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Confidence in city boosts organizers of Centrallia

By: Martin Cash

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Strangely enough, the recent global recession has helped inject a dose of confidence in the idea that Winnipeg is a city that actually works pretty well. That's what happens when there is unemployment and economic disruption all over the place, and relative calm at home.

So now when there are discussions about CentrePort, for instance, people seem more inclined to talk about how it will work, rather than why it won't work.

That sense of confidence and enthusiasm about Winnipeg's place in the world is behind the organizers of Centrallia, a global small business forum taking place in Winnipeg in October 2010.

It was conceived of as an economic development event that can capitalize on and become part of Manitoba Homecoming 2010 festivities.

Centrallia will be the first anglo-North American event held in association with Futurallia, a French-based organization that has been holding intense international business-to-business speed-dating events all over the world for 20 years.

The idea to hold an event in Winnipeg was the brainchild of Mariette Mulaire, the energetic head of ANIM (Agence Nationale et Internaitonale du Manitoba).

ANIM, which is only a couple of years old, is effectively the province's subcontracted francophone trade development agency. With financial support from the province, it helps establish more links for Manitoba businesses throughout the francophone world.

Mulaire has been to Futurallia events and led a delegation of Manitoba businesses to one in Quebec City in 2008 as part of that city's 400th anniversary.

"When I go to trade shows and meet with business around the world encouraging them to come to Manitoba, they ask me what would be a good event for them to attend," she said.

Centrallia will be an excellent reason for small- and medium-sized enterprises from around the world to

come to Winnipeg next year.

Mulaire has already enlisted the support of all of the key Manitoba business groups. She has rounded up financial support to organize the event -- the \$1 million price-tag is an indication of the size and scope of the undertaking -- and is building momentum for the year-long task of securing delegates from around the world.

The magic formula of the event is getting hundreds of business people in the same room sitting across from each other in scheduled one-to-one pitches.

Centrallia has licensed Futurallia's unique match-making software that links compatible businesses to each other and then schedules meetings. Organizers are planning for 500 delegates (and hoping for 1,000), with about one-third of them from the region.

Centrallia will hold a kick-off event Oct. 20 when it might also announce a big name keynote speaker.

Among other things, it is seen as an opportunity to bring a lot of business people to Winnipeg so that they may advance their own self-interest and at the same time put Winnipeg on the global business map.

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Loren Cisyk, IBM's Winnipeg territory manager, has been selected as one of only 17 Canadians to participate in IBM's Corporate Service Corp, thought of as the company's Peace Corps.


Next month Cisyk will travel to Chengdu, China (co-incidentally, a sister-city to Winnipeg), to participate with nine other IBM colleagues from around the world in a four-week project advising Chengdu small businesses about becoming part of the global marketplace.

It is a feather in Cisyk's cap just to get chosen to go and will add further sheen to IBM's 550-person strong Winnipeg operation that already does plenty of work for clients all over the world.

martin.cash@freepress.mb.ca

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