



**ECONOMIC AND CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT  
MEMORANDUM**

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**TO: MAYOR J. LEHMAN AND MEMBERS OF COUNCIL**

**FROM: S. SCHLICHTER, DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC AND CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

**NOTED: A. MILLER, RPP, GENERAL MANAGER OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND GROWTH MANAGEMENT**

**RE: FISHER AUDITORIUM AND EVENT CENTRE UPDATE**

**DATE: JUNE 22, 2020**

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The purpose of this Memorandum is to provide members of Council with an update to the W.A. Fisher Auditorium and Event Centre redevelopment project.

Background:

As of the last update in April 2019, the Creative Economy Department was to review the existing design and identify any changes to design, orientation, as well as the preferred amount of onsite parking. Changes to the original assumptions, namely full understanding of the remaining portions of Barrie Central building and the freeing up of land reserved for the YMCA, allowed for a review of Theater/Event centre designs to optimize operations. During preliminary reconfiguration of space/logistics several operational opportunities were identified including the potential of removing the fly gallery and adding meeting rooms, as well as onsite parking. The final Theatre/Event Centre footprint needed to be confirmed for an integrated site plan to be advanced. As follow up, integrated site plan options were to be presented to Council with the Fisher/Event Centre business plan proposal. The capital campaign was not to proceed until the building design was confirmed and the business plan approved.

Discussions between Creative Economy, Facilities and Planning continued and revised conceptual concept work was initiated via successful tender process with Harry Pontarini Architects. In late November, 2019, the City restructured its leadership of several portfolios, and leadership for this project was shifted to the Infrastructure & Growth Management (IGM) Division via the newly merged Economic and Creative Development Department.

Economic and Creative Development Staff have since reviewed project details with the inclusion of Recreation and Culture Staff, specifically in the context of the theatre design and operational needs. The review identified the need for further investigation and validation of facets for the proposed theatre and event centre prior to completing a comprehensive business case. Specifically, some of the earlier work completed was preliminary in terms of design, functionality and cost implications. This, combined with the time since the completion of some of the original studies, the advancement of site works for Kidds Creek realignment, along with work initiated in 2019 for a new City Tourism Master Plan, supported the need for the City to revisit and validate the proposed theatre operations plan and update the conference works in order to create a consolidated overall comprehensive business case for this project.

The YMCA's move away from the site opened the opportunity to explore partnership opportunities with other community partners. Staff have been working closely with a prominent organization with the goal of solidifying this location as a community hub and gateway to the downtown; full of street activation, linkages to strategic priorities and strong urban design. A viable partnership model was close to being conceptualized for presentation to Council when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.



Current State:

Theatre and event centre operational needs and design elements are confirmed and being reviewed by industry experts. Work to determine Barrie's fundraising capacity for a new theatre and event centre is also being reviewed by industry experts. Stakeholder input is being confirmed. Based on reworked layouts, building design and site needs, the minimum financial investment for the combined theater/conference centre is currently estimated at \$50M and not the \$25.6M previously suggested. Given the magnitude of this change options for cost efficiencies are being identified as part of the review process.

The five-year Tourism Master Plan that leverages and supports the growth of existing tourism in the Barrie area, integrates sports, nature and business tourism and provides direction on growing the overall tourism sector. will be completed summer 2020 and reported to Council in September 2020. The Tourism Master Plan work identified the need for a conference and event centre in the City to capture greater business tourism opportunities and revenues to the City. Preliminary assessment from the review of the W.A. Fisher Auditorium site as a downtown conference centre location, would help capture available demand for conference and cultural events. The review also identified that the success of the conference component requires a 3.5\*+ hotel development to be considered in conjunction with the building of the centre, connected or adjacent. There has been recently significant private hotel development interest in the downtown. No development applications have been submitted as of writing of this report.

The updated Business and Operating Plan framework is in place. Findings of each of the components mentioned above are close to being finalized and fed into the Business Plan.

Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic:

The investigations into the feasibility of a redeveloped W.A. Fisher Auditorium and Event Centre have assumed a 'typical' market situation, but the current impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic have resulted in extremely 'atypical' circumstances for theatres, conference centres, businesses and the general public at large. The success of a theatre and conference centre are hinged on the ability to draw large crowds and with the uncertainty of the longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on such gatherings it is not reasonable to anticipate the feasibility of a new theatre and conference centre at this time. Everyone involved in the work feeding into the Business Plan believes that the assumptions now need to change.

The organization with whom staff were working with has indicated the need to pause all discussions. This organization is reassessing their needs and focus in a post COVID world. Details of the partnership concept, including who the organization is, must be kept confidential.

Staff recommend that the W.A. Fisher redevelopment plans be held until it is more clear how the economic recovery from COVID-19 is going to unfold. The concept of a 650 seat theater, event/conference centre and associated hotel and community development initiatives may not be realistic for some time. It is also important to have commitment from a strong community partner in order to fully leverage the site and potential to serve as a catalyst for west end redevelopment.



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Next Steps:

Complete Tourism Master Plan in summer 2020 and present to Council in fall 2020.

Staff are holding on any further work on the updated Theatre Business and Operating Model Report, and Preliminary Fundraising Capacity Study, pending as assessment of post COVID opportunities for the hospitality industry.

Under the Capital Plan, there are remaining unspent funds of \$170,000 in project FC1142 for Fisher Auditorium Execution allocated from the Council Strategic Priority Reserve. A further \$26M is budgeted in the capital plan for project FC1138 Fisher Auditorium Redevelopment allocated at \$3.0M in 2021, and \$11.5M in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

Through the 2021 capital budgeting process, recommendations for timing and the allocation/reallocation of the funds will be presented for Council consideration.