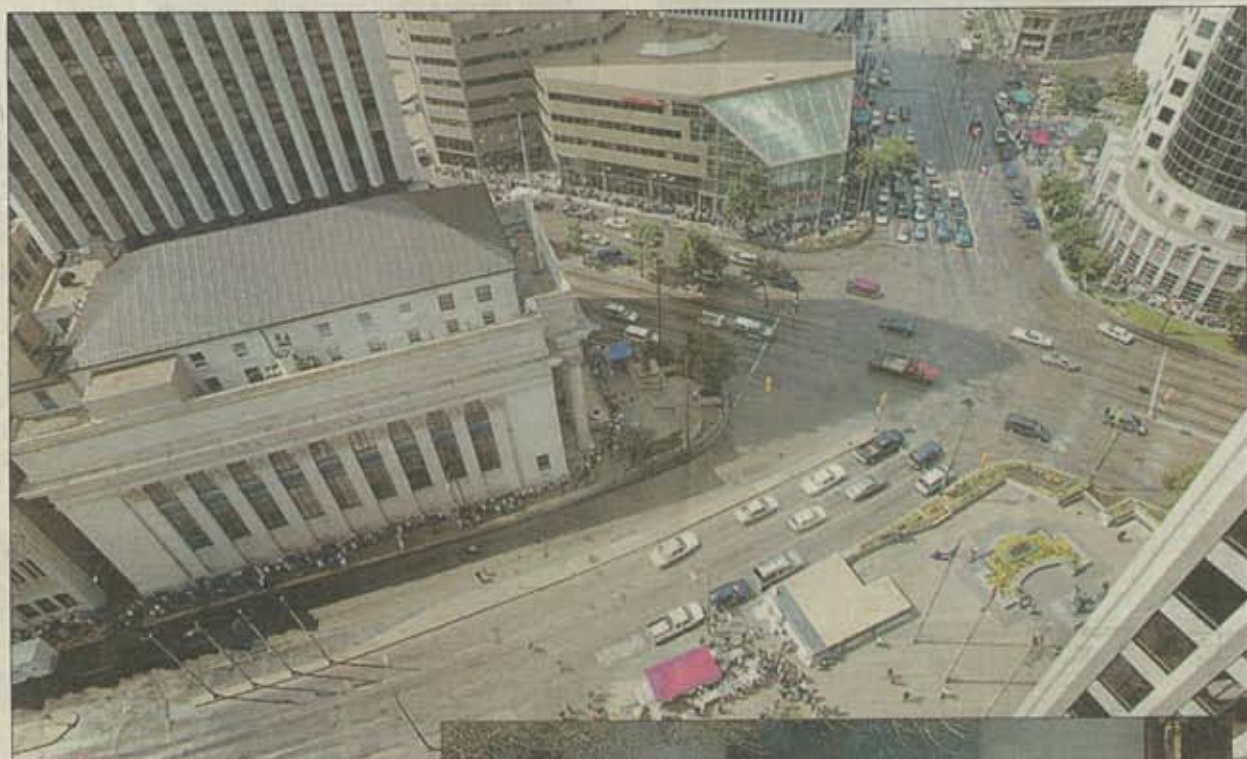


Bring down barriers now!



WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Downtown panel wants famed corner 'liberated'

By Mary Agnes Welch



PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

The city is being urged to reopen the corner of Portage and Main to pedestrians by removing concrete barriers (above) by summer.

ber board is calling on city council to reverse the ban, and it's exploring ways to remove the waist-high concrete barriers as soon as possible.

Yesterday, CentreVenture's board wrote an open letter to city councillors saying the fabled intersection should be "liberated" as soon as possible.

"It is not a sufficient condition for success, but it is a necessary condition. The good effects of opening the

corner will begin with a strong visual statement that things are different downtown, that they are better," the board wrote.

"It is in the power of city council to direct that the barriers be removed forthwith."

Continued

Please see **BARRIERS A2**

CENTREVENTURE SOUNDS OFF A15

WINNIPEG'S downtown development agency is calling on city council to open Portage and Main to pedestrians by Victoria Day, saying it's time the intersection was "liberated."

CentreVenture, the city's arms-length downtown development agency, revealed yesterday it has a legal opinion saying the city can repeal a 30-year-old agreement with the corner's four landowners that banned pedestrian traffic at Portage and Main.

So the agency's powerful nine-mem-

Barriers

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The letter was signed, among others, by Fort Garry Hotel owner Ida Albo, pollster Ginny Devine, Online Business Systems head Chuck Loewen and Eugene Kostyra, Premier Gary Doer's economic development guru and former NDP cabinet minister.

An international competition to redesign Portage and Main is underway, but CentreVenture's letter puts pressure on the city to take action immediately, saying "let's do it, and do it now."

According to CentreVenture's legal opinion, the 1976 agreement with the intersection's four landowners obligated the city to operate the underground tunnels and to prohibit pedestrian traffic above ground, which it did with a bylaw.

But city governments always have the right to repeal their legislation, which is what Winnipeg should do as soon as possible, say CentreVenture's officials.

CentreVenture's letter also clears up lingering confusion over whether entrants in the design competition are legally bound to keep the intersection closed to walkers.

"We didn't want people with good intentions and ideas to think they couldn't enter the competition because they were constrained by the barriers," said Ron Margolis, CentreVenture's president and CEO.

"It's quite the opposite."

The design competition, which is expected to draw about 100 entries from architects all over the world, will name a winner in about six weeks. Entrants are given a fictitious budget of \$10 million to turn the intersection into a vibrant commercial destination befitting its history.

But it could take several years to find the city funds to start construction on the winning entry.

Margolis said he doesn't want to wait that long, which is why he is pushing to have the barriers removed as early as this summer.

CentreVenture is even offering to bear the cost — likely under \$100,000 — of removing the concrete

barricades.

In addition to the formal design competition, members of the public can add their two cents to the debate over the future of Portage and Main.

CentreVenture has hired an architecture student to submit a simple proposal outlining how the barriers could be removed and how much it would cost.

The wrench in the plans may be Oxford Properties, which manages Winnipeg Square, the underground shopping mall at Portage and Main.

Several calls to staff at Oxford were not returned yesterday.

But sources said they are a stumbling block to removing the barricades since they fear foot traffic in their underground mall will migrate to street level instead.

Margolis argues vibrant pedestrian traffic above ground will boost the mall's businesses, especially after 5 p.m.

Removing the barriers could increase traffic woes, though, since cars turning left and right from Portage Avenue onto Main Street would have to wait for walkers to cross.

For the design competition, city traffic engineers did a quick assessment of the traffic implications of several new pedestrian crosswalks through the intersection.

They found traffic wouldn't be unduly hampered by a crosswalk between the TD Centre and the Richardson Building, but a crosswalk between the Scotiabank tower and the historic Bank of Montreal building wouldn't be safe and would stall traffic.

About 94,000 cars and buses zip through the city's main hub every day, and many of those are forced to cut through the heart of downtown because there is no bypass route.

Kenn Rosin, the city's transportation division manager, said he won't prejudge the traffic implications of reopening Portage and Main to pedestrians before he sees the winning bid.

But he said removing the barriers this summer is unlikely since the city is planning to reconstruct the southbound lanes of Main Street from the Disraeli Freeway to Portage Avenue this summer.