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Organizers explain Arts Centre status

Article submitted

The Arts Centre is the first sight a stranger notices when entering the centre of Fort St. John.

The striking red and silver exterior of the building has transformed the old Hudson's Bay building into an attractive focus for downtown Fort St. John.

When the interior is complete, the region will have, at last, a home for the Public Library, Art Gallery, Artspace and a theatre with a seating capacity of 420.

During the Library and Theatre referendum held in April, 1980, Fort St. John voted 1,067 for and 472 against.

In the second referendum, on Nov. 15, the results were 1,023 for and 761 against.

The referendum failed because in two of the four regional areas the negative vote was slightly higher.

However in Fort St. John the ratio was two to one.

The history of the North Peace Arts Centre began in 1985 when the Peace River Regional district, in cooperation with the City of Fort St. John and Taylor, initiated the identification of an Expo Legacy Project in the North Peace.

Input from the community supported the development of an Arts Centre for the area.

A joint application was submitted to the B.C. Expo Legacy Fund and a \$1,000,000 grant was announced by the North Peace MLA Tony Brummet in 1986.

Following another joint application for funding to the federal government, Prince George-Peace River MP Frank Oberle announced in 1987 a \$500,000 grant from the

Cultural Initiative Program of the Department of Communication.

An additional \$500,000 was realized through private donors, business contributions and corporate donations along with special events and fundraising by community organizations.

Why did Phase I go ahead without Phase II funds in place?

Both the Provincial Expo Legacy Grant and the Federal Cultural Initiatives Grant — totalling \$1,500,000 — were in danger of being revoked if the project did not begin in 1988.

The proposed budget costs were increasing rapidly, due to inflation.

The basic structural changes and exterior work was done during the summer to allow interior work to be covered in, if funds were available for Phase II.

Phase I of the Arts Centre included purchase of the land and building, structural changes to the building, and exterior finishing of the structure.

By July 1, 1989, Phase I of the Arts Centre was completed at a cost of \$2,027,838.

Corporate and private donations have contributed substantially.

Phase II will complete the interior construction and will finish and equip the centre.

The building must be opened and operating smoothly before 1992, putting the opening target date at sometime in the spring of 1991.

The North Peace Cultural Society as a non-profit organization has raised 72 per cent of the capital costs of the entire project.

Nearly three-fourths of the project costs are confirmed.



Photo by Oliver Ho

These cheering students from C.M. Finch were voicing their excitement Monday in turning over \$100 in pennies to help fund construction at the Arts Centre. One of the current fundraising projects is to completely cover the new stage with one-cent pieces.

10,000 pennies for Arts Centre

MAR 13, 1990

A group of students from C.M. Finch school donated 10,000 more pennies to the Arts Centre's penny drive on Monday.

The money was left over from fundraising that the Grade 6 and 7 students did for a trip to Edmonton in June 1989.

They had about \$500 left over and the students decided to donate most of it to various local organizations, including the Child Development Centre and the food

hamper campaign.

"This was their idea," said Grant Spelsberg, one of their teachers.

On Monday morning, 26 of the 50 original students who raised the money came to the Arts Centre to present representatives from the North Peace Cultural Society with the pennies.

Their 10,000 pennies join 20,000 others on the stage of the unfinished Arts Centre. All the coppers have been raised through

donations.

Arts Centre officials estimate they will need about one million pennies to cover the stage.

They are having a contest, in fact, to guess exactly how many pennies they will need. The person with the closest guess will win \$100 (contact the Artspace at 785-1990 for more information).

The students stayed at the Arts Centre for a few minutes after their presentation to lay out some more pennies on the stage.

When the whole stage is covered with one-cent pieces, the shiny new ones will spell out "Arts Centre", and will be framed by the older, darker colored pennies.

The penny drive has been going on since July of last year, and Arts Centre representatives hope to have the whole stage covered by July this year.

So far, volunteers and a lot of children have put in time laying out pennies on the stage.

Arts Centre *discussed*

APR 11, 1990

The uncompleted Arts Centre was brought up at the Chamber of Commerce meeting again. Sue Popesku pleaded for the business community to back the project.

"An abundant arts community is critical for the development of any community in the future," Popesku quoted from John Nesbitt's book "Megatrends 2000".

She explained the arts are an economic, as well as a cultural resource. She noted how corporations look to the cultural amenities of a community when they consider locating their operations.

She went on to remind the chamber that the centre could have a major impact, but, instead, costs the city money as it stands unfinished.

"The centre could be the source of major bucks. It loses money everyday it stands empty."

Popesku told the chamber that she had groups ready to book the centre but was unable to confirm dates, given the current state of the complex.

She cited the B.C. Cattlemen's Association and the B.C. Chamber of

Commerce as groups which wanted to book the centre for conventions in 1992.

"Everybody's asking when is it going to be done. Some of these groups may go elsewhere if the centre is not completed soon," Popesku warned.

She told of a discussion she had with the Canada Council Touring Office.

A representative from the office said that the council wishes to include Fort St. John on its touring circuit.

The circuit is for the various performers that the council sponsors and includes stops in Dawson Creek, Grande Prairie and Prince George.

Popesku said the Arts Centre would go a long way to securing a spot on the circuit for Fort St. John.

She updated the chamber on the current total that has been raised for the centre.

A total of \$935,000 of the necessary \$2,067,700 has been raised so far.

Popesku concluded by echoing the Mayor Walsh's comments to the chamber last week.

"Let's get it done!"

The Arts Centre: how and why

The history of the Arts Centre is long and complex.

It had its beginnings about 20 years ago when a local group investigated the possibility of constructing a community theatre as Fort St. John's big project for the 1971 British Columbia Centennial. That didn't work out.

But still the idea persisted. In 1980, there were two referendums on a regional theatre, which would include a 10,500 square-foot library and a 420-seat performing space.

The \$3.9 million facility would be paid for by Regional District taxation over a 25 year period and \$800,000 of recreational facilities grants.

However, both the April and November referendums failed. Although 70 per cent of Fort St. John residents approved the project, the support was not as strong in the outlying areas. Both referendums required the majority support from each of the four participating municipal areas: the City of Fort St. John, the Village of Taylor, Electoral Area "B" and Electoral Area "C."

The idea lay dormant for several years, until Expo 86 came along.

The North Peace Arts Centre was resurrected in 1985 when the Peace River Regional District, in co-

operation with the City of Fort St. John and Taylor, decided to apply for an Expo Legacy Project for the North Peace.

The provincial government, perhaps feeling guilty about spending so much money in Vancouver for the world's fair, had decided to make funds available for community projects throughout the province.

Soon, North Peace MLA Tony Brummet announced a \$1 million Expo grant for the Arts Centre.

In 1987, local MP Frank Oberle did his part, announcing a \$500,000 grant from the federal Cultural Initiative Program of the Department of Communication.

With \$500,000 from corporate donations and local fundraising, the Arts Centre now had \$2 million, enough for the construction of Phase I, the exterior.

The North Peace Cultural Society, the legal entity responsible for the Arts Centre, decided to go ahead with construction even though it didn't have the Phase II funds in place.

The reason? The society said that if the project did not begin in 1988, the provincial and federal grants — totalling \$1.5 million — were in danger of being revoked.

Phase I, which included the pur-

chase of the vacant Hudson Bay building for \$405,000, was under way.

Construction began in mid-1988, with the exterior of the structure completed by July 1989, at a total cost of \$2,027,838. That was an overrun of about \$210,000.

After Phase I was finished, it was determined that Phase II, the interior construction, would cost \$2,067,700.

For three months, not much happened, although local fundraising went on as before and corporate donations continued to come in. Although generous, these amounted to a mere trickle. What was needed was a major government contribution.

In September 1989, MLA Tony Brummet came through — after much arm twisting on his part — with a \$650,000 GO B.C. grant.

However, that now appears to be the end of any ordinary government grants that the North Peace Cultural Society can expect to see.

In the group's plans for Phase II funding, they had counted on \$100,000 in foundation grants and \$452,000 from the Government of Canada under two grant programs, Community Initiatives and National Galleries. These have all fallen through.

Likewise, the corporate and business communities have been tapped already for several hundred thousand dollars. It's unlikely we'll see any more big donations from them — they've been generous enough.

In February of this year, City Council looked at the idea of staging a November referendum on having the taxpayers finish off the project.

This idea met with much opposition in the community because the implicit promise had always been that not a cent of local tax money would be used to pay for the Arts Centre.

As a result, there is no referendum scheduled for this municipal election, Nov. 17.

Secret meetings were recently held with the cultural society and local politicians from various levels of government. Their goal was to come up with a strategy for finishing the controversial project. Although the members have been mum, the general suspicion is that they were unable to arrive at satisfactory solution.

Meanwhile, the Arts Centre — just a shell of a building — remains half finished, a public embarrassment.