

# Daphne Bramham: Plug pulled on \$10-million North Vancouver Museum

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 17, 2016

true



An artist's concept of the proposed North Vancouver Museum on the Lonsdale waterfront, which was recently deemed "too risky" by city council.

**Photograph by:** Handout, Vancouver Sun

It's a good thing Vancouver is pretty because other than scenery there's sure not much else to look at.

Glaringly absent in this metropolitan region with its presumptions of greatness are museums. Of course, UBC's Museum of Anthropology is spectacular. But beyond it, most museums across the region simply do the best they can in cramped quarters and usually in out-of-the way locations.

North Vancouver promised to buck that trend with its renaissance plans that included a museum as well as an art gallery on vacated shipyard lands along the waterfront.

Shovel-wielding politicians from the three levels of government proudly dug in last month to mark the construction start of the \$12.25 million Polygon Gallery, which will be the new home of Presentation House. The federal, provincial and municipal governments had provided \$2.5 million each, while the rest came from private donations.

But, less than two weeks later, city council pulled the rug out from under the proposed \$10-million North Vancouver Museum, which was to have been a regional attraction with interactive exhibits and artifacts displayed in a restored shipyard building just a few steps from the art gallery.

The numbers simply didn't add up, says Mayor Darrell Mussatto. He echoed the conclusion of the accountants at BDO Canada, who were hired by the city to review the plans for the museum. They pronounced the project "too risky to contemplate" and "no commercial case" to be made.

One of the accountants' touchstones was the failed Storyeum — a private, quasi-museum and theatrical experience that lasted less than two years in Gastown.

The other was the Museum of Vancouver, which had an operating loss of \$82,000 in 2014 on a

\$2.1-million budget even with increased attendance and an 18-per-cent jump in membership.

Because of the dearth of a good history museum to draw a comparison with, the accountants concluded: "It is very difficult to get a historic museum profitable in Vancouver."

And far from believing that if you build it they will come, council agreed.

When museum fundraisers came up \$1 million shy of the \$5 million needed to get the city's matching funds, council in a secret and split vote took away the museum's promised spot in the city-owned Pipe Shop.

Instead, the city will spend some money adding heating and washrooms to the 10,000-square-foot heritage building and try to maximize rental revenue that last year brought in close to \$350,000.

Museum supporters rightly point out that the accountants' and the city's conclusions were based on the faulty premise that public museums must not only break even, but generate profits.

They rightly note that it's a rare museum that doesn't have an annual operating deficit, which is why most are non-profits that do various forms of fundraising throughout the year.

But what the museum supporters seem to have been too polite to mention is that government-supported sports and convention facilities rarely have to pass the same rigorous financial hoops as museums.

The B.C. government paid \$514 million for new roof on BC Place even though it has never and likely will never break even or turn a profit. The same is true for the \$883-million Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre and the millions more spent on other 2010 Winter Olympics infrastructure.

Those were deemed to be investments, justified on the basis of their spinoff benefits.

Yet, nowhere in the BDO analysis of the North Vancouver museum were spinoff benefits acknowledged. This is despite the fact that a regional museum flanked by a highly regarded art gallery along the North Shore waterfront would likely have made it even more attractive for people to take a SeaBus ride across the harbour and spend time at adjacent restaurants and shops at Lonsdale Quay.

Mussatto, who was a longtime proponent of the museum at the shipyard, insists he remains committed to finding it a new home on or near the water. But he also pointed out that it's unfair to place the blame solely on the city.

It had been willing to provide the Pipe Shop at no cost, \$5 million in capital costs and annual operating grants of \$500,000.

The provincial government, he said, didn't give a single nickel.

Had it provided the \$1 million that the museum asked for, we might have been treated to another spectacle of politicians at the end of shovels.

But that didn't happen. Once again, preserving and celebrating local history isn't judged to be worth the investment.

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