

Council approves art gallery move

Destination centre includes expanded theatre

BY DAVID HUTTON, THE STARPHOENIX DECEMBER 1, 2009



City council has sculpted its vision for the anchor public site at River Landing with an art gallery and an expanded Persephone Theatre forming the foundation of what was trumpeted Monday night as a signature building. The expansion will wrap around Persephone Theatre, occupying the space between the building and the freeway, currently used as parking

Photograph by: Greg Pender, StarPhoenix file photo

City council has sculpted its vision for the anchor public site at River Landing with an art gallery and an expanded Persephone Theatre forming the foundation of what was trumpeted Monday night as a signature building.

The 90-minute council debate ended with all but one councillor approving the civic administration's recommendations, meaning the Mendel Art Gallery will officially move into the destination centre at River Landing in 2014.

The \$58-million destination centre will include the Art Gallery of Saskatchewan, an atrium, gift shop, dressing rooms, adaptable community studio, restaurant and lecture theatre, and an expansion to Persephone Theatre's backstage stage.

Mayor Don Atchison answered what he termed "serious allegations" that the city guided the process of the move of the Mendel Art Gallery to River Landing, not the other way around.

"Did the city approach the Mendel or did the Mendel approach the city?" Atchison asked Mendel board chair Art Knight.

"The gallery came to the realization that this wasn't going to work at the current location," Knight said.

"We had some stinging advice . . . that (the renovation) wasn't going to fly.

"We said, by unanimous vote, let's seize this opportunity."

"I wanted to make sure we had that understood," Atchison said.

"There have been some totally not accurate or factual allegations made."

"I'm not a pawn, I'm a knight," Knight said to laughter.

The city received dozens of letters urging them to "save the Mendel," including pleas from Camille and Chip Mitchell, Fred Mendel's grandchildren, to postpone the vote until the family could speak to council.

Former city councillor Lenore Swystun raised questions about the process that brought about the move of the Mendel to River Landing and the lack of public consultation and transparency in the decision making.

"The public has had very little input into this," she said.

". . . I guess the shovel has been passed," Swystun said, "and that's interesting because this is the first time it's come to the public's attention."

The provincial government is contributing \$17 million in total to the project, including \$4 million initially slated for the expansion of the Mendel gallery, and the federal government will contribute \$13 million.

The city will borrow \$12.9 million over 10 years starting in 2011 toward the destination centre and build a \$7-million parkade.

Knight announced local lawyer Doug Hodson will chair the \$8-million capital fundraising campaign for the art gallery.

Coun. Pat Lorje, the only councillor to vote against the civic administration's recommendations, raised concerns about the potential fallout from the "controversy" that surrounds the project leading to a lack of fundraising capability, particularly since Persephone will also be looking to expand simultaneously.

In her comments, she said the lack of consultation may lead to unforeseen costs and impacts.

"I'm not the enemy in all of this," she said. "But my job as a city councillor is to ask difficult questions. We have to have our eyes open and our willingness to share this project and to discuss it with others wide open, otherwise it's not going to succeed.

". . . This project already has some controversy surrounding it and there are many people in this community who have questions about it.

"But let's figure out how to make this a winning situation."

"I'm quite confident that the city will step forward once again to support this project," Hodson said. "An 8-million contribution is quite a fair contribution and is an achievable target."

Persephone Theatre board chair Douglas Richardson said he met last week with Knight and struck a working group with their future neighbours.

"We don't want to build a facility that won't be used," he said.

The Mendel Art Gallery building will be vacated and in need of a new tenant at the end of 2014, with the Meewasin Valley Authority the front-runner to move into the building.

The process for finding a tenant will be determined by the city in the coming year, council was told.

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