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# New highrise on the horizon

## Geotechnical testing begins on vacant lot downtown

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*A tower that would change the landscape of downtown Winnipeg could soon rise just a stone's throw from Portage and Main.* Photo Store

A surface parking lot on prime downtown real estate is finally poised to become a highrise tower, potentially with a hotel chain as the major occupant.

Earlier this week, heavy machinery and construction fencing appeared on the property formally known

as 416 Main St., a vacant lot that sits immediately north of the 201 Portage Avenue office tower.

Situated within barricade-jumping distance of Portage & Main, this undeveloped parcel has long been eyed as an ideal site for a highrise building. Geotechnical testing began this week as a prelude to the potential construction of a tower known to the Winnipeg development community as "Project W."

The 23,000-square-foot lot is owned by Asper Tower, Inc. and controlled by Creswin Properties, lawyer David Asper's development firm. Although work is underway -- and visible to passersby -- there is no deal to build on the property just yet, Creswin president Dan Edwards said in a statement.

"The purpose of this drilling is to allow us to better define construction budgets as they relate to foundation work that will be necessary as part of any new building. While we are not yet in a position to make any definitive announcements, this is an important step as we move to finalize our development process," Edwards said.

"We have been exploring development opportunities for this property for a long while now. As you might expect, we have been patient to ensure the right kind of development, given the significance of this site."

Should a deal be concluded, the Westin hotel chain or an affiliated brand is expected to be the major occupant, according to sources in the development industry as well as at city hall.

The nearby Fairmont Hotel on Portage Avenue East was once a Westin property.

Sources pegged the height of the tower at 22 to 27 storeys, depending on whether office tenants sign on to the project.

Winnipeg's construction industry has the capacity to build such a tower, even as other major projects proceed, said Ron Hambley, executive vice-president of the Winnipeg Construction Association.

Major projects underway include the Centrepoint office-hotel development north of Portage Avenue, the expansion of the Health Sciences Centre campus, the redevelopment of the Canad Inns Stadium site and the construction of the Heritage Landing apartment tower on Assiniboine Avenue.

The Winnipeg Convention Centre expansion and the construction of D Condos, also on Assiniboine Avenue, are within weeks of commencing. All of these projects could proceed simultaneously without adverse impacts on the construction industry, Hambley said.

"We would be very careful at scheduling so certain trades wouldn't overlap, but I think the capacity is there for several large buildings at once," he said.

Other major projects are possible down the road. Longboat Development Corporation, the company behind the Centrepoint development, has medium-term plans to build two office buildings and a plaza on the surface lot southwest of the MTS Centre.

Toronto's Fortress Real Developments has expressed interest in building a tower at the former Winnipeg Tribune site on Graham Avenue -- a surface lot the firm does not own.

What may be missing from this puzzle are surface-lot development incentives promised by Mayor Sam Katz during the 2010 civic-election campaign.

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## CAN WE BUILD THEM? YES WE CAN

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MAJOR construction projects underway or close to starting in Winnipeg:

- **Winnipeg Convention Centre:** The \$200-million expansion across York Avenue is expected to commence once Stuart Olson Dominion completes work on Investors Group Field.
- **Health Sciences Centre:** The province is conducting approximately \$200 million of work across the campus, including the construction of a new energy plant, women's hospital and diagnostics building.
- **Centrepont:** Longboat Development Corporation is transforming part of the city block bounded by Portage Avenue, Hargrave Street and Donald Street into a \$75-million office, hotel and parkade complex. If green-lit, the Glass House condo development would add another \$20 million to the project scope.
- **Heritage Landing on Assiniboine:** Crystal Developers is in the midst of building a \$45-million apartment tower on Assiniboine Avenue.
- **D Condos:** Sandhu Developments will soon begin the \$30-million construction of a condo tower on the former Restaurant Dubrovnik site on the Assiniboine River.
- **Stadium redevelopment:** A partnership between Cadillac Fairview and Shindico is demolishing Canad Inns Stadium and planning to build a stand-alone Target store in the northwest corner of the former stadium site.

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