



Lessons from Halifax convention centre controversy

Will Nova Scotia's spiffy new \$165-million convention centre turn out to be the over-priced, under-utilized white elephant boondoggle its many and various nattering-nabobs-of-negativism critics predict?

Or will it – as its equally fervent Pollyanna-ish proponents like to proclaim – become the open sesame to a Halifax economic renaissance, sprouting millions, perhaps billions of dollars worth of new downtown major construction project growth and regularly filling the city with cash-register-ringing convention-goers, who will magically transform themselves into big-spending post-convention families of tourists, and then repeat-visitors, and then...?

The short answer is no one knows.

We are still at that no-one-is-wrong-yet 100,000-cubic-metres-of-rock-and-stuff sucked out of a 27-metre-deep hole-in-the-ground stage. Which makes this as good a time as any to revisit the process that got us to this point and ask ourselves if we could have – should have – done anything differently.

We need to ask that question no matter who turns out to be right about the centre. If anyone ultimately does.

The convention centre, the flagship for a massive \$500 million, one-million-square-foot hotel-office-residence-commercial complex on two downtown blocks anchored by the former Halifax Herald property, was bound to be controversial.

For starters, of course, there was that perennial, oh-so-Halifax question about the havoc such a development could wreak on the view of the harbour from Citadel Hill.

Let us, for our purposes, pass lightly over that debate.

What is more interesting is the fact it was those same often mocked heritage preservationists, a rag-tag group of citizen volunteers known as the Save the View Coalition, led by a retired chemistry professor named Phil Pacey and a veteran community activist named Bev Miller, who undertook the most significant research and raised the most insightful, and troubling, questions about the project.

Trade Centre Ltd., the convention centre's chief promoters as well as its wannabe operators, submitted eight different consultants' reports to shore up their case that a new centre was desperately needed.

But it was Save the View – and not any of the dozens of federal, provincial and municipal politicians and bureaucrats who had oversight responsibilities – who pointed out how little new or old clothing the emperor was wearing. Save the View uncovered the fact that one of the supposedly arms-length studies and reports touting the centre was actually prepared by the executive director of Convention Centres of Canada, a convention industry-promoting agency. And that another in-depth assessment had been prepared, in the consultant's own words,

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“without the benefit of any primary research”.

It was also the preservationists, not the mainstream media, whose research brought to light the ongoing, North America-wide decline in the number of larger conventions of the exact sort this centre is designed to attract, and that many other cities are already building similar facilities to compete for that shrinking market.

More than a year later, in his too-late-to-have-any-impact-on-the-decision analysis of TCL's lack of analysis, Auditor General Jacques LaPointe pointed out “industry realities were ignored, including the over-supply of convention centre spaces in Canada, new competitors and the stagnant convention market.” TCL's upbeat forecasts, he told reporters, “were not really consistent with much of anything.”

None of this is to suggest the new Nova Centre, as it is now called, won't turn out to be a roaring success. Forecasting future demand in a post 9/11, Google Hangout, Skyping world, is not a science.

And Trade Centre Ltd.'s Scott Ferguson boasts his marketing sales staff have already secured five major national events at the new centre, with a sixth set to be announced this month. Those conventions include the Canadian Library Association whose 1,500 delegates, he says, “could not be properly accommodated in the current facility.” The new convention centre is scheduled to open in January 2016.

Ferguson is not the only one bullish about the new centre. Steve Snider, the CEO of the Halifax Dartmouth Bridge Commission, says he's convinced his colleagues from the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association to return to Halifax for their 2016 convention. They were last here in 1999. “We've been trying to get them back for some time,” he says, but the old trade centre simply “couldn't meet our needs.”

Despite that, of course, it's still far too early to claim the centre is a success – or failure.

But it's soon enough to promise ourselves we'll be far more rigorous next time when it comes to weighing the pros and cons of a mega project. It isn't fair to leave it to volunteers to do what professionals should be doing. | ABM

The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com