

## **Natural Neighbourhood Grows On You** by Lynne Mustard

It's not your typical new housing development. For one thing, Assiniboine Landing is so quiet you can hear the hot breeze rustle the silvery prairie grasses in the public reserve. Cool, deep shade from 60 to 90 year old maples, ash and basswood lies dark upon the ground. On the other side of a hill, the land sweeps down to a picturesque wetland alive with ducks, bulrushes and frogs. Assiniboine Landing is Qualico Development's new 52 acre neighbourhood, tucked into a lazy curve of the Assiniboine River in Headingley, just two kilometers west of Winnipeg. With this new 'natural neighbourhood', Qualico is pioneering a 'back to the original prairie ecosystem' movement in land development.

"It's more an evolution than a revolution," states Eric Vogan, Qualico's Land Development Manager, "It's a response to environmental sustainability concerns and a reflection of people's lifestyles today, in terms of how much time they want to spend maintaining their property."

In essence, Qualico is returning much of Assiniboine Landing to the original prairie landscape of 150 years ago: the contour of the land has not been bulldozed flat, 18 acres of forest and shelterbelts are protected in public reserve and the riverbank will be maintained in its natural state. Instead of the typical, sterile urban storm water retention pond, water run-off is channeled through wetlands, an enhancement within the development created by Native Plant Solutions of Ducks Unlimited.

"Wetlands are called Nature's water filters for good reason," states Brent Wark, Manager of Native Plant Solutions. "They can trap and hold a very high percentage of the nutrients and pollutants found in run-off water. Some are metabolized or given off as gases and some stay in the roots or soil and do no harm. The water that runs into the river system is much cleaner".

Of Assiniboine Landing and Qualico's sustainable approach, Wark declares, "I think it's absolutely great. It's an ecologically sound approach to development. These types of developments are starting to embrace and demonstrate all of the sound land use ethics and water quality principles that need to be applied broadly across the North American landscape."

Qualico's vision for the property is described in its Community Development Guidelines. "Imagine if you could turn back the clock and recreate the original landscape. Our vision in Assiniboine Landing is to introduce houses and lifestyles that both build on this rural tradition and harmonize with the natural setting. Through architectural and site development guidelines, homeowners will embrace a land ethic that promotes sustainability."

Out of Assiniboine Landing's gross area of 52 acres, about 27 or 28 acres are homesites, with half the lots facing the river and the other half backing onto public reserve. Each lot is just over half an acre, with part of each property dedicated to prairie grassland and the remainder manicured yard, if homeowners wish. Landscape guidelines require that the natural border on each homesite extend at least 10 feet into the front yard from the naturalized boulevard, and at least five feet on each side of the property line. Where the rear yards back on to public reserve, the depth of the natural area must be 10 to 30 feet and lots on the river must leave 80 to 90 feet of riverbank, natural. This will make yard maintenance much less time-consuming for homeowners and will provide a transit and habitat area for wildlife.

Anyone attracted to this rural neighbourhood must be willing to share their space with other beings that fly, slither, climb and occasionally, smell. There are over 33 species of birds in the area, including Northern Orioles, Yellow Warblers and Cedar Waxwings, as well as a wide variety of wildlife including, squirrels, snakes, deer, raccoons and possibly, skunks. To help Assiniboine Landing homeowners cope with the critters, Qualico commissioned Native Plant Solutions to prepare a *Living With Nature* guide. It is full of helpful tips on how to enhance the experience while reducing or eliminating any potentially negative aspects.

The remaining 24 acres of the 52 that comprise Assiniboine Landing are either public reserve or roadway. Vogan says that in developing the property, they worked hard to retain the trees in the public reserve and "were lucky to have a contractor and municipality that were willing to work with us on bending rights of way as well as street and pipe alignments to minimize the impact on the forests."

The Rural Municipality of Headingley was pleased to accommodate Qualico's ideas, as it is very supportive of this kind of sustainable development. "Everybody who sees it is very impressed, it is so attractive. There is no question it will be a positive asset to our community." states Marly Mustard, Headingley Municipal Councillor.

In Assiniboine Landing, where the public reserve is largely forest and prairie grassland, Headingley will inherit a neighbourhood much lower in cost to administer and maintain than a typical, municipal park. For example, it costs about \$1,400 to \$1,800 per year to maintain one acre of Kentucky bluegrass, factoring in seed, watering, fertilizing, gas for mowing and the time to tend it, as opposed to about \$300 once every five years to maintain an acre of native prairie grasslands.

### **Neighbourhood Has Roots**

A total of four archaeological excavations and several surface collections in the area have shown that human habitation goes back thousands of years, to the time when the shores of the Assiniboine River provided food and shelter for both

bison and Aboriginal peoples who hunted them. Qualico hosted a dig by the universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg as recently as June of 2004.

“Previously they found artifacts relating to occupation of the land over a period of time extending back five thousand years,” Vogan states. “This curve in the river where Assiniboine Landing is located was a crossing point for bison and people would camp there and take down a good haul of bison and then process them, doing everything from boiling the bones for marrow to making pemmican.”

Then came the wave of European exploration and settlement, and the land has since been used for farming and market gardening. Now it’s home to a new pioneering effort in sustainable land development practices.

Once the site is fully developed, Qualico’s involvement with the land will cease. To ensure that the neighbourhood is preserved as originally developed and planned, Qualico has created a Community Association that will be driven by the residents of the area. It will be their job to ensure the natural areas are maintained, and to preserve the concept.