent council meeting and seen that the property of the auto dealership was for sale. But the parent council didn't meet again until September and by then Canada Post had bought the property. With no background in citizen activism, and a school staff that was already working to its limits with the day-to-day needs of teaching in one of Winnipeg's most diverse schools, neither parents nor staff could visualize an alternative to Canada Post occupying the field next door.

That is, until Nancy's article. The Dec. 17 meeting included 20 people from the school and community. Decisions were made to write letters to Canada Post, to convene the parent council to write letters to the school division, and to involve students in the letter writing.

The next day, school counselor Warren Bend, approached some students. Grade 12 student, Morgan Hoogstraten remembers that moment: "I was sitting in the hallway doing homework. One of the counselors who works with students gave me the article by Nancy. He said this was a perfect opportunity to have a green space, suggested I write a letter to Canada Post. I wrote up a cover letter later that day and put it in the office. I e-mailed Nancy. Once I connected with Nancy, she was just waiting for someone from the school who could be a spokesperson."

## critical campaign points

### One: Student leadership

Nancy identifies the Dec. 22 e-mail from Morgan as the first of four critical points in the campaign.

"It was exciting that a Gordon Bell student had emerged to lead the students! I asked her if she'd be willing to organize other students for a forthcoming rally."

The rally was set for January 23 at lunchtime. Students

who wished would join with community members at the empty field. Morgan began spreading the word and other students began getting involved. Flo Popoff was a good friend of Morgan's attending the University of Winnipeg Collegiate nearby. She came to Gordon Bell and, together with Morgan and others, painted signs for the rally. She spread the word to the University. They set up a Facebook page and invited 297 of their friends. Morgan remembers posterizing the whole neighbourhood. Teachers let them visit classrooms.

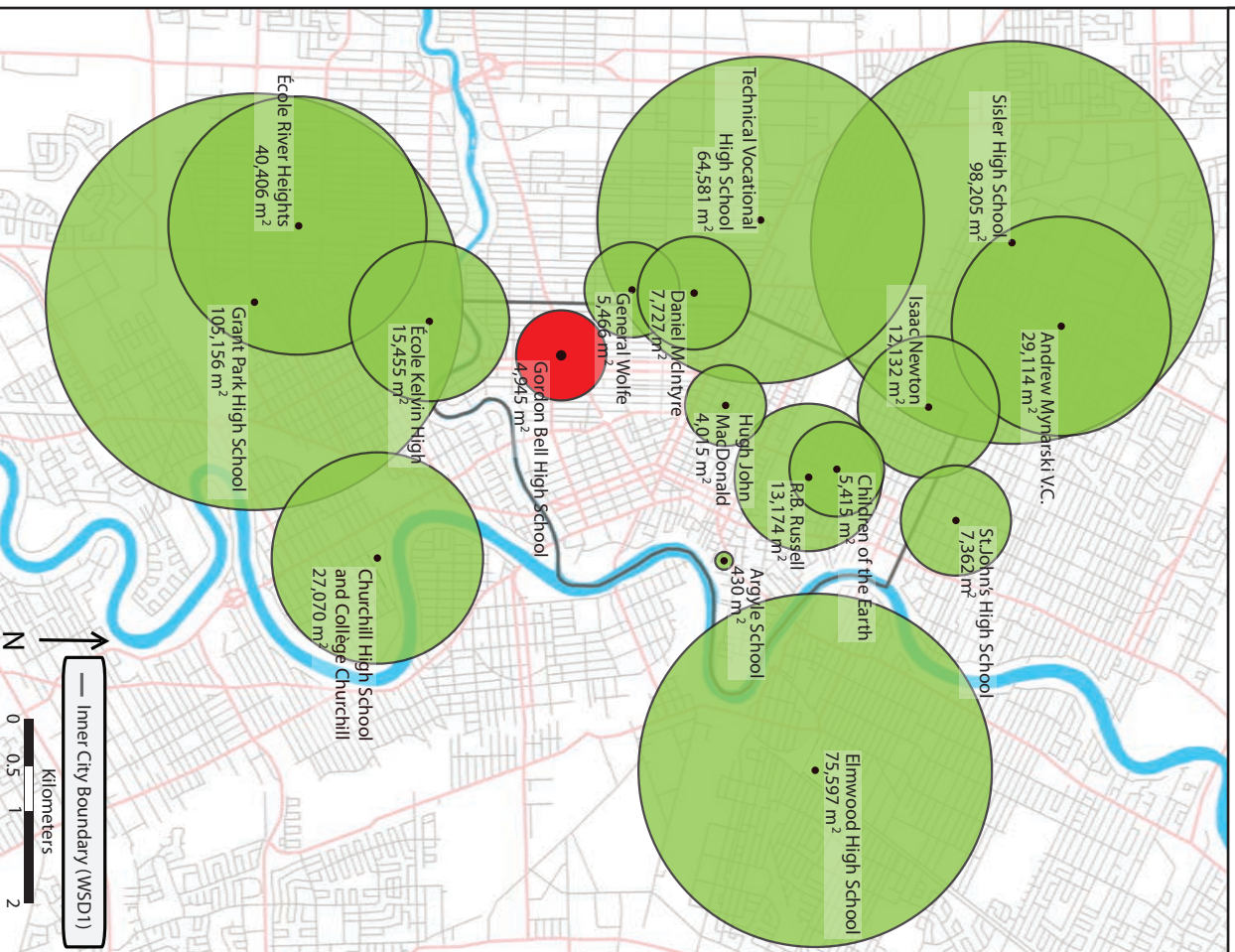
Close to 100 students and community members turned up for the rally, despite a typical Winnipeg day with windchill around -36. It was Morgan's first chance to meet politician Pat Martin – a coming together of the top-down and bottom-up forces that were shaping the campaign. Morgan represented the students, and along with friends like Flo, was steadily building a groundswell of support. Pat Martin had had talks with Canada Post, the provincial education minister, the Public School Finance Board, and others, and although everyone expressed support, there were always reservations, always some other step that needed to be taken first. Former school division chair John Orlikow was supportive, but pointed out that the school division was not authorized to buy land.

Linda McLaren had convened the parent council, and written the letters needed – first to the superintendent of Winnipeg School Division, and then to the trustees. But nothing had happened.

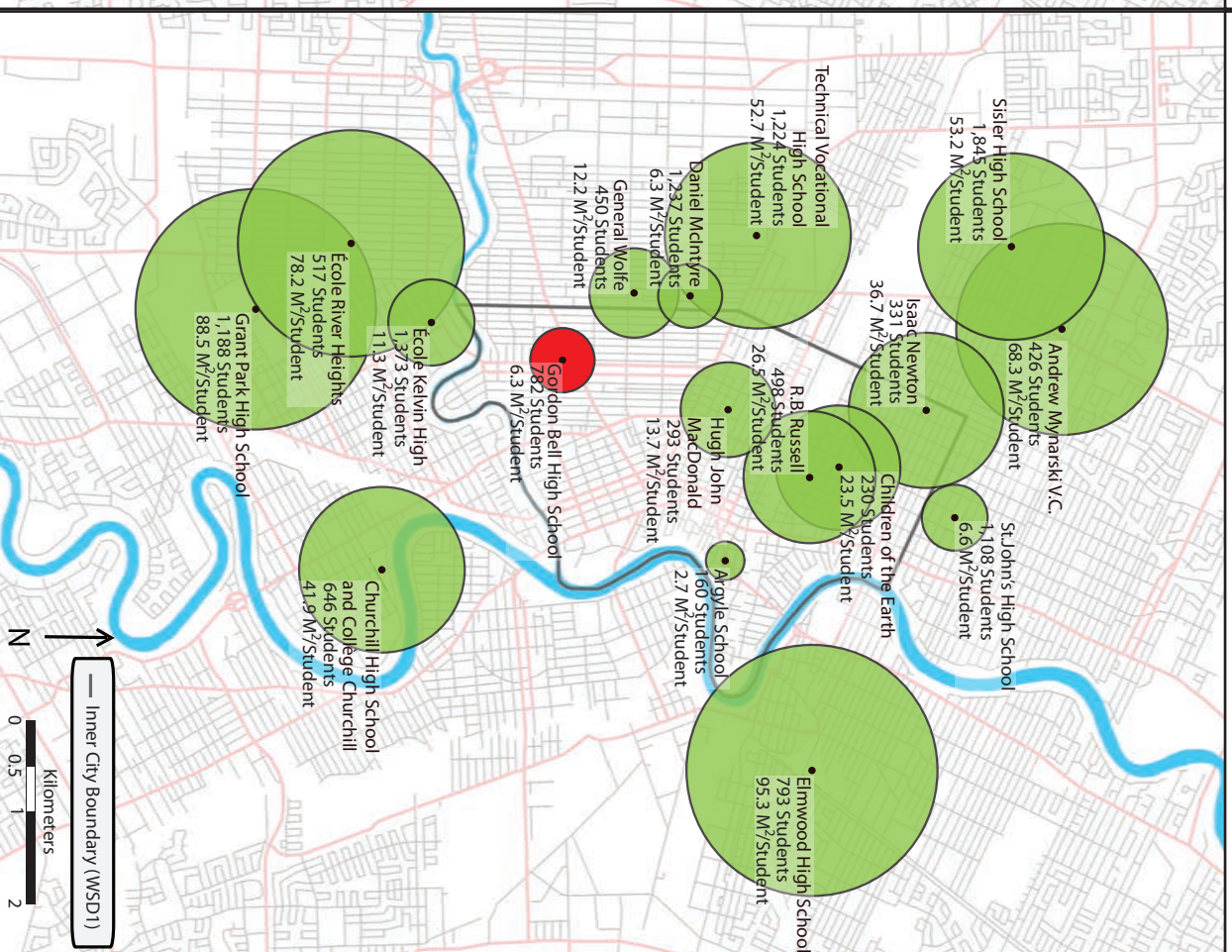


Morgan Hoogstraten and Pat Martin, an example of the top-down and bottom-up campaign

**Winnipeg School Division 1 (WSD1)**  
**Comparison of TOTAL AREA of Greenspace at each School**



**Winnipeg School Division 1 (WSD1)**  
**Comparison of GREENSPACE PER STUDENT at each School**



## critical campaign points

### Two: Media interest

Nancy identifies the Jan. 23 rally as the point that the campaign lifted off in the media, and the second critical point in the campaign. The rally and its student involvement had drawn all major media. Now reporters had people to call, including students. Decisions behind closed doors – or non-decisions – would now be held up to scrutiny.

Morgan and Flo were meeting weekly with Nancy, planning more rallies. Flo recalls: “Nancy would pump us up, give us pointers. She told us we would be talking to the media. ‘Nobody’s going to listen to me,’ she said, ‘But they’ll listen to you.’ It was really exciting.”

The loosely-organized coalition that was forming decided they needed to target Education Minister Peter Bjornson. They decided to march ten blocks from the school to the Legislature. The date was set for Feb. 10. Morgan and Flo organized students and signs.

Flo’s facebook on Feb. 2 read:

“HEY EVERYONE!! Rally at the Ledge for this SOLID cause!! that last one was just a practice round. we’re going full out this TUESDAY, FEB 10th at 12:20pm. Be there decked in green threads and other important rally gear, ie. posters!!! GIVE GB, UofW and the COMMUNITY the GRASS THEY DESERVE!!!! PASS THE WORD!! AND FOLLOW THE LINK AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PAGE TO SIGN THE PETITION!!”

But then, the weather in Winnipeg turned sour. An ice storm and freezing rain made the idea of marching dangerous. The Education Minister had agreed to meet them, and so adults cancelled the march.

But Morgan was determined. “No, we’re not going to cancel,” she remembered. “I said, ‘I’m going,’ and people followed me.” The Winnipeg Free Press estimated that about 75 students and their friends made the march.

## critical campaign points

### Three: Recruit administration & government

Education Minister Peter Bjornson met the delegation. He made it clear that, until he heard from the school

division, he could do nothing. Nancy was angry, pounding the table. “These students haven’t had a field for so long,” she said. Layers of bureaucracy seemed smothering. That night, she got an e-mail from Kristine Barr, Gordon Bell’s school trustee who hadn’t been able to make the meeting, asking if she could help? Nancy expressed her frustrations in a return e-mail emphasizing that the Minister was waiting to hear from the school trustees:

“The ball is once again in the court of the Winnipeg School Division Trustees... It is profoundly tragic how many times they have let the ball drop, What have our school trustees and the principal of Gordon Bell school been doing for the past two years... The ball is in YOUR court, Trustees and Gordon Bell Principal...”

Kristine responded that she was requesting a special meeting of Trustees and would propose that the board write to the Minister and Public School Finance Board requesting funds for the field. Two weeks later, she told the coalition that the meeting had been held and the school division was formally asking the province to purchase the land. Nancy feels that this was the third critical point in the campaign because allies now included the Gordon Bell administration, Winnipeg School Division and the Education Minister.

Pat Martin was still working in Ottawa. University of Winnipeg president Lloyd Axworthy offered full support and added his weight to the top-down part of the campaign. Morgan and Flo were organizing rallies every week.

Canada Post had always voiced support for the idea, but stressed they needed shovels in the ground on their project and so they needed an alternative piece of land. By the end of April, time was running out. An alternative



Marchers brave -36° Celsius weather. January 23, 2009



Protesters at the Manitoba Legislative Building, March 5, 2009

site had been proposed but Canada Post was taking its time responding. Nancy felt they were going to run out the clock and then reject the site, and so she leaked some of the details to the Free Press. On April 23, the Free Press wrote a glowing story saying what a “win-win” this land swap would be, and two days later, Canada Post quickly rejected the site. Media coverage exploded with every media outlet contacting students, contacting parents, contacting community members. Education Minister Bjornson asked Canada Post to reconsider. Lloyd Axworthy e-mailed from Europe: “Don’t give up.”

## critical campaign points

### Four: Create a media storm

Nancy identifies the media explosion after the Canada Post rejection of the alternative site as the fourth and final critical point in the campaign. “Somehow I think Canada Post became convinced at that moment that this site really was the only chance for Gordon Bell, and their heart changed.”

Whatever the case, May and June passed with little publicity, and continued top-down meetings – but now involving more than Pat Martin alone. On June 25, Pat Martin spoke at the Gordon Bell graduation and told an ecstatic crowd that Canada Post had agreed to sell the

land to the province. “I pulled in all my markers and used up all my political capital,” he said in a Free Press interview. “I have to start from scratch now, but it was worth it.”

Confirmation and details would take several months to work out, but, as of Graduation, 10 months after Nancy’s article had first appeared, the battle had been won.

Nancy’s description of four critical points — involvement of students, involvement of media, the confirmation of education bureaucracies as allies, and the media explosion in April; are good markers for any citizens’ group to remember. Nancy also believes it was important that the group’s objective was clearly identifiable and attainable — just having a vague target to improve green space was not as effective as having an actual property. It was also important that there was a clear time frame — the clock was running.

But there’s one other key factor.

When Morgan and Flo had stubbornly led the march to the legislature, despite adults cancelling it because of weather, the Free Press had reported with a headline **“Passion alone won’t get sports field for school.”**

Although technically true (victory needed top-down dealing and Pat Martin calling in all his markers) none of





Green 4 the Ghetto, April 30, 2009

that would have happened without the passion – first of all from Nancy; and most of all, from the students. Their marches in -36 weather; Nancy becoming frustrated and pounding the table; all were needed to shift the heavy inertia of bureaucracies, including the education bureaucracy.

Morgan put it well in a Facebook post in March, when she was replying to one of many negative comments that Facebookers were making about the campaign:

“O yes Christina, WE KNOW!! but Gordon Bell DID NOT purchase it, Dont ask me why, if it had been my school i would have POUNCED on that opportunity. That is why We, the students, are working on getting it ourselves. If i could find Canda Post a new location, I WOULD HAVE a long time ago! Our rallies put the pressure on the people who CAN find canada post an alternative location! that is the point of them and that it what they are doing! AND as a matter of fact, I DO expect this land to be "gifted" to Gordon Bell. The school and the kids who go there DESERVE this field and have been waiting for it for over FIFTY years!”

Making allowance for Facebook misspellings, that’s about as articulate a statement about the main facets of this campaign as can be found anywhere: the disparity and injustice; and the need to change the inertia of bureaucracies.

And, incidentally, just a hint of the passion that made it all happen.

*Author: Mike Maunder*



Success!! Morgan, Nancy and Flo



## Gordon Bell Greenspace

The new greenspace will be a landmark and frame the gateway to West Broadway.

Gordon Bell High School Greenspace, Concept Drawing  
Image courtesy of Scatliff Miller Murray

**SCATLIFF + MILLER + MURRAY**



Gordon Bell Greenspace view from Portage Ave and Chestnut St



Borrowman Place Upgrade with Raised Pedestrian Crossing and Improved Gordon Bell High School Entrance



Multi-Purpose Sports Field with Spectator Viewing Mounds and Architectural Backstop Fence





The proposed greenspace under construction, spring 2012.