

LONDON COMMUNITY NEWS

May 2015 Column by Gord Hume

The public debate about a new Performing Arts Centre for London is quietly rearing its head. Again.

I still have scars from some past debates. I was an advocate then, and remain one now, that a good community facility to celebrate and enhance the performing arts is a positive step for London. Many people disagree, including a number on previous City Councils. It is more difficult today after the demise of Orchestra London.

For thirty years or more London has fumbled this debate. A lot of very good people spent time, money and effort only to see the project come to naught. Some potential large donations have been lost as community leaders and philanthropists interested in the project have died; their estates have been split amongst kids who no longer live in or care about London. The new generation of entrepreneurs and business leaders don't seem to be as invested in this community.

There is a reasoned argument to be made that such a centre would move London forward, and that in the 21st century things that enhance our quality of life as a city pay off in helping to attract graduates, entrepreneurs, job-creators and the next generation of community leaders, investors and new residents. We need more growth in London.

But to appeal to the community, such a facility has to recognize the changing entertainment tastes of the public. It needs to be flexible. Modern. Adaptable.

Pretty much all great performance centres have been controversial, and most of them go over budget.

The Sydney Opera House, a magnificent structure that has eight different performance areas of various sizes, is now recognized around the world as that city's iconic symbol. It was born in controversy, however—the ultimate design was plucked from the garbage bin by a late-arriving member of the judging panel. The costs of the facility skyrocketed and the architect unceremoniously dumped part way through the project; he was so bitter he never saw or visited the finished facility.

Some of us were bruised when we fought to build the John Labatt Centre. But, can you imagine London today without it? When you think about the major, world-class events it has attracted, and the economic activity it has sparked, few today would argue the benefits of that project.

If London is ever going to have an adult conversation about a new performing arts centre, I have consistently said for years that there have to be certain fundamental truths put out there. The process that the last council set up was pretty much the worst possible one—pitting local cultural organizations against one another.

Let me offer some parameters on the process that I think has to happen if London is going to consider such a major project:

1. It has to be lead by City Council. Without strong municipal government leadership, no other orders of government will be supportive. Community negativity will soon capture the discussion. It takes great courage to be a champion of new public facilities.
2. It should be an architecturally-significant project. Too often local governments in recent decades have built boring, grey concrete boxes.
3. If we're going to do it, let's do it right. There was pressure to make the JLC smaller, cheaper and less appealing. Enough of us on the council of the day fought to make it larger, better and more versatile.
4. Get professionals involved. Council shouldn't run the facility, although the city will almost certainly own it. One of the best things we did was get the brilliant Brian Ohl and the people at Global Spectrum to be a partner and run the now Budweiser Gardens.
5. There will be tax-payer money needed. Large amounts. Depending on the need for land acquisition and the design, the project is probably in the \$50-100 million range. There will need to be substantial local fund-raising, perhaps in the \$15-25 million range. Support from the provincial and federal governments will only happen if and when strong local financial commitments are made. If the city council isn't prepared to put up substantial capital funding, then let's not even go through the agony of the debate again.
6. The facility could be part of a larger private-sector development project—housing, whatever—that would make the project even more attractive.
7. It has to be versatile to accommodate today's show business needs and the desires of contemporary audiences. That will take innovative design techniques and flexible operations. There should be ample provision for accommodating a variety of local performance needs.
8. There will need to be an annual operating subsidy. It is highly unlikely such a center would be a break-even proposition. They aren't in almost every other city. Again, if we're not prepared to accept that, let's not open the debate.

That's laying out the issue, London--bluntly, openly and honestly.

