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LOCAL

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Urban reserve leaps ahead City agrees to Long Plain project on parcel in Polo Park area

By: Larry Kusch
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Artist's conception of Long Plain First Nation's economic zone — Winnipeg's first urban reserve — upon its eventual completion.

Winnipeg's first urban reserve will contain an 80,000-square-foot office building, a new home for Yellowquill College, a gas station and a depot through which First Nations buyers can take delivery of goods purchased in the city tax-free.

Ottawa is expected to grant approval to Long Plain First Nation to create the reserve -- or economic development zone -- on a 1.4-hectare parcel of land on Madison Street in the next few months. The property is located about a block west of the stadium at Polo Park.



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Southern Grand Chief Morris Swan Shannacappo is presented with a blanket at signing ceremony with the city Thursday. (JANEK LOWE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

The nuts and bolts

Components of Long Plain First Nation's 1.4-hectare economic zone:

A new five-storey, 80,000-square-foot office building to be completed in 2012. Long Plain says it has already received commitments from First Nations child and family services agencies to rent half the space. The other half is expected to be leased to First Nations organizations and professionals.

Converting a 25,000-square-foot former Manitoba Hydro building into the future home of Yellowquill College, now located downtown on Assiniboine Avenue. The college, established in 1984 by the Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council, could move into the new location as early as January, Long Plain says.

A gas bar and convenience store.

A depot through which First Nations people can take delivery of goods purchased in Winnipeg tax-free. Long Plain would charge a small administration fee for the service.

What is an urban reserve?

It is an economic zone located within a municipality that Ottawa has designated a First Nations reserve. This allows for aboriginal commercial ventures that enjoy tax exemptions offered to traditional reserves.

Why create one?

Many First Nations are located far from towns and cities where most wealth and jobs are created. This geographic remoteness poses challenges for First Nations trying to increase their economic self-sufficiency.

How many urban reserves are there in Canada? As of 2008, there were more than 120 urban reserves across the country, the federal government says. They often stem from Canada's legal obligation to settle and implement outstanding land claims.

Winnipeg city council approved Long Plain's bid for the economic zone on Wednesday. On Thursday morning, Mayor Sam Katz and Long Plain Chief David Meeches signed an agreement through which the city will provide services to the property for a negotiated fee in lieu of taxes.

"Welcome to Long Plain First Nation," Meeches said to the mayor, as a crowd of Long Plain residents -- including dozens of kids -- and the grand chiefs of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the Southern Chiefs Organization looked on inside a large white tent set up on the property.

Meeches said later that Ottawa will likely grant formal approval, creating the economic zone, within one to six months. Now that the city has signed off on the project, federal approval is considered a formality.

While this is Winnipeg's first urban reserve, there are dozens of such entities across the country, including one in Saskatoon that is more than two decades old. Long Plain, in fact, has had one in Portage la Prairie since the 1980s.

The First Nation is anxious to get Ottawa's nod of approval as it has a \$15-million development planned in the industrial district in the shadow of Polo Park Shopping Centre.

The land now contains an old Manitoba Hydro warehouse, which the First Nation hopes to renovate by the end of the year. It wants to complete construction of the office building in 2012.

Katz told the gathering he was pleased to assist the First Nation in its efforts to foster economic activity for its people.

"Winnipeg's aboriginal community is growing and it has the potential to be one of our greatest assets. And I want everyone to know that economic success among First Nations is success for the entire community," he said.

Meeches said Thursday's signing opens a "new door of opportunity" for Long Plain and the beginning of a long-lasting relationship with the city. "Today is such a significant day for our people -- significant in ways we have yet to determine," he said.

Long Plain has been trying to establish an urban reserve in Winnipeg for several years. Four years ago, the First Nation and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) announced plans to build a \$100-million development that included a First Nations Governance House.

However, that plan was eventually dropped because the Portage la Prairie-area First Nation felt the proposal would fail to generate the economic activity it desired. The AMC is now exploring a downtown location for an urban reserve containing its long-dreamed house of government.

Long Plain used money to purchase the property from a \$16-million compensation claim it won in 1994 for land owed since 1871 under treaty obligations. No government money will be used to finance the development on Madison. The \$15-million project will be financed from profits of its Portage la Prairie economic zone, the First Nation said.

Among the enterprises it will operate on the Winnipeg reserve is a "tax depot." Any item delivered to a First Nation is tax-free. Once the Madison Street property gains reserve status,

any Manitoba First Nations person or community could arrange to have retailers deliver goods -- from automobiles to furniture -- there tax-free.

Meeches said Winnipeg construction firms and their workers stand to benefit from the new development. "Everything is being done through local construction companies and architects," he said. Even the tent used for Thursday's historic signing was supplied by a business across the street from the proposed development.

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