

History made Monday night  
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What is the sound of history being made? Often it is imperceptible; the moment passes, without hardly a notice. That is quite probably what happened on Monday night at a special meeting of city council, called to discuss the future of Medicine Hat's electric generation utility.

The matter stemmed from numerous comments made during last October's municipal election debates. Several would-be aldermen questioned the effectiveness of Medicine Hat maintaining its own utilities in such an uncertain marketplace. How can we continue to compete with the larger players, they asked. Perhaps it is time to sell off the utilities and use the profits to purchase electricity and gas like every other community in Alberta.

When the newly elected council gathered, they realized that the door had been opened on a volatile issue, one which they were not entirely confident they understood. "There is a great deal of uncertainty in the community about where we are going," cautioned Alderman Graham Kelly.

So, on Monday night, a small audience gathered in council chambers to listen to independent consultant Larry Charach present a primer on the future of Medicine Hat's electric generation. And a fine job he did.

Charach reviewed the history of the utility, reminding his audience that Medicine Hat began generating electricity in 1910 using diesel fuel. With charts and graphs he clearly defined the "Medicine Hat advantage," comparing various Alberta market rates to those charged in Medicine Hat, and he offered alternatives for the future that pointed the way to both survival and success in the marketplace.

In the end, he eloquently answered the most important question of the night, simply and to the point. "Are we doing a good job for our customers?" queried Alderman Ted Clugston.

"Yes," replied Charach.

That, you see, is the concern on the minds of Medicine Hat voters.

Are we getting good value for our tax dollar? Is the utility sustainable? Is there really an advantage to living in Medicine Hat? These are all related questions, but the central concern lies in that age-old question: Are we doing a good job for our customers?

Charach made recommendations for maximizing the output of the electric utility, not the least of which was a reaffirmation of the plan to replace two aging generators with a new LM6000 turbine. This decision to upgrade the system at a cost of about \$50-million was made last year and has been ratified by the province's regulatory body.

Charach also cleared up questions regarding the environmental benefits of using natural gas to produce electricity and the effectiveness of using wind turbines as a power source. Councillors even questioned him about the viability of hydroelectric power, should a dam be constructed in the region.

Alderman Kelly's motion, that Medicine Hat remain in the electric business for the foreseeable future, eventually won the night. "It is time to put that issue to rest," he stated.

Whether the history books recall this moment or not, that was the sound of history being made.

To comment on this column, email Barry at [bfinkelman@medicinehatnews.com](mailto:bfinkelman@medicinehatnews.com)

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