

JAMES: Full disclosure needed on museum decision

[Elizabeth James](#) / Contributing writer

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Just
ASKING
Elizabeth James



"IT'S REAL. The City of North Vancouver has approved the project and has made a generous gift-matching commitment of \$5 million. Your generous contribution will be matched dollar for dollar by the City of North Vancouver."
– Brochure, North Vancouver Museum and Archives

Question: When is a commitment not a commitment? Answer: When fund-raisers for the new museum at The Shipyards fell short of their goal and gave Mayor Darrell Mussatto and Couns. Holly Back, Linda Buchanan and Craig Keating the excuse they needed to kill the project during the Jan. 25 meeting of council.

The background: At its regular meeting July 9, 2012, City of North Vancouver council unanimously endorsed a motion that approved in principle a design concept for a new museum at the Pipe Shop on Lot 4 of the Pier Development.

Council also approved \$75,000 from the Civic Amenity Fund for the purpose of funding the next steps in the planning process.

Lastly, the motion directed museum staff to report on a business plan predicting operating costs and revenues, preliminary exhibit design work, follow-up architectural work and a fundraising plan.

As the project evolved over three years, NVMA met all of the city's provisions bar one: **with the province yet to confirm its contribution, the museum's 17-month fund-raising campaign fell short of its target by 10.8 per cent.**

Put another way, in a tough economy and ending at a time when potential donors were busy with Christmas holiday spending, for the museum to raise more than \$3.9 million over and above the city's "commitment" was a remarkable achievement — especially when the provincial contribution had yet to be confirmed.

After money, time and effort expended, would it have hurt council to extend the Dec. 31 deadline by three months to allow NVMA to do two things: bring in the additional funds and, importantly, address statements made in a BDO Canada report to council.

Before continuing this saga, I should say that, in my opinion, a common way for politicians to kill a project is to study it to death. So after NVMA had already commissioned expert opinion from Lord Cultural Resources — an internationally renowned museum-planning firm that includes fiscal and fiduciary considerations in its reviews and recommendations — why council needed to finance yet another report from BDO is beyond me.

Suffice it to say that, in her Jan. 29, 2016 response to BDO's Feasibility Review of New Museum Business Plans, museum director Nancy Kirkpatrick refutes one of the underpinnings to the report, namely that the new museum should be expected to make a "commercial case" for its existence.

In fact, as you can see from the American Alliance of Museums at aam-us.org, although most museums are, by nature, non-profit entities, the direct and indirect contributions they make to their communities are invaluable.

The alliance states, "Museums employ more than 400,000 Americans and directly contribute \$21 billion to the U.S. economy each year and billions more through indirect spending by their visitors ..." And further, that "Governments ... find that for every \$1 invested in museums and other cultural organizations, \$7 are returned in tax revenues."

In the case of the proposed new museum at The Shipyards, archives and ongoing exhibitions would not only inform our histories, its interactive and educational displays would enliven our appreciation of the North Shore communities in which we live and also expand students' understanding of the society they will inherit.

One aspect of the new museum I had not thought of until I began this story is that its obvious tourism potential mirrors in many ways that of the hugely successful Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria. Although the Royal benefits financially from being a Crown corporation, its other characteristics apply equally to a new North Shore museum located exactly where it was planned — in the historic Pipe Shop.

As a tourist attraction and as a community amenity, a museum on that site would be perfectly situated near a transportation hub and within walking distance of Lower Lonsdale shopping, restaurants and accommodations.

So, where lies the real problem for Mayor Mussatto — or for Coun. Keating who made the motion to kill the Pipe Shop proposal? Is it that they didn't like the idea of a project jointly run by the city and district? Did Pinnacle not want the new museum as a neighbour? Are city coffers short of the \$5-million "commitment"? Or is it simply that the mayor and his supporters on council have a more lucrative development in mind for the site?

As is often the case, what is needed here is full disclosure — disclosure that could have been revealed in the course of a North Vancouver-wide referendum on the matter. What we also need to hear loud and clear are the fully informed reactions to the news from District of North Vancouver council and the First Nations whose history would form a vital part of a museum at The Shipyards.

This is written with my best wishes to director Nancy Kirkpatrick and the NVMA team — don't give up; your work, expertise and donors deserved so much more respect than they received.

After 16 years with the multi-disciplinary Perinatal Programme of B.C. and later in various endeavours in the growing high-tech industry, Elizabeth James now connects the dots every second Wednesday on local, regional and provincial issues. Email her at rimco@shaw.ca (<mailto:rimco@shaw.ca>).

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