



Arts hub in works for former Maritime Museum building in Bastion Square

Work is underway to transform the former Maritime Museum in Bastion Square into a shared community arts space with areas for workshops, studios, exhibits and performances.

The project is in conceptual stages, but the hope is to convert the former Maritime Museum building into a multi-media arts hub perhaps with a café and pub, Victoria councillors were told Thursday.

“The whole point of this is to create affordable, shared art space for the community,” said Mayor Lisa Helps.

Helps said that she has met with representatives from the province and the federal government and they are both “very excited about this project” and the province has agreed to fund an estimate of what would be needed to rehab the building and outfit the space.

The province “is spending a lot of money to keep it vacant, which isn’t in anyone’s interest, so I think we’ve got potentially really solid partners with the province and with the federal government on this project. So I think we need to, as a council, just let the work continue,” Helps said.

“I think this is a great proposal,” said Coun. Ben Isitt, adding he would support the city providing a subsidy “as a junior partner.”

“I don’t think revenue neutral is realistic for this type of facility. Many artists are starving. They don’t have substantial incomes and if we want a facility that’s going to be accessible to a real diversity of artists and also the public-use components, I think a level of subsidization is supportable,” he said.

Helps said it’s premature to think about subsidies, but there’s potential to generate revenue through a lease for a pub or café in the centre.

An arts hub is an ideal concept to pursue for the building and would help revitalize the square, said Coun. Pam Madoff.

“In the past when the square was first created it was full of retailers and restaurants, and there were tons of people. Over the years, it’s really evolved into more of an office hub which really doesn’t bring a lot of people through the square,” Madoff said.

“There’s an attempt to animate it with the market and that sort of thing, but it really needs more people coming and going on a regular basis and an arts hub is certainly seen as key to that,” she said.

The arts hub is not a city-led project. A small group with members from the Downtown Victoria Business Association, the Bastion Square Revitalization Association, the community and city

hall are meeting “to see the project through the pre-project development phase,” says a city staff report.

Owned by the province, 28 Bastion Square opened as a courthouse in 1888 and most recently housed the Maritime Museum. The museum was forced to move out in 2014 after the province raised concerns about the condition of building. It has remained unoccupied since.

A design charette is scheduled late this month to help inform what work would have to be done by the province to bring the building up to usable standards.

The city transferred the building to the province in 1977, said city solicitor Tom Zworski.

At that time the province agreed the old courthouse would remain in public ownership, that it would upgrade the building to current standards and any use of the building would have to comply with local zoning.

Coun. Geoff Young said he’s enthusiastic about the idea of federal and provincial funding but warned any city subsidies should be approached with caution.

“We know that it’s possible to drift into situations where subsidies are very heavy,” Young said.

“As I have mentioned on many occasions, the taxpayers of this city sink \$750,000 a year into the McPherson Theatre and have done so for many years.”

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