

North Vancouver waterfront museum plans are history

Funds raised fall short of target, council votes down proposal

Justin Beddall / North Shore News

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An artist's rendering shows the Pipe Shop directly behind the performance stage at Shipbuilders' Square. The Shipyards are recognized as a primary heritage site in the City of North Vancouver heritage inventory. image supplied

A week after breaking ground for the new Presentation House Gallery at the foot of Lonsdale, City of North Vancouver council has voted down plans for a new museum inside the nearby Pipe Shop building at the Shipyards.

The decision came Monday after a closed-door session with the museum's capital campaign organizers.

In July 2013, the North Vancouver Museum and Archives received conditional approval from council to develop a museum at the Shipyards provided that they raise \$5 million by Dec. 31, 2015. The city pledged to match contributions up to \$5 million if the target was met.

Campaign chair Don Evans and other members of the team sat glumly in the back row of the gallery as council debated the museum's fate publicly after the in-camera session.

As of Dec. 31, the drive had reached 83 per cent of its target and currently it has two major corporate donations reaching final approval stages which would add \$600,000 to the total.

Still, some council members weren't convinced as to the viability of the project, which was planned as an interactive cultural history museum.

Coun. Craig Keating said the biggest factor in his decision was the BDO Canada report to council last year that "advised council that even were the monies to be raised on the capital side of the project there was a very high probability that this would not be a successful enterprise in terms of financial problems going forward. This in my mind was very sobering news. ... They brought forward these recommendations in terms of business case."

The council-endorsed Central Waterfront Development Plan for Lot 5 development, created by destination marketing expert Roger Brooks, included the museum.

"Roger Brooks, remember him?" said Coun. Rod Clark, "the American who came into town and juiced us up about Site 5 at the waterfront? Roger Brooks said the Pipe Shop and museum would be a good thing."

Clark introduced a motion to defer a museum decision until after the fundraising team could make a public

presentation to council. "Far too much has gone on in the back room there and it needs to come out in the public and then we will see who stands by the museum and who does not," said Clark.

Clark's motion was defeated, with Couns. Pam Bookham and Don Bell voting in favour of the delay, while Mayor Mussatto and Couns. Linda Buchanan, Holly Back and Keating voting against it.

Clark then abruptly left the council chambers.

The original motion – to not support the concept plan with staff reporting back to council with possible options for the relocation of the museum – was then voted on and passed 4-2, with Couns. Bell and Bookham in opposition.

"I think this is the wrong step for the council to take in terms of the interest of the community," said Bell. "I think the opportunities that exist by having the museum located in the Pipe Shop are substantial and they support council's desire to see something exciting happen down in the Shipyards area."

Bell took issue with some comparisons made in the BDO report.

"I think the BDO report was in my opinion a poor assessment of the revenue risk. The comparisons to the Storyeum which was really a theatrical venture in Vancouver that was not a museum, and the comparison with the Vancouver Museum, that is a museum in an out-of-the-way location and it's an old, traditional museum. We're talking about a different concept here."

Bookham lamented the continued loss of heritage at the site. "Instead we have basically reduced the historical imprint of that site to the name The Shipyards. I think it is a great failure of the imagination."

Although a new museum won't be on the waterfront, a search for a new home will continue.

"We will look at options for a new home," said Buchanan. "But at this time I cannot support something that has very clear indications that it will come back to be a large cost and financial burden on the City of North Vancouver."

Mussatto thanked the campaign organizers for their diligent efforts but noted, "what was a clincher was the BDO study. The BDO study made some observations that they felt had to be said... that was a big flag for me."

Reached after the meeting, Evans expressed his disappointment over council's decision. "We felt we were were so close to the target that it would just make sense to finish the job and get on with it," said Evans.

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