

East Side Hydro Corridors and Roads - Expanding the Picture

Manitoba Wildlands

The Winnipeg Free Press printed an article (September 27, 2005) and an editorial (September 29, 2005) about the possible ramifications of the government of Manitoba's decision to direct Manitoba Hydro to shelve their plans to construct a direct current hydroelectric transmission corridor that would traverse the lands east of Lake Winnipeg in the province of Manitoba. The two articles are the latest in a series of Winnipeg Free Press editorials, articles, and op-eds about the east side. The complete list and links are found at the end of this document.

These two Free Press pieces are available for download:

Hydro line to jolt rates? Protecting east side of lake could add \$550M to cost
(Tuesday, September 27, 2005)

Editorial - Half-billion to waste (Thursday, September 29, 2005)

As an environmental-non-government organization that supports the government of Manitoba's decision regarding east side hydro transmission corridors, Manitoba Wildlands wishes to call attention to certain facts omitted from these two articles, clarify some assertions, and provide a more complete picture of the issue.

1. Scope of the discussion

These articles focus on business-as-usual options for energy in Manitoba. Restricting the scope to hydro development, gas turbines, exporting and importing power ignores the potential for alternative energy and conservation measures. It also sidesteps the fact that Manitoba does not have an energy plan, nor does it have standards and targets for renewable energy.

2. Cost is only one half of the equation

Both articles refer to the cost of building transmission corridors; however no mention is made of the revenue that Manitoba Hydro generates from such projects. Nor is the amount of public debt involved in this kind of project identified.

In fact we hope our daily newspaper begins to cover the full cost of Manitoba Hydro's set of development intentions, as it looks like \$10 Billion or more. We are watching for coverage of the full set of Manitoba Hydro development intentions, with both economic & environmental costs together with environmental commitments in these same boreal forest regions.

3. First Nations/ Aboriginal rights

All of this waste is to avoid conflict with the environmental lobbyists and the leaders of some east side First Nations who are opposed to a hydro corridor on "traditional" lands, which are owned by the Crown -- all

Manitobans. The leaders have every right to an opinion about the corridor, but that should not be confused with having final say.

(September 29, 2005 Editorial)

The above statements trivialize Aboriginal and First Nation treaty rights established through the Canadian constitution and by Canadian courts. While all Manitobans have an interest and a 'right' regarding decisions about Crown lands, it has been established in law that First Nations have a different set of rights. The same steps are taking place in the courts with respect to Métis rights. It is therefore no longer appropriate to consider First Nations and Aboriginal people simply as stakeholders.

4. The 'benefits' of building a hydro transmission corridor

...It is clear that most of the opposition comes from leaders of First Nations in the south, while most of the benefit would accrue to First Nations in the north all the way to the Nelson River.

(September 29, 2005 Editorial)

Construction of the corridor opens a path through the wilderness along which an all season road would follow. Hydro is ill-disposed to such a marriage of projects. But if the government can order it to look on the west side, it can order it to look at a marriage proposal.

(September 29, 2005 Editorial)

Benefits for First Nations and northern communities resulting from a hydro transmission corridor are questionable. Manitoba Hydro has repeatedly stated both publicly and privately that it is not willing to consider partnership arrangements for transmission infrastructure. Economic benefits in terms of employment and contracts are short-term, while impacts to Manitoba's land and waters are permanent. A hydro transmission corridor is **not** a precursor to a road; Manitoba Hydro has made it clear that not only does it not require a road to build and maintain transmission corridor infrastructure, roads actually add risks to the project. The Manitoba Government has also indicated, in the pages of the Winnipeg Free Press, that hydro corridors and road projects are not linked.

5. The benefits of conservation

Both articles fail to acknowledge the economic benefits of maintaining boreal forests as intact and functioning. World Heritage Site status for First Nations traditional lands on Manitoba's east side will have significant benefit including with respect to future tourism the communities may engage. Protecting these boreal forest lands would allow for mitigation of climate change and the continued flow of ecosystem services (contributions to the carbon and hydrological cycles – weather and water quality, erosion control, wildlife habitat, etc.). These are in addition to maintaining First Nations' traditional activities on the land (and the economic benefits from hunting, trapping, fishing, etc.). Non-timber forest products such as medicines and wild foods are also a growing aspect of Manitoba's northern economy.

6. Who does the power benefit? Who bears the cost?

Although the transmission corridor that was being discussed for the east side is touted as necessary for reliability of Manitoba Hydro's transmission system, the utility is planning for dams and additional transmission corridors that would export power – either to the US or to Ontario. Manitoba Hydro likes to promote export power as enabling the utility to

charge lower rates to Manitobans, but Manitoba ratepayers are also paying for the cost of generation and transmission infrastructure. They are also seeing increases in hydro rates. Transmission projects inevitably have associated environmental costs that Manitobans, and particularly northern First Nations and Aboriginal peoples, will bear in the future.

In addition, each new dam and set of transmission lines means more debt for Manitoba Hydro, and because it is a Crown corporation, this debt is a debt that all Manitobans carry. Manitobans deserve to know the whole story so that they are able to make intelligent decisions that weigh all the factors, costs and benefits of new hydro capacity in our province. Planning single hydro developments without an energy plan has the potential to increase risk for Manitobans.

7. “Environmentalism” perspective on placement of hydro transmission corridors

Furthermore, from an environmental perspective, how could it make sense to cut down 1,200 kilometres of trees on the west side rather than 800 kilometres of trees on the east side?

(September 29, 2005 Editorial)

Despite this editorial, it is incorrect to suggest that environmental non-government organizations (ENGOS) endorse any proposal to construct a hydro transmission line that goes through the Interlake as opposed to the east side. Framing the decision as one where there are only two options where trade-offs are involved can mislead the reader into thinking Manitoba Hydro has only one transmission corridor to build. To suggest these are the only options and solutions to overall energy needs of our province is incorrect.

8. Who are these ‘environmentalists’ anyway?

‘Environmentalists’ are portrayed in this Free Press content as narrowly-focused interest groups. However, polling of Manitoba citizens on environmental and conservation issues, especially in our boreal forest regions, indicates the values and viewpoints presented as those of ‘environmentalists’ are shared by the majority of Manitobans. Manitobans care about the environment and our boreal forest regions, and are knowledgeable about environmental concerns. Given Manitobans share core values of environmentalists, and Manitoban environmentalists are working to support the concerns and values of Manitobans, who is the media referring to?

9. The underlying message – overt and subtle

After that, First Nations would be free to exploit for their own and Manitoba's betterment the vast resources among which they live.

(September 29, 2005 Editorial)

This last sentence of the September 29, 2005 Winnipeg Free Press editorial embodies the overt message and potentially also the underlying view of the paper’s editorial board. The idea that our natural resources exist to be developed, and indeed are only of value if they are exploited and consumed, is an idea that is dated, short-sighted and ignores the potential for economic opportunities that are ‘outside the box’ of resource exploitation options. Perhaps also the value of our forest regions in the face of climate change is being ignored.

List of Winnipeg Free Press articles, editorials, op-eds, letters to the editor re: Manitoba's East Side (May 2005 – September 2005)

Letters to the Editor (Friday, September 30, 2005)

Editorial – *Half-billion to waste* (Thursday, September 29, 2005)

Hydro line to jolt rates? Protecting east side of lake could add \$550M to cost (Tuesday, September 27, 2005)

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Why does the East Side elect this guy? (Saturday, July 16, 2005)

First Nation opposes power corridor (Friday, July 15, 2005)

Editorial – *Chomiak's East Side debacle* (Sunday, July 10, 2005)

Hydro won't get cheapest route - Province rejects line down east lakeshore (Sunday, May 29, 2005)

Friday, September 30th, 2005

Letters to the Editor

Hydro costs reasonable

So, Manitoba Hydro needs to increase my rates to build a more reliable link from the generating stations in the North. As a person who heats his home with electricity, this decision will affect me more than the average consumer.

I consider the increased costs a very reasonable amount to secure increased reliability and avoid negative environmental impacts. In the province of Ontario, they attempted to avoid passing those costs onto consumers and now they face blackouts. I am more than happy to pay another \$2, indeed another \$5 per month to ensure I receive a reliable electrical supply that does not damage the environment. At less than 20 cents a day, I am prepared to pay that cost.

Furthermore, I am prepared to pay a few more cents a day to increase the amount of electricity that I consume that is generated from wind and other renewable sources. Pursuing development in this direction is good for rural Manitoba and agricultural producers.

There has been too much focus on minimizing the cost of energy consumed in Manitoba and not enough concern about improving its reliability and quality from an environmental perspective.

LES ROUTLEDGE Killarney

\$10 is hardly a jolt

Regarding the Sept. 27 article *Hydro line to jolt rates?*:

I don't get it.

How will adding \$10 per year to my hydro bill 'jolt' my hydro rates? That's less than \$1 per monthly bill. That's an extra shower, or a security light, or maybe enough juice to roast a Sunday turkey. Compared to the alternative, it's a ridiculous analogy. The line would cut a trail through Manitoba's most pristine wilderness. It will open up the boreal forest, currently being referred to as the planet's second lung (the rain forests being its first), to exploration, development, and tourism.

I'm not saying there is anything wrong with exploration, development, and tourism. If that is what's at stake, let's balance those merits against what will be lost.

But don't try and jolt me with fears over \$10 a year.

TIM FRIESEN

Thursday, September 29th, 2005

Editorial - Half-billion to waste

IT was learned this week that the Doer government is prepared to waste \$550 million to appease environmental lobbyists and some First Nations leaders who oppose the construction of a hydro corridor on the east side of Manitoba. This is an unconscionable waste of money and opportunity. Premier Gary Doer should immediately order Energy Minister Dave Chomiak to remove his blinkers on this issue and instead show the kind of leadership that will see Manitoba's wealth used to create hope and opportunity for impoverished east side residents and for all Manitobans. He can begin by removing the gag order that prevents Manitoba Hydro from exploring with First Nations the potential a hydro corridor creates on the east side. Mr. Chomiak should open his mind to creative uses of Manitoba's wealth.

The \$550 million price tag that the government's lack of political courage and vision creates is the sum of new costs and lost revenues that will accrue if the government insists Manitoba Hydro do what it has shown it should not do -- abandon its decades old plans for an east side corridor and instead invent an impractical alternative on the west side. Inventing the impractical will add three to five years of planning for a new line and will waste years of detailed planning and analysis on the east side. The west side option adds 400 kilometres to the length of the line. The extra construction will cost about \$250 million and the extra distance will cause \$250 million of electricity to leak away in transit.

To put the amount of money to be wasted into perspective, consider that it is nearly enough to finance the expansion of the Red River Floodway -- the biggest public works project in the province's history -- without help from Ottawa. It is enough to make all \$200 million worth of repairs to Assiniboine Park with \$350 million left over to fix potholes. It is more money than was spent on all new construction in Winnipeg to date this year -- \$443 million.

All of this waste is to avoid conflict with the environmental lobbyists and the leaders of some east side First Nations who are opposed to a hydro corridor on "traditional" lands, which are owned by the Crown -- all Manitobans. The leaders have every right to an opinion about the corridor, but that should not be confused with having final say. Rather than blanket denials, they should consider where in their traditional lands a corridor would intrude -- burial grounds, for example -- and preserve those places. In addition, it is clear that most of the opposition comes from leaders of First Nations in the south, while most of the benefit would accrue to First Nations in the north all the way to the Nelson River. Some First Nations in the south should not be allowed to block the aspirations of those in the north.

The environmental lobby wants the east side to remain pristine. It wants the area declared a world heritage site and is concerned that a hydro corridor will create a "perceptual discrepancy." The future of the east side, however, should not be about optics, but rather it should be about opportunity. The corridor represents opportunity. Furthermore, from an environmental perspective, how could it make sense to cut down 1,200 kilometres of trees on the west side rather than 800 kilometres of trees on the east side? Nor has the government explained why it is blocking a corridor on the east side of Manitoba for the benefit of Manitobans while, at the same time, it is negotiating with Ontario to move the same line over the border into Ontario, where it will cut through the same boreal forest as is being avoided in Manitoba.

Construction of the corridor opens a path through the wilderness along which an all season road would follow. Hydro is ill-disposed to such a marriage of projects. But if the government can order it to look on the west side, it can order it to look at a marriage proposal. A road is the best, perhaps only, realistic option to create wealth and jobs on the east side and to bring down the astronomical costs of transportation -- costs that double the price of food while making resource development impossibly expensive. Climate change already is having a negative impact on winter roads, which for a few weeks each year allow for the transportation of a year's supply of dry goods and fuels to east side communities. It is predicted that within a generation, climate change will wipe out the winter road network.

Hydro wants to spend the money needed to create the path. The government wants to waste \$550 million to avoid it. The common sense solution, however, is to allow Hydro to create the path and to invest the \$550 million in the development of a road on the east side. All east side communities already have some road construction capacity, which is used to build winter roads to their communities. The money the government wants to waste on the west side could be used to fund these construction operations year round to build permanent roads. It might take a generation to link the many arms of the network to the corridor, but eventually it would be done. After that, First Nations would be free to exploit for their own and Manitoba's betterment the vast resources among which they live.

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Tuesday, September 27th, 2005

Hydro line to jolt rates?

Protecting east side of lake could add \$550M to cost

By Helen Fallding

BUILDING a new high-voltage transmission line down the west side of the province to protect wilderness east of Lake Winnipeg could cost electricity customers about \$10 a year on their bills.

Manitoba Hydro president Bob Brennan confirmed yesterday the western route is about \$400 million to \$550 million more expensive than the shorter eastern route vetoed by the Doer government over environmental concerns.

That's equivalent to nearly a two per cent rate increase over the life of the project, or \$10 a year for the average residential consumer.

"Whenever you have a cost increase of this magnitude, eyebrows are raised," said lawyer Byron Williams, who represents consumer groups at utility board hearings.

"The clients would start to wonder whether the benefits of the project outweigh the costs."

Brennan said a new high-voltage line and converter station may be needed to improve the reliability of Manitoba's electricity system.

Three-quarters of the power currently coming out of northern Manitoba's dams travels down two lines in a single corridor through the Interlake, leaving the province vulnerable to wind or ice storms, forest fires or terrorist attacks.

Manitoba Hydro had been planning to build a third high-voltage line, dubbed Bipole 3, east of Lake Winnipeg. But the Doer government vetoed that plan after consultations with First Nations in that area, who are lobbying for a world heritage site designation for a large tract of boreal forest.

Brennan said the west-side route is 50 per cent longer -- about 1,200 kilometres compared to 800 -- adding about \$250 million in construction costs.

Over the life of the project, about another \$150 to \$300 million could be lost because the farther electricity has to travel, the more power escapes from the line.

Each \$250 million represents about a one per cent annual increase in hydro bills, or \$5 for the average customer annually.

A two per cent increase could put Manitoba's residential rates on par with Quebec and make them slightly higher than B.C. Currently, Manitoba Hydro boasts the lowest rates in the country.

Williams said the debate over the best route should take place in a public forum -- not behind closed doors, where lobby groups sway politicians privately.

"No option should be foreclosed until it is looked at."

Energy Minister Dave Chomiak said trying to win environmental and First Nation approval for an east side route could add years to a Bipole 3 project, resulting in extra costs that need to be factored into any comparison.

And he said there are so many options on the table that it's premature to even begin the debate. A potential power sale to Ontario or an east-west national grid might allow Manitoba Hydro to increase its reliability without another north-south line.

Brennan said the utility will consider alternatives like backup gas turbines in southern Manitoba or an import contract to bring power from outside the province in an emergency.

But Williamson warned that proposals for gas turbines in other provinces are running into trouble because of environmental concerns.

Reliability aside, Manitoba Hydro will eventually need Bipole 3 to bring more power south to Winnipeg and the U.S. from new dams. However, Brennan said if reliability problems were already solved, Bipole 3 could follow a route through the Interlake.

An estimate of the costs of the west-side route will be included in the next financial forecast sent to Manitoba Hydro's board.

Brennan said it will add up to more than \$1.8 billion -- a billion dollars for a converter station and about \$750 million for the transmission line, plus planning costs. As with the eastern route, adjustments would have to be made for power line losses.

University of Winnipeg professor Peter Miller, who has raised environmental issues at hydro hearings, said a survey commissioned by Manitoba Hydro many years ago found Manitobans were willing to pay a premium to avoid an eastern transmission line.

The eastern route would cut a 60-metre swath through pristine forest and muskeg, while the western route would likely follow a more developed path close to Thompson and The Pas.

Whatever the route, Manitoba Hydro may have to pay compensation to First Nations whose traditional territories the transmission line crosses.

Some First Nations east of Lake Winnipeg are adamantly opposed to a high-voltage line through their territories, while others are only interested if they can own the line and lease it back to Manitoba Hydro.

Brennan said the utility took a very preliminary look at an equity partnership with First Nations on hydro corridors a long time ago and didn't see any benefits. However, he stressed that was a very cursory examination.

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Editorial - Power line benefits

Saturday, August 6th, 2005

IN a column on the page opposite on Thursday, Culture, Heritage and Tourism Minister Eric Robinson wrote that the government decided against a hydro corridor on the East Side of Manitoba after consulting with residents there. The residents' main concerns, he wrote, were the "impact a hydro transmission line would have on the boreal forest," and a concern about having the line "going through their communities that did not provide economic benefit." "Those views," he continued, "resulted in a decision to find an alternative to building a line down the East Side." Mr. Robinson does not explain how it that the "decision" follows from the "concerns" -- perhaps because it is inexplicable. Certainly it is illogical.

If East Side residents are concerned about the impact of a line on the boreal forest then it follows that the issue should be examined to determine whether the concerns have merit. As big an undertaking as a line certainly is, the fact is that it remains only a very small undertaking relative to the vast wilderness through which it would run. If the impacts are greater than they might seem in relative terms, then it should further be explained why that leads to a decision to cancel a line along the East Side and instead locate it either down the west side of the province or down a central corridor, both of which will cut through boreal forests. In fact, both alternative routes are longer than the East Side route, which will mean both will have greater impacts on the forest. In addition, the proposal to build the Conawapa generating station and to sell its output to Ontario will require a separate line, one that is envisaged as following a corridor through the same boreal forest as the East Side line, albeit largely on the Ontario side of the border. Concerns about the boreal forest, however, are not leading to decisions to block those routes.

The issue of having lines through communities is easily addressed by simply not putting the lines through communities, which, after all, constitute tiny properties in a vast wilderness.

As to benefits from a line, why can't East Side communities benefit from the line? While Mr. Robinson seems incapable of answering that question on the East Side, the government of which he is a member is encouraging the development of wind farms in southern Manitoba which pay land owners on average \$7,200 a year for the use of their property.

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East Side voices a guiding force

Thursday, August 4th, 2005

By Eric Robinson

THE government of Manitoba is in the midst of writing a new chapter when it comes to our working relationship with First Nations and northern communities -- one that strives to replace paternalism and neglect of the past with consultation, partnership and hope for the future.

As a member of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation and who has worked to improve the lives of northern residents long before I was first elected as MLA in 1993, I have seen first-hand and been directly affected by the problems that have resulted from the errors of the past.

Historically, communities were shut out of the process of determining how economic development in the North would proceed and were not given a chance to share in the benefits that came with it. That was a horrible mistake -- one that has taken a toll on communities, and more importantly, the people who live there.

When our government looked at how we should proceed with sustainable economic development including construction of any new hydro electric transmission line along the east side of Lake Winnipeg, we embarked on a process where communities would get their say. Their views on the economic, environmental and cultural impact of the project on the people who live there would be the most important factors in our final decision.

The East Side of Lake Winnipeg is a vast area that is 96 per cent First Nations, with numerous remote communities, and a large and pristine boreal forest. Each community is distinct and unique from the other and as a collective East Side community hold a vast amount of traditional knowledge and experience that is different from north, southern or western First Nations in Manitoba.

The East Side process included 80 meetings as well as seeking the advice and input from elders and stakeholders who may have an interest in the East Side process. During those discussions, two key themes emerged. Communities were concerned about the impact a hydro transmission line would have on the boreal forest. They also were not interested in having a line going through their communities that did not provide economic benefit.

Those views resulted in a decision to find an alternative to building a hydro line down the East Side of Lake Winnipeg and look for other and better ways to improve the lives of the people who live in those communities.

This has been a first-of-its-kind approach in Canada. The voices we heard during our visits and that were reflected in the East Side report told us there was much interest in land use planning and sustainable economic development. Our government is committed to these priorities.

Since the East Side process began we have worked with the communities and the East Side Planning Initiative to implement joint forestry projects with local communities, funding the Hollow Water traditional land use study and regional landfill project, launching a River Stewards Program to train and employ local people in eco-tourism and resource management along waterways, piloting community garden projects in the Island Lake communities this summer; and moving on Treaty Land Entitlement transfers throughout the East Side, including Gods Lake Narrows, Norway House, and Red Sucker Lake and introducing the Sagkeeng Prospector training course.

In keeping with the recommendations of the East Side report and what we ourselves heard, we will be working with communities in the following areas:

Proceeding on land planning leading to local resource management.

Improving energy efficiency to reduce home-heating costs.

Providing local training and job opportunities in home retrofitting.

Moving forward on all-weather road and airport projects.

Advancing aboriginal and eco-tourism opportunities.

Piloting a trapping program in Bunibonibee First Nation.

Recently some northern communities have seen ownership of the transmission line as a way of funding these and other priorities. However, Manitoba Hydro has said it must own its transmission lines for both regulatory and security reasons. As well, many communities have told us they do not support a transmission line in their communities.

Our government respects what the East Side people have told us, and have been working on many of the recommendations that they have provided to us. We are committed to working with them on their priorities without tying that commitment to a particular development.

The idea has also been put forward that a hydro line will mean an all-weather road. The issues surrounding the East Side are complex, but one thing is clear, and that is that a hydro line does not guarantee an all-weather road, and, while we are committed to addressing the serious transportation issues affecting communities, we also recognize that road access alone will not address the many other issues that lead to situations of unemployment, poverty, and poor health.

We know we have made a good start but our work together is not done. We do not assume that after these initial meetings with residents we can walk away and know it all. The Manitoba government continues to invest in these relationships and maintains communication to ensure that East Side voices continue to be heard, as is being done through the creation of the Wabanong Nakagum Okimawin (WNO) made up of leadership from the 16 East Side First Nations as well as other representatives. The people of the East Side of Lake Winnipeg have supported this process for a reason. We have made the effort to go to them and listen. We will continue to do so, acting in the best interests of all East Side communities.

Eric Robinson is Manitoba's minister of culture, heritage and tourism and MLA for Rupertsland.

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Saturday, July 16th, 2005

Why does the East Side elect this guy?

GERALD FLOOD

IF I lived on the East Side of Manitoba, I would be asking myself the following questions: Just whose side is the NDP government on, and in particular, whose side is Culture, Heritage and Sport Minister Eric Robison on?

Just who's on whose side was an issue of considerable debate among East Siders this week. Leaders of East Side communities were in town to attend a series of meetings at which the government tried to explain away Energy Minister Dave Chomiak's bone headed declaration that he would not allow a hydro corridor to be constructed on the East Side, even if that decision wastes an estimated \$1 billion and forecloses the best hope for a road up the East Side, one that would pave the way to the creation of jobs and economic development.

By all accounts, the government managed to confuse and muddy the issues, as usual, and at the forefront of effort was Mr. Robison.

Mr. Robison is the MLA for Rupertsland, a vast riding that includes many of the East Side and northern First Nations that stand to benefit from a hydro line. A former broadcaster, he was first elected in 1993 in a by-election and has been re-elected with the regularity that New Democrats are re-elected by aboriginal people. Mr. Robison, who is aboriginal, is said to have a special affinity for the people on the East Side.

But in discussions this week, it would be easy to conclude that he speaks for the government, not the people of Rupertsland.

Three things: He said he doesn't know where the idea of marrying a road to the hydro line came from; that he doesn't want to encourage "pipe dreams" on the East Side; and that he can't see that Manitoba Hydro would allow East Side First Nations to own the corridor, as growing numbers of East Side leaders propose.

What these three things demonstrate are a lack of imagination, a disturbing complacency about the future prospects of East Side communities, and a willingness to speak for Hydro rather than his impoverished constituents.

That Mr. Robison does not know where the idea of wedding a road to a line comes from is irrelevant. Just because someone has not handed him a fully developed plan should not preclude him from demanding one.

There are all manner of naysayings about this proposed wedding -- that hydro corridors typically follow different routes than roads, for example, and that a road will only invite folks on the East Side to take pot shots at insulators and cause power disruptions that don't occur on the West Side.

But there is nothing to prevent the plotting of this corridor differently than past ones.

In fact, if Mr. Chomiak, and now Mr. Chomiak's handmaiden, Mr. Robison, have their way, \$1 billion will

be squandered to avoid the East Side route. It is not a "pipe dream" to insist that rather than waste \$1 billion creating a longer West Side route that will bleed electricity and profit, that it instead be invested in making the corridor compatible with a roadway on the East Side. It is a perfectly sensible thing to do.

Mr. Robison is likely correct that Hydro would not allow First Nations to own the line. But Hydro has shown a willingness to share ownership of its infrastructure. In fact, it is doing just that with the Wuskatim generating station, financing a profit-making ownership role for neighbouring First Nations people.

A similar arrangement for the new corridor would produce dividends that could be shared among First Nations community and be used to finance road construction.

East Side First Nations already have small construction companies that build and maintain winter roads for a few months each winter. Those men and machines could be used in summer to build small sections of road, which, over time, would connect and become a network.

Hydro wants to build a line by 2010. If it goes down the East Side as Hydro wants, then there would be jobs in the immediate future to build the corridor, followed by jobs to maintain it and start working on a road.

If it takes another decade to achieve, the fact is that it would be achieved, and once achieved it would reduce the prohibitive costs of living on the East Side and make development possible. To be sure, it is a long term plan, but it can work and while it does the East Side will have years and years to debate and forge an appropriate resource development regime.

In the meantime, there is nothing to stop Mr. Robison from applying the bandages that he has become accustomed to applying. Rather than promoting a road this week, Mr. Robison turned attention to a plan to retrofit reserve housing for electrical heating systems. There's nothing wrong with that plan but, in truth, it won't accomplish much and you have to wonder why the emphasis is on using electricity to heat houses that are built in an immense forest where wildfires consume more trees than can be imagined.

And finally, it is an odd thing that Mr. Robison cannot countenance telling Hydro that it must allow First Nations to own a powerline, but he has no qualms about telling Hydro to waste \$1 billion against the expert judgment of Hydro planners, engineers and accountants.

As I said, if I lived on the East Side I would be wondering whose side Mr. Robison is on. I'd also be wondering if he deserves re-election.

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First Nation opposes power corridor

Friday, July 15th, 2005

LEADERS of the Poplar River First Nation say they will not let a high-voltage power corridor be built through their traditional territory -- even by other First Nations.

"There's no way we're going to let that happen without a fight," Coun. Sophia Rabliauskas said yesterday after hearing for the first time about a proposal by the Island Lake Tribal Council to build a hydro line and lease it to Manitoba Hydro.

"I was quite disturbed because they're just kind of ignoring the work we've been doing for the last 15 years to protect our territory," she said.

The First Nation is one of five in Manitoba and Ontario lobbying for a boreal forest World Heritage Site designation from the United Nations on the east side of Lake Winnipeg.

Sophia's husband Ray said the idea that a hydro line would open a route for road development is a "strange myth."

Other First Nations involved in the World Heritage Site have not ruled out having a high-voltage power corridor built through their territories -- as long as they get a stake in the project.

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Chomiak's East Side debacle

Sunday, July 10th, 2005

ENERGY Minister Dave Chomiak has taken that all-important first step on the road to recovery of his senses -- he has recognized, however dimly, that he has a problem of his own making on the East Side of Manitoba.

Mr. Chomiak has invited the four chiefs of the Island Lake Tribal Council to a meeting this week, a precursor of many more meetings to come with leaders of outraged First Nations up and down the East Side. The purpose of this initial meeting -- the fact that it has even been called -- has not been announced. But the purpose is clear none the less -- Mr. Chomiak is trying to find a way to maintain his perch on the pedestal he climbed onto in declaring to environmentalists that he would not allow a hydro corridor to be constructed through the pristine forests on the East Side.

Why an energy minister pretends he is an environment minister, and as popular as that announcement might have been in environmental circles six weeks ago, it has played less well elsewhere, particularly in First Nations communities on the East Side that were not consulted by Mr. Chomiak prior to his declaration. In fact, the communities learned of Mr. Chomiak's fiat by reading the Free Press.

Now it might be that Mr. Chomiak simply forgot his manners, that it slipped his mind that the Doer government had pledged that the people of the East Side would be masters of their own future and that the Supreme Court of Canada, no less, has ordered that meaningful consultations with First Nations are required on development issues. If not vainglorious paternalism, how other than forgetfulness to explain Mr. Chomiak's unilateral declaration?

Whatever the reason, however, the fact is that First Nations are offended and alarmed that Mr. Chomiak alone decided to reject the best, perhaps only, hope for the impoverished East Side -- a hydro corridor that would open the way for an all-season road and the resource development and jobs that would follow.

Mr. Chomiak's unilateralism was the topic of much discussion during a four-day meeting of the Assembly of First Nations in Yellowknife last week. Chiefs returning from Yellowknife say that a consensus has developed that Mr. Chomiak must reverse his declaration and instead begin negotiations that would lead to the construction of the \$2-billion corridor and the laying of the foundation of a road.

The chiefs also want to continue to explore with Manitoba Hydro the idea of having an ownership role in the corridor. Mr. Chomiak will be asked to lift the ban on such talks that he imperiously imposed at the same time as he rejected the corridor.

An ownership role makes good sense for a variety of reasons. It would give East Side First Nations a say in the development and operation of the corridor; it would provide compensation starting at the front end of the development, a reversal of the past practice of fighting for compensation in the courts over decades after. It also makes financial sense. The advantage of a corridor down the East Side is that it is the shortest route. Distance matters. Mr. Chomiak's alternative route down the west side of Manitoba will add at least \$100 million to the cost. But more important, as electricity moves along lines, it creates friction and heat which

leech away much of the electricity. The shorter the line, the less the leeching. The difference in the length of the east route as opposed to a west or central route is so great, in fact, that the savings from less friction are greater than the cost of the line. In other words, the economics of a line down the East Side are so favourable that the savings exceed the cost of construction. Which means that the line and dividends to First Nations can be financed through savings.

Even the principle of Hydro leasing power lines from a third party as opposed to owning them outright is not new. When northern hydroelectric development was undertaken in the 1960s, the two lines to bring the power south were financed by the Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. and were leased to Hydro into the 1990s, when the corporation bought it out.

Mr. Chomiak's choice not only costs more initially, it also produces so much more leeching waste that it will lose money rather than make money -- in perpetuity. Mr. Chomiak has said that he understands that his unilateralism is wasteful, but that the hundreds of millions of unnecessary capital costs and lost savings is a small price to pay to meet "our" environmental goals. Who "our" might refer to and what goals are being pursued he has not deigned to explain, certainly not to East Side communities.

So it is fair to say that Mr. Chomiak's folly is not just that it is imperious and wasteful, but worse, he has created this absurd political situation in which the understandable aspirations and demonstrated needs of East Side residents are being weighed against the greater ballot-box clout of non-resident environmentalists, many of whom are paid handsomely to prevent any encroachment on the East Side, no matter the cost to residents.

It is unconscionable that Mr. Chomiak has myopically created this destructive dynamic. It is unconscionable, too, that Premier Gary Doer continues to have confidence in such a minister.

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Hydro won't get cheapest route **Province rejects line down east lakeshore**

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By Dan Lett

THE province has ruled out construction of a power line down the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg, dashing a plan Manitoba Hydro has touted for nearly two decades. Energy Minister Dave Chomiak says his government will not allow construction of Bipole 3 -- a third major transmission line to bring power from Manitoba Hydro's northern generating stations to the south -- through the pristine wilderness east of the lake.

"I think that in life, as in politics, you never say never," Chomiak said in an interview. "But the reality is that when we weighed all the options, we couldn't support going down the east side. It's not going to happen."

Hydro has long argued it needs to build a new transmission line, preferably along the eastern edge of the lake, to shore up its aging main lines that run through the Interlake region.

The east side route is Hydro's choice because it would be hundreds of kilometres shorter and hundreds of millions of dollars cheaper than routes around the west side of Lake Winnipegosis. It is also more secure for Hydro than running it along the path of existing lines in the Interlake.

However, Chomiak said an east-side route for Hydro's new line would bisect a tract of virgin wilderness that is being considered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for designation as a World Heritage site.

Environmentalists applauded Chomiak's statement as the biggest step the NDP government has ever taken to protect the wilderness east of the lake.

"This is a very big deal," said Don Sullivan, executive director of the Boreal Forest Network, a major supporter of the UNESCO World Heritage designation. "(Chomiak) made a definitive statement and we commend him for taking this bold step and taking the flak for this. It's not every day that the government goes up against the interests of Manitoba Hydro."

Sullivan said less definitive messages from the province have allowed Hydro to continue quietly encouraging support for Bipole 3 among aboriginal communities east of the lake.

In fact, a campaign by the Island Lake Tribal Council to form a native consortium in support of an east-side route, led by former MP Elijah Harper, is receiving limited support from Hydro.

Harper said he is aware the NDP government has rejected an east-side line but has been told by Manitoba Hydro a final decision has not yet been made.

The potential spinoffs from a transmission line, including greater all-weather road access, make this the most important economic-development project for the region, he added.

"We are the poorest region in the country," Harper said. "We can't continue to look at government handouts. We have to look at developing the resources in our own backyards."

Manitoba Hydro president Bob Brennan said he is aware that an east-side route is not supported by the current government. Brennan said the utility is currently committed to studying other transmission routes that would avoid the east side of Lake Winnipeg.

However, Brennan said the east-side route will likely have to be examined again in the future.

"At this point we couldn't entertain anything involving the east side," Brennan said. "That doesn't mean we're ruling out the east side. But we're looking at other options at this time."

Development of the lands east of Lake Winnipeg has been a political lightning rod for decades.

Despite a strong message from the province, government sources confirmed Manitoba Hydro has never lost its appetite for a transmission route east of the lake. The sources said Hydro is preparing updated feasibility studies on the Interlake and western Manitoba routes that will show how much more expensive these options are. The end game, the sources said, would be to embarrass the province into re-thinking its policy.

Chomiak said he is fully prepared for some backlash from Hydro, political opponents and the business community for using environmental concerns to trump economics.

"It would be cheaper to go down the east side," Chomiak said. "But you don't make these decisions on the straight economics ... We're going to stand on our environmental concerns."

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