

Battle for the Sun: Green Energy vs. Indigenous Heritage in Edmonton

by Robert Houle

EARLIER THIS MONTH, on October 19, 2020, following many years and months of debate and opposition, the Epcor **E.L. Smith Solar Farm** was approved at Edmonton City Council in a 7-6 vote. This comes even after it was made clear to the City and proponents that this location in the River Valley is a bonafide Cree heritage site in Alberta.

During the final approvals, back in June of 2019, I spoke to the Edmonton Council about the significance of the site and the missed opportunity to involve Enoch Cree Nation in discussions, encouraging the city to step back from the project. But more conversations with the Mayor and Council around Indigenous engagement followed and there was a commitment from Epcor to go back, correct the work and involve the Enoch Cree Nation in a greater capacity. Eventually Enoch and Epcor signed an Memorandum of Understanding this past September. The project seemed to be back on track, and had the appropriate buy-in to continue.

The solar farm, a 51 acre, 45,000 panel operation is proposed on a jewel of Edmonton, replacing a flourishing meadow next to the North Saskatchewan River, which is rich in cultural sites.

Reflecting on the process, the re-engagement with Enoch Cree Nation, and the final decision, it is hard to accept the City's decision. It's not that the project is unsound in principle, rather the placement and proposal was deeply flawed from the onset. But these flaws, once identified, were not corrected, and ultimately may lead to bigger problems in the future for the Solar Farm.

A FAILURE OF INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT

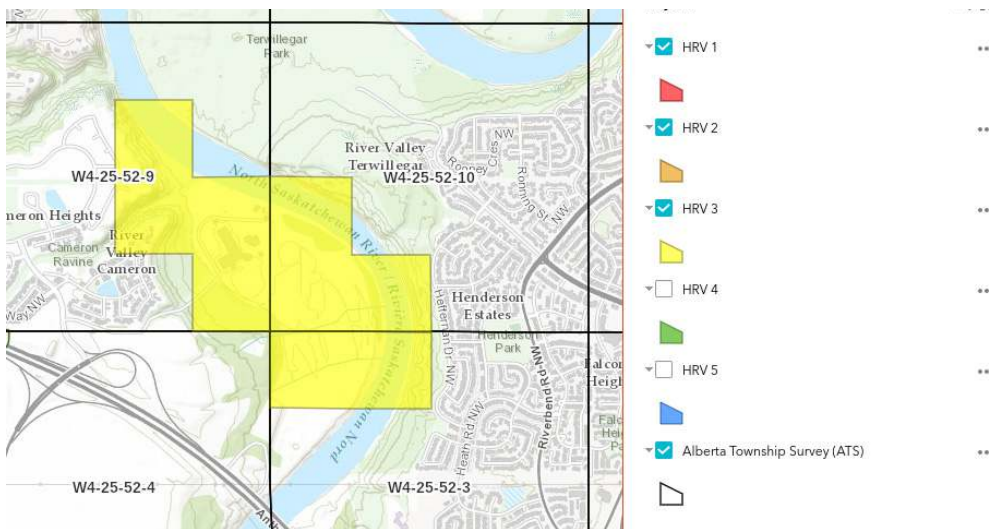
Much was made about the (eventual) involvement of Enoch Cree Nation and the new partnership, but this was not without challenges.

When Historical Resource Act clearance was provided in **September 2018**, Epcor was given direction to undertake studies of lands to be impacted. This was directed due to the above legislation, and how all known and potential sites are given a Historical Resource Value (HRV). Prior to further evaluation, this location was given an HRV of 4 which is standard for most of the River Valley and other known sites of occupation. Epcor was also directed to excavate additional test sites, and stumbled upon a historical campsite.

Having been former **Enoch reserve** until 1908, all parties recognized that there exists a high potential for these lands holding important cultural or historical items. Epcor itself wrote about a site in the area:

This site can be described as a multicomponent pre-contact period campsite which consists of a series of undisturbed cultural occupations from below the plough zone (approximately 30 centimetres below surface) to approximately four metres below ground surface.

Additionally, upon reading the test pit reports, there appears to be multiple layers of occupation present, which speaks to ongoing and recurrent habitation. The geotechnical report for test pit TP17-08 notes cultural artifacts discovered at 1m, then again at 2.5 m. Indigenous people, before contact, would return to sacred places and spaces as a matter of practice. This evidence supports oral histories that speak to those practices. These findings were uncovered in 2017, but were only shared with Enoch Cree Nation in 2019, a full two years after excavation. When they were finally shared with the Nation, it was my hope that this would lead to more investigation, but this did not happen.



Epcor simply did the bare minimum, shared the artifacts and evidence they had been sitting on for a number of years, concluded that was all, and asked Enoch staff and leadership to prove them wrong. There was no opportunity for other excavations, explorations or opportunity to determine what else could be there. There was no attempt to allow independent interpretation, rather an odd addition to the already completed report by Epcor that was added to the final presentation.

This joint report to Chief and Council makes the point to denounce the previous claims of a Sundance site being discovered, and goes on to whitewash the issue by stating ceremony happened everywhere.

There was no comparison or question on how many other Sundance or sacred sites the archaeologist had experienced excavating, though since a single campsite was excavated, it is impossible to say definitively there were none at this location (this would be clear to anyone who has ever attended a Sundance).

No, rest assured there is more there. We can draw this conclusion from Alberta Culture and Tourism's recent upgrading of the lands from 4 to a 3 on the HRV scale. On the HRV scale, 1 and 2 are reserved for known Municipal or Provincial historical resources of great value, 3 is designated to spaces that have a greater potential for cultural or historic resources.

For comparison, the UNESCO World Heritage Site Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo-Jump has an HRV of 3 for most of its site and Writing-on-Stone's petroglyphs have an HRV of 3.

REVIEWING THE CASE FOR THE EPCOR SOLAR FARM

From supporters of the project, much was also made about the site being previously disturbed, farmed over and part of Epcor's private holdings dating back years. These are the usual refrains used to depreciate the land, and sell the idea of "no greater damage" so common when it comes to bulldozing Indigenous heritage sites, again and again. But we know that archaeological resources exist below the depth of a plow, and that the land was not always part of Epcor's holdings.

To try and quell some concerns, City Council also asked that this project be deemed essential, and that it could not exist in any other place. To support this designation, the lack of solar projects in Alberta was touted as a justification. The lack of green energy speaks more to a failure in policy and resourcing, not a successful project proposal.

We were told that Edmonton is so far behind places like Tokyo in solar, conveniently obscuring the green and parkspace that puts us ahead. Why create unrealistic and inappropriate comparisons?

We also heard that a new agreement with Enoch would allow them access to lands that were removed from their possession over 100 years ago. This could have been achieved without the solar farm and/or with it in another location. But, while we're on the subject of land back, I can think of a few more restitution projects.

Lastly, another supposed benefit of the project is that it will avoid ongoing excavations, but this is just a matter of semantics. Rather than digging holes, the proponent has chosen to drive pilings directly into the ancient campsites beneath. Pilings which, according to its own experts, may fail due to the cobbling on the site.

FUTURE EDMONTON

Is it worth it? Must Indigenous history, heritage, culture and sacred sites remain off-limits for years more in order for a utility company to save money? Should archaeologists, experts and engineers be able to applaud themselves for getting a project approved that may destroy a place in the River Valley that has been proven to be occupied for a minimum of 9,000 years?

This was a sad day for Edmonton and Epcor, and our only reprieve is that future generations seize the opportunity we just ignored. For when they eventually protect this site as culturally significant, one that could rewrite history books, we will only be remembered as the people who destroyed much of it for power.

IMAGE SOURCE: [LISTING OF HISTORIC RESOURCES](#)