

Volunteers work to restore historic Rivers train station

BY TYLER CLARKE

A volunteer effort to restore the historic Rivers train station continues to trudge forward, with evidence of success sprinkled along the way.

“It may not look there’s a lot done, but a lot has been done,” said Donna Morken, estimating an investment of approximately \$100,000 through grants, donations and fundraising has already been made.

“Heritage projects are notoriously slow because of the cost,” the Rivers Train Station Restoration Committee chair said. “Volunteers can only do so much, and then you have to call in contractors and so forth, and in order to do that you need the money to do so.”

The most notable changes in recent years have been the installation of new shingles on the roof and of various paintings on the plywood that covers windows, by Brandon artist Cy Longman.

The paintings were done on large puzzle pieces, which when put together will form one giant painting.

The original intent was for the pieces to be connected in 2017 to mark the building’s 100th anniversary, but the effort was delayed due to the volunteer-run committee shifting their efforts toward more timely building issues.

With a historic building such as this, Morken — chair of the organization — said “they’re never really done because there’s always something else to do.”

But, with the roof protected by new shingles, its degradation is expected to slow in time for volunteers to improve its condition.

The committee formed in 2006 to preserve the building for future generations, picking up where other community organizations had left off.

Morken has been involved since 1998, inspired by both its importance to the community and her family’s connection. Her grandfather, Harry Evans, worked for the rail line beginning in 1906.

The approximately 4,000-square-foot building was constructed by the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in 1917 to replace the previous structure, which burned down on March 4 of that year. The original train station was identical to the one in Melville, Sask.

Rivers exists because of the rail line, which welcomed the first repair depot west of Winnipeg at mile 143 in 1907. The community is named after Sir Charles Rivers-Wilson, who was president and chairman of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway’s board of directors.

The building’s historic notoriety is also marked by silent movie star Buster Keaton filming “The Railrodder” for the National Film Board of Canada on site the early ‘60s. Keaton is featured in Longman’s puzzle piece painting.

The building was designated a federal heritage site in the ‘90s, and volunteers have been chipping away at restoring the building for the past several years.

“It would be wonderful to



Rivers Train Station Restoration Committee chair Donna Morken leans against one of seven train wheel benches the committee has installed throughout the community — this one outside of the historic train station. (Photos by Tyler Clarke/The Brandon Sun)

have it done tomorrow, but that’s not going to happen,” Morken said, adding that volunteers have never set a completion date “because there’s so much work to do.”

Though it’s easy to give in to impatience when it comes to a project as massive in scale as restoring a historic building, the committee has also taken the time to complete smaller projects.

The most recent effort — the installation of train wheel benches throughout the community — recently wrapped up when the seventh and final bench was installed outside the Blue Crescent Hotel.

Developer Andrew Rempel said he was proud to have the piece installed at their property, as it symbolizes how the community came to be.

“Rivers was built as a CN Rail town, and CN Rail is a major part of why we built there — they have rail changes there, so we do a lot of business in Rivers,” he said. “It’s just a good way to showcase the heritage of Rivers and give some exposure to that.”

Smaller efforts such as this help the committee maintain enthusiasm for the more substantial rail station project, which will be more than worthy of community celebration when it’s finally completed.



One of many puzzle piece paintings by Brandon artist Cy Longman is seen covering the boarded-up windows of Rivers’ historic train station.

» Hope is to incorporate alternative energy



Rivers' historic train station, built in 1917, is seen last week. See Page 5 for more. (Tyler Clarke/The Brandon Sun)

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The ultimate goal is for the building to include a museum, house the Rivers and Area Community Foundation, Via Rail and a commercial component, or maybe some arts and culture venue, Morken said — “We’re not sure yet.”

They also hope to incorporate alternative energy into the mix, including the installation of an electric charging station for vehicles.

“Really, we want to preserve the history, but we want to move it into the future,” Morken said. “The train station here provided the first electricity to Rivers and area, so it only makes sense that ... it would lead the community into the next century.”

Work at the building is expected to resume next spring, when painting and other exterior work will be done before volunteers commence work on its interior.

Donations to the Rivers Train Station Restoration Committee Inc. can be made to Box 952, Rivers, MB, R0K 1X0.

» tclarke@brandonsun.com
» Twitter: @TylerClarkeMB



Rivers Train Station Restoration Committee chair Donna Morken leans against the historic train station the committee is working to save.