

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE PAST:

Heritage IS A Resource

BY REID DICKIE | PART 2 OF A 2-PART SERIES

Heritage is part of every community. As more communities appreciate their own history, creative methods of managing and promoting heritage resources have developed. This progressive thinking has led some local governments around Manitoba to formalize incentives for heritage restoration and maintenance, and to create heritage tourism regions with common goals.

Municipal Heritage Advisory Committees (MHACs) have informed and motivated many councils and Brandon is an excellent example. Though the Brandon MHAC has been around since 1987, they took the giant step of recommending to city council in 2001 the creation of a bylaw offering incentives to heritage property owners.

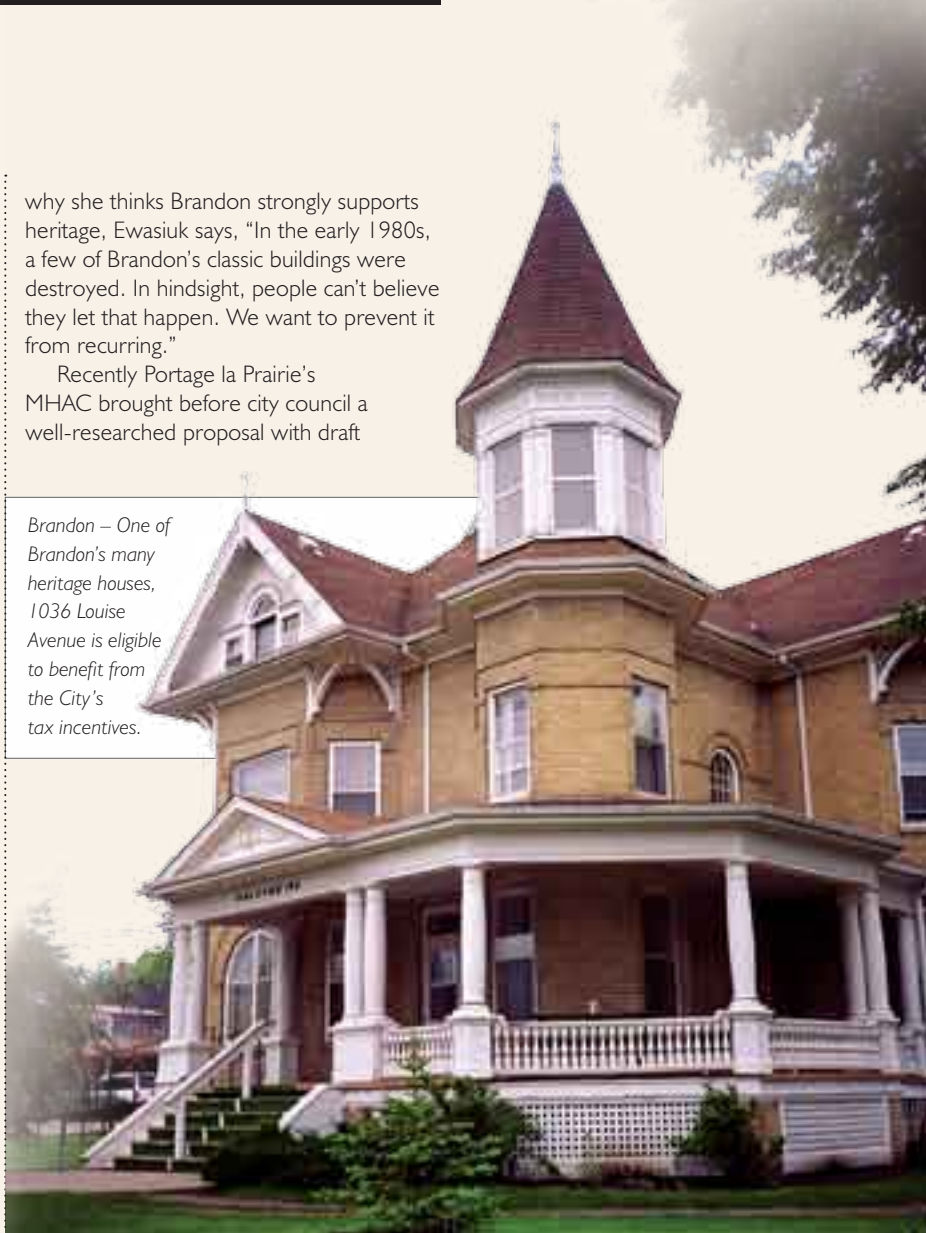
In 2003, Brandon City Council created the Heritage Tax Credit bylaw offering a maximum of \$5,000 credit over 10 years to assist designated municipal heritage properties. In addition, the Renaissance District bylaw gave substantial tax abatements to businesses and residences in a specific downtown area. To help heritage homeowners citywide, Brandon now offers a residential tax assessment freeze on homes. Both incentives only apply to buildings at least 80-years-old.

Heather Ewasiuk, Brandon's heritage resources officer, says, "In the last five years, heritage has blossomed in Manitoba. People are becoming much more aware of what's in their own backyard, more appreciative of the heritage in their communities." Asked

why she thinks Brandon strongly supports heritage, Ewasiuk says, "In the early 1980s, a few of Brandon's classic buildings were destroyed. In hindsight, people can't believe they let that happen. We want to prevent it from recurring."

Recently Portage la Prairie's MHAC brought before city council a well-researched proposal with draft

Brandon – One of Brandon's many heritage houses, 1036 Louise Avenue is eligible to benefit from the City's tax incentives.



provisions for a local bylaw, based on Brandon's Heritage Tax Credit and with a similar intent. **Barry Bills**, local MHAC chair says, "Council's reaction was generally positive. We presented it as a plus for Portage and, since it was a unanimous recommendation from the committee, council gave it serious consideration and it went right through."

Carberry expanded on the heritage site concept by designating two whole blocks of Main Street as a heritage district

with the intent of encouraging storefront restoration. Mayor **Wayne Blair** says, "We want to revitalize Main Street to show our community pride, get some tourism spin-off and maybe even attract a movie or two. We don't expect it'll be done in five years, hopefully 10, but it might take longer than that."

Storeowners in the Carberry heritage district – the only one in Manitoba – can get a \$2,000 50/50 matching grant, renew-

able every three years. Town council puts \$10,000 into the fund every year so five businesses can apply.

"On first mention, council split three to two in favour," says Blair. "After the two town meetings, where residents and businesses recognized the benefits for the whole community, it passed with no dissenters."

Communities taking advantage of their heritage resources need to market their products. The future success of heritage tourism lies in co-operation between communities and municipalities. Recognizing regional strengths and resources, then creatively packaging and promoting them, gives tourists more options for discovery, making promotion cheaper and drawing more visitors.

The co-operative approach is proving successful in Manitoba's Parkland. **Kathy Swann**, executive director of Parkland Tourism, says, "There wasn't as much co-operation between towns and RMs 10 years ago as there is now. Shrinking populations and external changes are forcing people to work together. Towns need to realize that they shouldn't be competing with each other, but rather working together in clusters or regions."

Swann says it is now necessary to form regional heritage partnerships to compete with other provincial and national places, and the entire world, due to the Internet. "The percentage of travelers using the Internet to plan their vacations is very high," she says. "Tourists are looking for varied, authentic heritage experiences with some kind of packaging or theme."

Self-guided driving trails and town walking tours, visitor's guides, events such as Doors Open and re-enactments, educational opportunities for local schools and geocaching (see sidebar) all attract heritage tourism.

GEOCACHING CATCHING ON

"Geocaching" is a new tourism buzzword. Though your children may beg to differ, it is basically an old-fashioned treasure hunt using high tech gadgets and the Internet. Geocachers find site co-ordinates online then, using their global positioning systems (GPS), attempt to track down the physical cache. Once the cache is found, participants add to or take a token item from it, record the data of their visit in a logbook in the cache and report it online. The contents of the cache can be related directly to the site's heritage. While it may sound easy, geocaching has challenges that result in educational fun and, depending on the design of the hunt, exposure to local history.

Manitoba's Parkland has numerous geocaches. "We hosted a geocaching workshop where the participants created ideas to bring area heritage into the geocaches," says Kathy Swann of Parkland Tourism. "It's a way of getting people to a heritage site they probably wouldn't visit otherwise. It becomes part of their quest. I see it as a trend more than a fad. With the current techno savvy everyone has, we have to think along those lines too."

Penny Burton, Cartwright's economic development officer, agrees. "I see geocaching as very important to future heritage tourism. It is one way to keep a running tabulation of the number of visitors to stand-alone heritage sites where no admission is charged.

"Heritage is used a lot more by visitors than is given credit for. People visit heritage sites, museums and buildings, but we can't record that. Geocaching can account for some of the visitors to heritage sites."


For details on some of Parkland's geocaching sites, visit www.cachingridingmountain.com.



The economic benefits of tourism are direct and substantial. Swann explains, "Every dollar visitors spend is free money because they come, spend their money and leave. Heritage, family or adventure - whatever their reasons for coming, why wouldn't you want tourists?"

In 2007, Cartwright developed a heritage tour tied in with Ponderosa Days. **Penny Burton**, Cartwright economic development officer (EDO), says, "Most EDOs view heritage tourism as having huge potential. I work with other EDOs in the area to swap information so people know what is available in the region. This exchange is very important."

When managing heritage resources try these three considerations:

- Act locally – identify, restore and maintain your local heritage resources,
- Think regionally – form regional partnerships that combine and package numerous heritage experiences, attracting more tourists and benefiting everyone,
- Promote globally – take advantage of the Internet to promote your interesting activities and attractions and get your share of the huge number of travelers who plan trips online. 

Carberry – Carberry's busy Main Street retains many of its original buildings. Restoration begins in earnest this year.



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