

On February 1, 2006, Burlington College's Institute for Civic Engagement hosted a panel of citizens involved in the ongoing debate over the future of the vacant Moran Generating Plant on the Burlington Waterfront. This space has been preserved with tenacious advocacy by concerned citizens and city planners from wealthy developers, private interest groups, and supporters of developments that would change this public space into an exclusive place of business or real estate.

Some would describe the Moran Plant, located on the northern section of the Waterfront, as an eye-sore, a hulking relic from Burlington's industrial past, or even a hazard to the health and safety of the surrounding neighborhoods. Whatever your feelings on the aesthetics of this unused space, the Moran Plant is serving no functional purpose for the community and the talks and planning around its future use need to move forward.

The panelists at Burlington College reviewed some of the plans that have been proposed and rejected in the past. This included the controversial 2005 plan for housing a new YMCA in the Moran Plant. The citizens of Burlington ultimately sided against the plan for a variety of reasons, including concerns about the Young Men's Christian Association's religious affiliations, the threat of increased volume of traffic and parking, and issues of economic exclusion (high membership dues). There were also those who would rather see a hotel or more profitable entity located on the Moran site. However, the Public Trust Doctrine places limitations on what kinds of uses would be allowed on this city-owned land.

The origins of the public trust doctrine in Burlington came about in the late 1980's when citizens were embroiled in responding to the "Alden Plan," a proposal for high-priced hotels and condominiums on the Waterfront. Attorney, Rick Sharp was present on the panel to recap the public trust battle that was won in a Vermont Supreme Court decision in 1989. This decision gave the people, through the City, power over the legislature concerning the authority (zoning and contractually) for approved uses of public land.

Another panelist, Michael Monte of CEDO (Community & Economic Development Office) offered information on allowed public trust usages, and a breakdown of the property. In 1985, the Waterfront was divided into public and private-use, leaving the land to the west of the railroad tracks (closer to the water), from Main St. through the North 40, as public trust land. A portion of this, north of the Moran Plant, has been held specifically for future generations, undeveloped, as the Urban Reserve.

Public trust land can only be used in ways that have been approved by the legislature. Until 1999 these uses included: railroad, wharfing, and storage. Surprisingly, a public park was not one of the allowed uses. Now the allowed uses have been expanded to include recreational, educational, governmental, and cultural.

The other two panelists at this discussion represented opposing factions concerning the future use of the Moran Plant. Morris Mahoney, local teacher and community activist, argued for the destruction of the Moran Plant, with the City putting up \$1.5 million for the removal. This option would, in theory, turn the area into green open-space, securing the North Forty from development, and keeping parking and traffic levels to a minimum.

Manni Leoni, architect, presented a plea that attempted to summon historic, aesthetic, and empathetic feelings towards the building itself. He argued that with present-day zoning laws on height restrictions, this volume of space would never again be available to us on the Waterfront, and that the \$1.5 million would be better used to renovate the building for future use.

What would this future use be? Unfortunately, little clarity is being offered to the public as we attempt to make up our minds on this question. The public was surveyed in 2005 and asked to give input on our preference for future development of the Moran Plant. Planners categorized these into choices such as “Marine/Sailing Center” and “Recreation Center”. On the ballot March 7th, the public will be asked if they would rather tear down the Moran Plant, leave it standing, or leave it standing depending on the intended use. The vague choices for intended use will be voted on from a scale of 1-5, indicating the level of your agreement with that option. Sound a little confusing?

The public needs to be given specific estimates for tax dollar commitments, firm descriptions of the proposed renovations and required secondary accommodations to weigh the possible advantages and disadvantages to our community—in short, we need clear and consistent choices, based on educated analysis.

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