

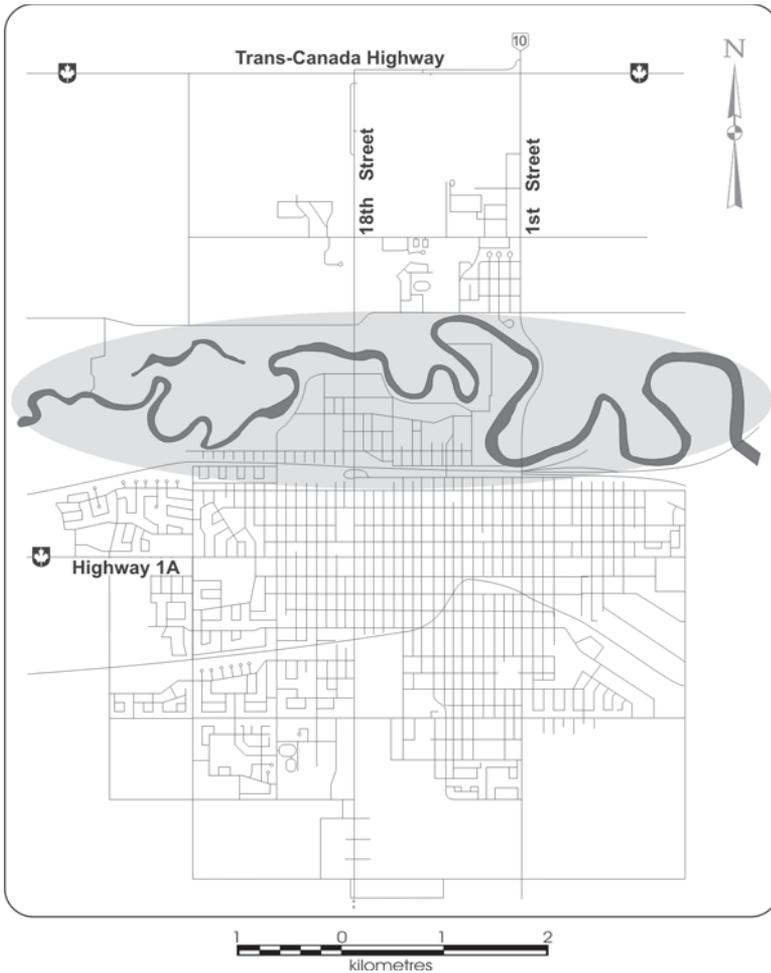
## **Down by the riverside: recent developments along the Assiniboine Corridor in Brandon**

**G. Lee Repko and John Everitt**  
**Brandon University**

**Abstract:** In the past few years, the previously neglected Assiniboine River corridor within the city of Brandon has shown signs of significant change and development. These changes have largely been the result of a realization, by both city officials and community members, that an important local recreational resource has been neglected or ignored by the majority of Brandon's inhabitants for many years. A series of public meetings sponsored by the city led to the acceptance of a plan for the riverbank and the formation of a not-for-profit group to bring planned changes into reality. In the past three years, pre-existing developments have been brought under the auspices of Riverbank Inc. and a series of new initiatives have been started. This paper briefly describes the past and contemporary development of Brandon's Assiniboine river corridor.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to outline and report upon the development of the Assiniboine River Corridor by "Riverbank Inc." Riverbank Inc. is a non-profit "arms length" organisation incorporated by the Province of Manitoba in 1994. The aim of the organisation is to develop the tract of land along the banks of the Assiniboine River within the city of Brandon as a recreational area for the city and its region, and as a possible ecological focal point for tourist activity within southwest Manitoba (Figure 1). The ongoing transformation of the river valley has the potential to be one of the major changes to the face of Brandon since its incorporation in 1882.



*Figure 1: Map highlighting the Assiniboine River Corridor at Brandon, Manitoba (adapted by author, 1998).*

## Background

Although aboriginal peoples have been in southwestern Manitoba for the past few thousand years, and undoubtedly passed through what is now the City of Brandon on many occasions, there is little evidence to suggest more than a transitory presence along the Riverbank Corridor. Clearly the locational advantages of this

site for a railway divisional point, as perceived by General Rosser, were not viewed as positively by First Nations' peoples. Brandon was chosen as a townsite by General Rosser in May 1881, after he rejected a floodplain site at "Grand Valley," an incipient settlement located a few kilometres to the east (Everitt and Stadel, 1988: 62). For the most part Brandonites continued to overlook or avoid the river until what was to become "Riverbank Inc." brought the Assiniboine River Corridor into the collective consciousness of Brandonites in the early 1990s.

This is not to say that the Assiniboine was collectively ignored (Welsted 1988). At times, the river has forced itself upon the city as a consequence of its propensity to flood. Flooding has occurred more than once every three years (on the average) and property damage has resulted from at least half of these floods. Consequently, the Shellmouth Dam near Russell, and a series of dikes, have been built to protect the city from its river. The Assiniboine has also been used for waste disposal by the city and by some industries, although such uses are now tightly controlled.

There have been more positive uses of the Assiniboine River within Brandon, such as its utilization as a means of transportation, water supply and recreation. Although commonly stopping to the east of the present built-up city at Currie's Landing ("The Rapids"), some steamboats used the river as far as Fort Ellice, and even Fort Pelly (near Kamsack) in Saskatchewan. The river has usually been the major water source for the City, with its level being maintained by the Third Street Dam. Some industries (such as the Hanbury lumber mill, and a number of natural ice producers) once used, and indeed depended upon, the river for their survival. It has also been used for recreation over the years, with the Sixteenth Street swimming hole and beach becoming legendary, boating and (more recently) water-skiing being occasional uses, and fishing becoming a tradition. A number of parks (Curran, Queen Elizabeth, Eleanor Kidd, Dinsdale) are located on the floodplain, but have promoted little direct contact with the river. Such uses remained the norm until the early 1990s when the seeds for Riverbank Inc. were sown.

## **The Origins Of Riverbank Inc.**

During the summer of 1993, the foundations of what would become Riverbank Inc. were laid at a City of Brandon councillor's retreat (Borotsik 1998). It was early in Rick Borotsik's term as mayor, and the council was trying to determine the city's development future. Borotsik, who had been the former manager of Brandon's premier shopping mall, had a vision involving the Assiniboine River. He viewed this corridor as an untapped resource that the city had thus far disregarded. Borotsik had witnessed the potential of river corridor development in the Credit River redevelopment programme undertaken in Mississauga, Ontario.

The Assiniboine River Corridor had become an afterthought for the city and was mostly ignored by Brandonites. The city's Parks & Recreation Department and the pre-employment program known as Westbran had done some valuable work along the Assiniboine Corridor, but mostly on an ad hoc basis, rather than by following a strategic plan. Consequently, the councillors and city administrators quickly supported Borotsik's proposed holistic approach to the Assiniboine Corridor development as a central natural venue and a source of civic pride.

The project involved a complete overhaul of the facilities and uses along the riverbanks. It was recognised that throughout the whole process there must also be continued public involvement, to allow the weaving together of input from all the communities of the city, and to have a truly "made in Brandon" product. An initial \$350,000 investment from the city was put forward to establish a task force to initiate and carry out the redevelopment. This move on behalf of the city sparked the genesis of Brandon Riverbank Inc., a non-profit organization whose task was to explore the public's opinion about such a project, and to identify sources of funding not available to municipal governing bodies.

The Planning and Development Officer of the City of Brandon, Dave Wallace, was selected for the job of President of the incipient organization.<sup>1</sup> During his career at the City, Mr. Wallace had made numerous attempts at breathing some life into what he saw as the neglected area along the Assiniboine. As recently as 1991, Wallace had proposed an elaborate design for the relocation of the City's

Parks and Recreation headquarters to a site in the heart of Brandon's river corridor. He was now given the authority to pursue a similarly spirited vision of riverbank development via Riverbank Inc.

One of the earliest steps Dave Wallace took was to organize a walking tour of the River Corridor area in the fall of 1993, for the city councillors and officials.<sup>2</sup> This gave council and city department heads an opportunity to examine the future project site, a first visit for several of them, and cemented the perceived need by council for action. The tour featured existing structures and highlighted some of the disadvantages such as trails that were not maintained and an overflow from the city refuse dump. The field trip allowed for brainstorming about some of the possible improvements that could be made.

The decision of how to advance the project was aided by Brandon's successful bid to host the 1997 Canada Summer Games. This allowed the city to prioritize some of the earliest improvements to the city's already impressive inventory of outdoor sport facilities (such as baseball fields, and soccer and rugby pitches) along the corridor. These structures, along with cycling and walking trail improvements, were some of the more visible changes that were made in the initial development stages of the project. The city administration quickly realized that the decision making process should involve the participation of the community at large and not simply the directives of city officials.

## The Public Role

To contact and inform as many people as possible, public input advertisements were placed in the local daily newspaper, the *Brandon Sun*. These were supplemented by public service announcements on the local radio and television stations. The advertisements included a "cut-away" section, designed so that members of the public could return these portions to Riverbank Inc. with their thoughts and suggestions. At the same time the city was aggressively searching for a professional planning firm to be contracted to develop a master plan that would represent the long-term vision and public interests that the present administration had called for.

By the late winter of 1994 Lombard North Group, a Winnipeg landscape architectural and planning firm had secured the consultancy position. Their magnum opus, The City of Brandon Assiniboine River Corridor Master Plan, was a culmination of intense public examination, data gathering, and the prioritization of immediate needs and long-term goals. There was, and always had been, a full realization that a project like this could not be completed within a year or even five years. The plan thus recognizes that over the next 20-25 years the river corridor can realize its potential as a community focal point and as an integral centre for habitat restoration and environmental study. The river corridor can become a vibrant centre of Brandon social activity and a recreational opportunity, as well as a “destination point” for tourists from elsewhere. The planners recognized the need for the plan to be a “living, breathing document”, adaptable to variations in funding, and to fluctuations in popular opinion.

## **The Plan**

Lombard North Group began its tenure by examining the initial public input to the city’s ad campaign. The firm’s chief executive David Palubeskie, in concert with the city, organized a series of three public forums. The first “Needs Assessment” workshop was attended by approximately 70 diverse members of the Brandon community, many of whom attended two related follow-up functions. All facets of society were represented including culture, education (secondary and post-secondary), heritage, First Nations, sports and recreation, public services, business, environmental and naturalist communities. Representatives from the provincial and federal governments as well as the Brandon and Area Planning District also rounded out the “Assiniboine River Corridor Planning Group.”

As the name implies, the mandate of the “Needs Assessment” workshop was to answer the question “What do we want?” The workshop was designed to build an understanding of community objectives, expectations and priorities as provided by the initial public input that had been collected as a result of the media campaign. The workshop process paid particular attention to the

perceived benefits, objectives and themes for development, and tried to identify the community needs that had to be served. The next two workshops attempted to answer the questions “How do we get there?” and “What do we do now?” The job the consultancy firm did was well received by those involved for their ability to understand the communities vision and to identify and procure funding, which helped to move the project forward.

## **Early Works & Westbran**

An element that proved to be critical to the success of the Riverbank development was the Westbran Employment Development Centre (known locally as “Westbran”). The organization was developed to undertake community projects, like riverbank development, while reintroducing social welfare and unemployment recipients back into the workforce (Pedlow 1998). Westbran had begun the work of riverbank development following its inception 25 years ago (1973). Westbran, and its other workfare project, Crew 10, have since completed most of the work that has taken place along the city’s floodplain.

Westbran’s involvement with the new Riverbank Inc. was seen as an opportunity to provide more work experience for its clients, and access to its job creation abilities as provided by its management. For instance, Westbran has been responsible for the creation of countless small jobs along the corridor, including clearing of the brush along new trails, site preparation for projects such as the center piece Red Willow Trail pedestrian bridge, or the Ducks Unlimited/ Travel-Idea Conservation Centre, in addition to most of the site preparation for Canada Games facilities. Essentially Westbran had been able to provide the labour to bring to fruition the ideas of Riverbank Inc.

Riverbank Inc. added a whole new dimension to the work agenda in the area. Some of the earliest works of the organization include:

a) The inventory of flora and fauna that call the river-bottom forest home. This was done in conjunction with the Brandon Naturalists society and the local office of Provincial Natural

Resources. The information is presently being compiled to fulfill public requests for natural interpretive signage and environmental education.

b) The construction of the Red Willow Trail pedestrian bridge. The \$1.25 million structure is a center piece of present development. Its presence provides a long-needed link between the northern portion of the city and it's central business district, enabling pedestrians and cyclists to avoid the automobile corridors of Eighteenth and First Streets. The bridge is also invaluable for observing beaver and other river wildlife. In addition, it provides an incentive for curious citizens to explore the area's extensive paved and pristine trails.

c) The production by Riverbank Inc. of a trail map that makes it possible for people to explore the riverbank along 17.4 km of trails.

d) The organization also keeps in touch with close to 20,000 Brandon homes through the regular publication of the River Review. This thrice-yearly publication keeps citizens abreast of developments, and includes historical research and discussions of landform processes that have shaped the River Corridor over the past 10,000 years.

e) In addition, trail development and maintenance continues, as does the provision of signage. Over the summer of 1998 work also continued on the lighting network along selected trails.

## **A Public Survey**

During the summer of 1998, Riverbank Inc. conducted a survey of nearly 100 people who were using the trails and facilities along the Assiniboine Corridor. Its purpose was to find out who was using the Riverbank, what they were using it for, why they chose to go there, when they used it, and which parts of the recreation system were chosen. It was also designed to be a baseline survey, the results of which could be compared with others over time, in order to record changing patterns of demand and use within the Corridor. As the questionnaire was administered during the summer months,

winter recreational opportunities (although mentioned by several respondents) were almost certainly severely undercounted.

As expected, most (73%) of the respondents were from Brandon, with the majority of the balance coming from other parts of Manitoba. Ontario as well as the other western provinces however, were represented, as were two European countries (France and the UK). There was, by design, a roughly equal male-female balance amongst respondents, and most age groups were represented. A range of family income levels was also represented. The median income proved to be lower than expected (\$20-34,999), perhaps reflecting in part the relative youth of the sample. The median age group was 35-39 years old, which is low compared to the overall regional population.

The range of activities taking place along the corridor was wide, reflecting the considerable number of opportunities available, but the largest number were “hiking/ running/walking” or “cycling/ boarding/blading” on the tarmacked sections of the trails. Nature watching was a major activity, with many people also taking the opportunity to picnic, or simply relax.

Clearly the Riverbank Corridor was chosen because it offered a range of outdoor experiences and opportunities not available elsewhere in Brandon, or even in the immediate hinterland of the city. It also offered the option of a single or group experience, with family groups being by far the most common users of the facilities.

To aid in the planning process, and continue the tradition of public involvement in Riverbank Corridor decision making, respondents were asked a question that attempted to obtain their “wish list” for the Riverbank. The first ranked desire was to connect the trail system along the Assiniboine Corridor with other city bike paths, in order to create a city-wide network. This is one of the future aims of the City and Riverbank Inc. — constrained at present by budgetary considerations. The second request was the provision of more garbage receptacles. This is also being explored by Riverbank Inc., but clearly has to be connected to a (possibly expensive) collection and disposal system. Third, was a desire to keep out developments that would take away from the natural experience of the Assiniboine Corridor.<sup>3</sup> It has always been the aim of Riverbank Inc. to maintain the Assiniboine River Corridor

as a natural, low-tech, environmental experience reflecting the Master Plan theme “Country in the City” and promoting a healthy lifestyle. Although some lower ranked items did suggest certain varieties of “development”, most of these are not intrusive (“improve fishing,” “water fountains,” “more bathrooms,” “improve boat launch,” “reestablish the Participark” etc.). Some of these (fishing, boating and the Participark) are already under consideration, and opportunities for others can be improved by better signage to existing facilities, or to those currently under construction.

The survey fulfilled its desired goal of providing a baseline for future research, and gave a useful insight into the demographic characteristics of current Riverbank users, and of their views on future improvements along the Assiniboine Corridor.

## **Board of Directors**

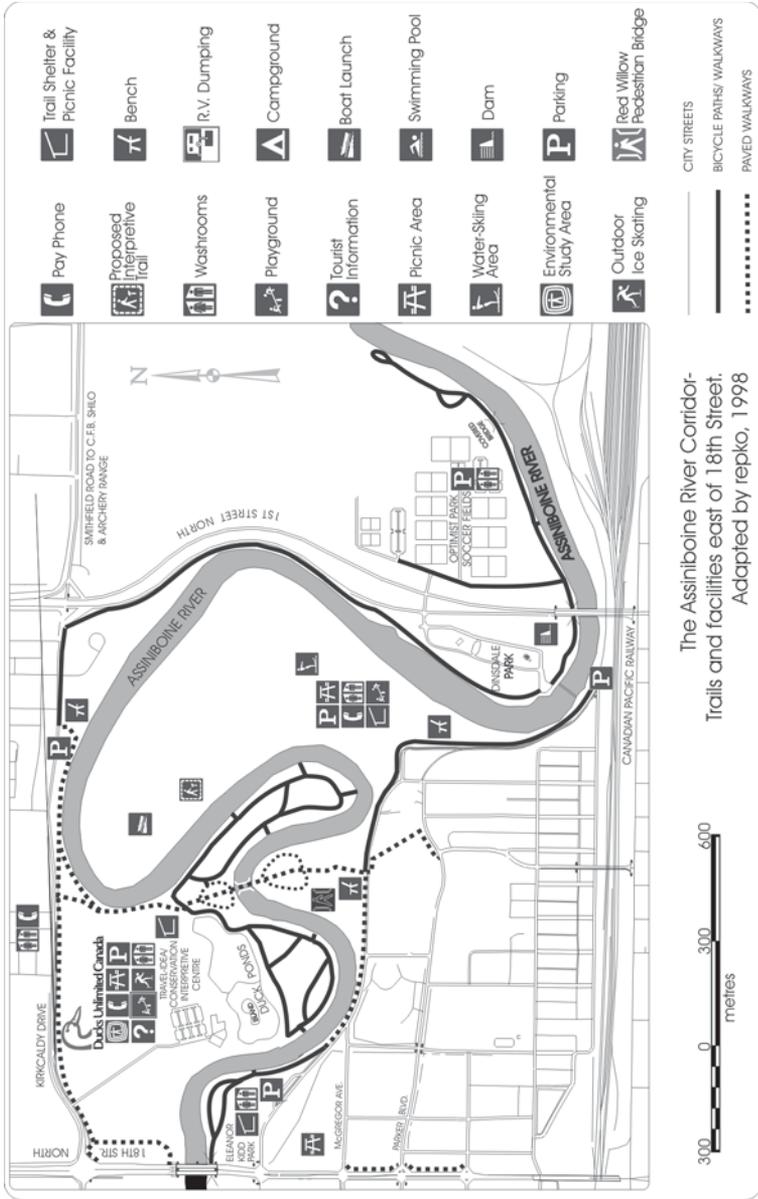
Although having a strong representation from the City of Brandon, the Board of Directors for Riverbank Inc. has been drawn deliberately from various facets of the Brandon community, and its composition reflects this diversity.<sup>4</sup> It meets once a month at the Westbran centre. One of the duties of the board members is to communicate, as far as possible, the views of a broad section of the Brandon populace and to ensure that developments are “made in Brandon.” The Board also attends to, and is responsible for, the financial aspects of the overall development along the corridor. These include the recognition and retention of corporate support from a number of local businesses (a list of which can be found at various improvement locations), and fundraising from individual and family community members (for instance, by “buying” a metre of riverbank for \$100 - with 224 donations to date). In addition, bonds and partnerships with other levels of government and their departments have been formed. Over the past five years a number of important partners have helped in this initiative.<sup>5</sup> They include, in particular:

- a) The City of Brandon, which gave core funding for various capital projects and contributed the time of several of the City administration staff.
- b) The Government of Canada, which provided funding for the Red Willow pedestrian bridge, as well as employment contributions through the Brandon office of Human Resources Development Canada.
- c) The Human Resources Development Canada Centre, which has created and contributed to almost 20 employment positions since 1994.
- d) The Province of Manitoba, which supplied funding for the Red Willow pedestrian bridge and for the Master Plan.
- e) The Westbran Employment Development Centre supplied labour and material in kind (enabling, for instance, riverbank trail developments).
- f) The Brandon Naturalists Society, gave information and advice re bird and plant species in river bottom forest.
- g) The Manitoba Department of Natural Resources supplied information and advice about wildlife species, gave advice re design of trail signs, and reviewed trail design.

The Board was also successful in obtaining a loan from the Western Canada Economic Diversification Fund. This long-term loan will allow the people of Brandon to see the progress in development without having to pay immediate high interest on the loan.

## **Contemporary and Future Works**

Although Riverbank Inc. is very busy completing projects already under way, it is eager to push ahead with new initiatives (Figure 2). In the fall of 1998 the newly built Ducks Unlimited/ Travel-Idea Conservation Centre will come into operation. The building, built and operated by Riverbank Inc., will be the “crown jewel” of the River Corridor. The Centre could become a major tourist attraction not unlike the environmental learning experiences that Fort Whyte or Oak Hammock Marsh, both in the Winnipeg area, provide. The development theme of “Country in the City” dovetails with both



**Figure 2:** The Assiniboine River Corridor—trails and facilities east of 18th Street (adapted by Repko, 1998).

artificial and natural wetland habitats that are already home to many bird species as well as an abundance of animals, including the White Tailed deer. This construction project relied almost exclusively on financing from the Western Canada Diversification Fund — which would have been unavailable to municipal governments, but which could be tapped by Riverbank Inc.

Projects currently underway include the development of a plaza and fountain as a center piece to a terrarium. This site will also be the home of Peter Sawatzky's first animal sculpture. Sawatzky is a world renowned sculptor who lives in nearby Glenboro, and his piece of two fawn and their mother was designed to exemplify the family focus and natural theme of the corridor developments.

## **Conclusion**

Although Canada is “blessed with rich and varied opportunities for people to participate in outdoor recreation” (Wall 1989: vii) these opportunities are not evenly distributed throughout the country, and are not all developed to the same extent. The recent decision by the City of Brandon to improve the recreational opportunities along the Assiniboine Riverbank Corridor represents an attempt to counter these inequities of distribution and development, by the betterment of its own physical and cultural environments. Thus the development by Riverbank Inc. acts as a means of serving the needs of city and regional residents, as well as hopefully providing a “destination point” for tourists who may be attracted to, or are passing through, southern Manitoba. Although the riverbank is still very much in a stage of nascent development, the facilities already in place, and those that are under construction, should guarantee that improvements continue to be made along the Assiniboine, and that the recreational opportunities and thus the quality of life for the residents of Westman will be substantially increased.

## Endnotes

1...The first support group to proceed with the forming of a Board, and with undertaking the constructional portion of the Brandon River Corridor Master Plan as approved by City Council, included Dave Wallace, Ted Snure (City Engineer), and Robyn Singleton (City Solicitor), Mervin Pedlow (former Westbran manager), Rick Borotsik (former Mayor) and Earl Backman (former City Manager).

2...The City Council of 1990-92 included: Rick Borotsik (Mayor), Margo Campbell, Rod Ficek, Arnold Grambo, Jeff Harwood, Joe Kay, Don Kille, Ross Martin, Dave Melcosky, Dan Munroe, and Jim Reid. For 1993-95 it included: Rick Borotsik (Mayor), Drew Caldwell, Margo Campbell, Brian Deacon, Rod Ficek, Arnold Grambo, Joe Kay, Don Kille, Romeo Lemieux, Ross Martin, and Jim Reid.

3...For instance, the “Forks” development in Winnipeg, although highly successful for that city, is very much a “Festival Market” type of enterprise, and this is not the model that the Riverbank Inc. board seeks to emulate.

### 4...The Brandon Riverbank Inc. Board of Directors

#### **Executive:**

Dave Wallace, President (*Planning and Development Officer, City of Brandon*)

Theodore E. Snure, Secretary (*City Engineer, City of Brandon*)

Robyn Singleton, Treasurer (*City Solicitor, City of Brandon*)

#### **Board Members:**

Mayor Reginald Atkinson (*City of Brandon*)

Glen Laubenstein (*City Manager, City of Brandon*)

Brian LePoudre (*Manager, Parks and Recreation, City of Brandon*)

Janet Kinley (*Intergroup Consultants, Community Member*)

Dr. John Everitt (*Department of Geography, Brandon University*)

Cindy Solon (*Brandon Chamber of Commerce representative*)

Wayne Adolphe (*Manitoba Hydro*)

Rod Wiebe (*Rural Construction Association*)

Merv Pedlow (*Community Member*)

Keith Timmons (*Community Member*)

**Former Board Members:**

Rick Borotsik, M.P. (*Former Mayor, City of Brandon*)

Earl Backman (*Former City Manager, City of Brandon*)

Rod Burkard (*Former Treasurer, City of Brandon*)

Wanda McFadyen (*Brandon Economic Development Board, Tourism Committee Representative*)

Bill Burbank (*Manitoba Hydro*)

5...A number of important corporate sponsorships have been made, but these are continually changing and are not listed here.

**References**

- BOROTSIK, R. 1998 Personal Communication MP for Brandon Souris.
- EVERITT, J. AND STADEL, C. 1988 'Spatial growth of Brandon' Welsted, J., Everitt, J. and Stadel, C. (eds.) *Brandon: Geographical Perspectives on the Wheat City* Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center 61-88.
- LOMBARD NORTH GROUP 1995 *The City of Brandon Assiniboine River Corridor Master Plan* Winnipeg: Lombard North Group.
- PEDLOW, M. 1998 Personal Communication General Manager for WestBran and Board Member of Riverbank Inc.
- WALL, G. 1989 *Outdoor Recreation in Canada* Toronto: John Wiley.
- WELSTED, J. 1988 'Brandon and the Assiniboine River' Welsted, J., Everitt, J. and Stadel, C. (eds.) *Brandon: Geographical Perspectives on the Wheat City* Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center 9-36.