

# Powerplant? More like Power-can't!



VICTOR VARGAS

The Powerplant is in big trouble. It was a surprise in the 2001/02 year when the Powerplant lost \$8612. In 2005 it was a shock that the Students' Union budgeted a \$30 000 deficit for running the Powerplant—until they posted a \$173 495 loss at the end of the year. But as of 31 December, 2006 the Powerplant is losing a breathtaking \$209 807, with four months left on the fiscal year to experience an even bigger hit. With such a large loss in the cards, the SU is being realistic about this year's financial forecast.

"Will [these changes] turn it around, no. Will it stop the floodgates, so to speak ... I'm hoping so," SU Vice-President (Operations and Finance) Chris Cunningham says.

At first glance, running the Powerplant as a profitable business shouldn't be that complicated. Students like drinking, eating and watching live music. Any bar on campus should be a licence to print money, yet somehow consecutive student governments have promised to make the Powerplant profitable only to fail again and again, making it as puzzling as trying to find a class in the Biological Sciences building.

But this failure can't be due to a lack of imagination on the part of the Students' Union. No other student government has attempted a plan as ambitious as taking the Powerplant and dividing it into three businesses: a buffet, a bar and a coffee shop. Stopping short of adding a massage parlor to the 'Plant, the SU has tried some pretty inventive strategies this year. But though it was an imaginative idea, so far it's failed horribly. Since September, the buffet alone managed to lose \$76 067 while the coffee shop lost a modest \$21 669, with the bar coming out the best by only losing \$7244. Add in depressing summer losses, and the straights are dire indeed.

In response, the Student's Union has eliminated the dinner buffet and alcoholic drinks on Monday

through Wednesday. As Chris Cunningham explains, the dinner buffet simply wasn't bringing in the people needed to make it justifiable, and the \$50 000 rent reduction at the expense of mid-week liquor sales was great decision because not only would it cut costs, but any lost business would be soaked up by RATT.

Despite these changes, Cunningham believes that the Powerplant is still headed for a loss this fiscal year. While the new buffet policy and savings on the Powerplant rent may help stop the loss of money, it will by no means solve the problem that the 'Plant is still deep in the red.

In the meantime, the employees of the Powerplant have had to adapt to these rapid changes. When asked about how he feels about the workers whom were affected by the changes, Cunningham says he "would not touch that question with a 16-foot pole"; but SU President Samantha Power notes that the affected employees concerned her greatly, and that she has worked for more students to be employed by the Students' Union. Regardless, several workers risk losing their jobs or are working nights where tips are becoming scarcer and scarcer. And as many of them are students, this is the last thing they need.

But it's not as if dissatisfied workers are a major part of the Powerplant's failure, anyway. As much as people complain about the 'Plant's service and food, it's really on par with RATT most of the time. Considering how undermanned they are and that the space is so much larger, they tend to do a decent job. Even the buffet food is now better than most buffets—the SU was even benevolent enough to use real potatoes.

No, the biggest problem for the 'Plant is the atmosphere. RATT has a beautiful view of campus and downtown, TVs constantly showing the best of sports, and runs successful events like Oilers hockey nights and karaoke Wednesdays. In contrast, the Powerplant feels like the land hope forgot, with its long shadows and endless rows of empty seats, it quickly gives patrons the eerie, dreadful sense that a guy with a machete will jump out of the shadows and scream, "God Is Dead!"

Let's face it, you could have the most charismatic and competent staff in the universe at the Powerplant, but it'll still feel like a Freddy Krueger movie. Its only claim over RATT right now is

that it's set for bands to jam it out. But with the Powerplant's attendance continuing to drop, this is clearly not enough.

While the SU is brainstorming some new ideas to reinvigorate the Powerplant, the financial situation, according to Cunningham, will necessitate that Students' Council will have to make some tough decisions. Unfortunately, SU's options are becoming increasingly limited.

But as Power points out, should Students' Council rescind on the lease and give the Powerplant back to the University, there's no guarantee the SU could ever regain control. And with the University's incredible thirst for more and more space, the Powerplant could easily become the "Ralph Klein Memorial Building."

Instead, Power hopes her initiatives to turn the Powerplant into "Student Lounge" space like SUB may be an answer.

"Students are no longer looking for bar space, they are looking for student space ... to interact like SUB space downstairs. We are in a process of figuring out how we can best utilize the [Powerplant's] space for students," Power says.

Still despite her efforts, she admits that to make the 'Plant into more of a student space it would still require drastic changes.

Regardless, something needs to be done, and this should be one of the top issues on candidates' platforms in the upcoming student elections. The Powerplant is costing students \$209 807 and counting. That money could easily have gone to the Access Fund, the Campus Food Bank, or even scholarship opportunities to help students in need. Plus, students are losing their jobs over this, and despite the booming Alberta economy, it's hard to find a job that will pay well and fit within a class schedule.

I don't have the answers to how the Powerplant can be turned around. So I suggest that you, the students, should make a pilgrimage to the iconic Powerplant and think of your own ideas of how to save this building. Take a look around, and while you're at it, e-mail your thoughts to the Students' Union and the Gateway. At this point, either we engage in vigorous conversation about how to resuscitate a terminally ill business, or just shoot it between the eyes and be done with it.

**'PLANT WOES**

Powerplant profits (and loses) since the SU has assumed control

1997/98	\$43 090
1998/99	\$131 616
1999/00	\$98 223
2000/01	\$50 872
2001/02	\$-8612
2002/03	\$-21 659
2003/04	\$-42 074
2004/05	\$-58 524
2005/06	\$-173 495



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