

Mural only one aspect of ambitious Spirit Way

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THE 10-storey-high Robert Bateman wolf mural is stealing all the thunder in Thompson's ambitious Spirit Way project.

But the northern Manitoba mining town is thinking of even bigger ways to exploit its wealth of artistic natural resources.

Among them are plans for a huge rock-face sculpture one-third the size of South Dakota's Mount Rushmore.

As well, Spirit Way organizers are trying to drum up support for a post-secondary school of aboriginal art they hope would attract students and tourists from across Canada, the U.S. and beyond.

"We have no shortage of talented artists," said Spirit Way spokesman Volker Beckmann, who was in Winnipeg earlier this week to meet with the province's deputy culture minister, Ann Ryan.

"They need the marketing and business skills to take what they do for a hobby and turn it into a career."

Spirit Way is the overall name for a two-kilometre walking trail that will feature 18 points of interest to northern tourists. In development for more than two years, the project is just now taking shape.

By next summer, when Thompson celebrates its 50th anniversary, 14 of the Spirit Way attractions should be complete. The Bateman mural, which recently attracted a \$125,000 cheque from Manitoba Hydro, is slated for completion on the side of an apartment tower by Sept. 9.

Beckmann, who owns a graphic design business, says that several universities and colleges offer courses in aboriginal art, but the nearest dedicated school is in Santa Fé, N.M.

"Our idea is not just a school for aboriginals," he says. "It's a school specializing in aboriginal art."

The bricks and mortar, he believes, could already be in place. There is a restaurant and bar complex perfectly situated on the north end of the Spirit Way course overlooking the Burntwood River.

It could be sold shortly, but the nine-member Spirit Way committee wants to raise \$75,000 for a feasibility study for the complex's use as an art school.

They have been busy lobbying officials in both the North and South. They envision the school taking three to five years to complete, and it may seek affiliation with the recently opened University College of the North.

The committee is seeking proposals for the rock-face sculpture, the largest of its kind in Canada, which they would like to begin by 2006.

Thompson, whose population has grown back to 15,000 after years of decline, is feeling its oats these days. The town's main employer, the Inco nickel mine, has announced a major expansion, and Manitoba Hydro is moving forward on its massive Wuskwatim hydroelectric dam.

Travel Manitoba, Beckmann says, has indicated that Spirit Way could become a "Manitoba Star Attraction," the top designation for a tourism site.

Northern Manitoba has three star attractions: Churchill Polar Bear Tours, Pisew Falls, an hour south of Thompson, and the Sam Waller Museum in The Pas.

A fourth in Thompson would be a boon to private tour operators.

"This is not a concept any more," Beckmann says. "Now it's real."