

**PRESENTATION TO THE NANAIMO CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE
OF THE WHOLE**

27 JUNE, 2016

By Dennis McMahon

Nanaimo, BC

Your Worship, Council Members, I thank you for this opportunity.

It is not often that seemingly unconnected events combine to create a valuable opportunity. To take advantage, one has to recognize such connectivity that I'll explain later, in more detail. First, here is some background information.

Five or six years ago both the VIU & Nanaimo Art Galleries restructured & repurposed themselves. The effect was to remove the ability of local artists & art organizations to exhibit in their galleries, especially in the downtown core of the city. (I emphasize, they did not create the problem, but rather brought this issue to light).

For the first time in 5 years, the Harbour City Photography Club held its juried show with an exhibition open to the public. It was held in the VIU Gallery, a venue that was affordable, but in a non-central location that was far from ideal & meant that only family & friends visited the show.

About the same time, the Nanaimo Chapter of The Federation of Canadian Artists held a major, annual exhibition in the VICC. This was a much better location that saw more than 600 visitors in a 3-day period. However, the rental was very expensive and not easily affordable to most local, not-for-profit cultural organizations.

In the recent core review, Nanaimo was compared for best practices to other BC cities of similar size and population. If you Google "Art Centres" for any of these cities, e.g. Kelowna or Chilliwack, you will find they have state of the art centres that reflect their city's dedication & support of the arts. Indeed, Kamloops already had a vibrant art centre when their city recently proposed a new \$38 million facility. Although the project is

not going ahead at this time, their city council considers it important enough that they are reappraising & re-jigging the proposal.

On the other hand, if you Google “Art Centre” for Nanaimo, you will only be directed to Medical Arts Centres.

When local artists wish to exhibit, they must frequently seek venues beyond Nanaimo’s borders, e.g. in Ladysmith, Nanoose, Parksville, Qualicum, Comox and even Victoria. Local artists have also rented studio spaces at The Old School House in Qualicum.

This situation is not in keeping with a city that prides itself on supporting the arts.

In 2012 the City of Nanaimo developed and adopted a corporate strategy plan identifying cultural vitality as one of the 4 pillars of sustainability and with a goal of balancing social, environmental, economic and cultural perspectives for generations to come.

Next, the city created & adopted a “Cultural Plan for a Creative Nanaimo 2014-2020.

This document identifies strategies and outlines the responsibilities of City Staff for its implementation.

Within this document is a section describing the need for spaces and places for art. I will quote in part:

“Identify priority additions or enhancements to cultural spaces & places & incorporate them into the cultural planning process & the city’s financial plan.”

and

“Work to ensure affordable and suitable spaces for artists and cultural organizations.”

Despite these positive goals, Nanaimo artists still have no affordable or suitable space within the city.

Nanaimo, is the largest city north of the Mallahat, & is probably the only city that does not have a dedicated, publicly supported centre for the arts. Thus, the 4th pillar of sustainability as identified in the “corporate strategy plan” and further developed in “The Cultural Plan for a Creative Nanaimo” has not been implemented.

Page 51 of the Core Review recommends in part, establishing priorities & developing targets for specific outcomes. The Cultural Plan for Nanaimo identifies needs, establishes goals & assigns responsibilities. Therein lies a major part of the problem. As far as I can determine, goals & actions have never been prioritized, nor targets set or outcomes established.

Recently, the Mayor & at least one other councilor attended "Showcase for Nanaimo - 2020"

Dr. Ron Burnett of Emily Carr University emphasized the importance of the cultural industry that accounts for 3.2% (that's \$99.6 billion) of the total GDP for Canada, more than mining & forestry combined. Furthermore, 12% of our GDP is derived from spinoff industries of cultural productions & activities. Therefore, it can be said that Nanaimo will benefit from cultural development in similar ways.

Dr. Burnett continued:

"We need to have places that people want to visit and finally, the key to recreation & tourism is not to celebrate the natural environments to the exclusion of the cultural environment; it is to celebrate the integration of the two."

In Nanaimo, how can we integrate the two, if one of the elements is not supported in a meaningful way?

At the beginning, I mentioned seemingly unconnected events that come together to form opportunity. I suggest these events to be:

- The restructuring of the Nanaimo & VIU art galleries that has had the unintended consequence of exacerbating the lack of affordable & suitable exhibition space.**
- The creation of "A Cultural Plan for Nanaimo 2012-2020".**
- The Core Review.**

Now these events provide a wonderful opportunity to satisfy the needs of the arts community in Nanaimo, as well as the 4th pillar of the strategic plan. Our issues could be solved in three stages over, say 5-6 years:

Firstly, provide immediate exhibition space within the city core that is affordable & suitable.

Secondly, as an intermediate solution, provide exhibition space and a temporary art centre in a decommissioned building, such as Woodlands High School that should be available soon for community use.

Finally, the permanent solution could be the construction & opening of a purposed centre for the arts, integrating it with a First Nations Cultural Centre. With such a vibrant arts community supported by a vibrant, functional centre, Nanaimo artists could flourish and contribute to the city's growth, prosperity & wellbeing. This could be a showcase piece for Nanaimo & a financial asset to the city. It would be, as Dr. Burnett stated, "A place people would want to visit."

The Nanaimo Arts Council is already working to resolve the first two issues & is in contact with your staff for advice & assistance. The third issue of a permanent solution is beyond the capabilities of the Arts Council & will require your commitment & involvement. I understand some discussion is already underway about land usage by the cruise terminal. May I suggest this would be an ideal spot for the needed Arts Centre?

Therefore, I ask that this issue be placed on Council's agenda & that a committee consisting of representatives from Council, the City Staff, the Arts Community, First Nations, DNBIA, NEDC, the Chamber of Commerce, & any other relevant stakeholders be formed & tasked to create options & to bring a recommendation to Council for inclusion in your planning process & your financial plan.

As Kerry Slavens, editor of Douglas Magazine said at the Showcase for Nanaimo,

"Its easy to say it won't work! Instead let's say, Awesome - Let's do it!"

THE GLOBE AND MAIL*

The economic imperative for investing in arts and culture

Todd Hirsch

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Wednesday, Mar. 27, 2013 7:30PM EDT

Last updated Wednesday, Mar. 27, 2013 7:34PM EDT

In this age of fiscal restraint, one of the easiest targets for spending cuts is the arts. While our politicians do all the dirty work, voters are largely to blame because most of us don't make too much fuss about it. Given the choice between a cultural centre or more hip replacements, it's usually not a contest.

But economically, we're making a mistake. There are several reasons why investing in culture is an economic imperative.

The first is that culture – including both arts and amateur sports – can mitigate the ups and downs of other industries. More diversity is healthy for any economy. Artists and athletes pay taxes, and their spending causes a multiplier effect throughout the economy. This is the argument offered by culture advocates, especially when justifying tax-dollar support.

While this is true, it's not the strongest economic case for public financing for arts and culture. Governments could also hire people to dig holes and then fill them again. The hole diggers would also pay taxes and their spending would have the same multiplier effect. But their labour would be pointless.

A better reason why the economy needs a strong cultural scene is that it helps to attract and retain labour. This is especially important for cities trying to draw smart professionals from around the world. The best and brightest workers are global citizens, and if they (or their families) are not pleased with the cultural amenities, they won't come. Calgary, where I live, is a perfect example: world-class fly fishing and a great rodeo will attract some people, but without fantastic arts and sports amenities, the pool of willing migrants would be shallow. Calgary's municipal government understands this and investing in culture is non-negotiable.

The third reason, however, is the most important. To become the creative, innovative and imaginative citizens that our companies and governments want us to be, Canadians need to willingly expose themselves to new ideas. A vibrant arts and culture community is the easiest way to make this possible.

American neuroscientist Gregory Berns, in the introduction to his 2008 book *Iconoclast*, wrote: "To see things differently than other people, the most effective solution is to bombard the brain

with things it has never encountered before.” Living and travelling abroad is a great way to do this, but for most of us that isn’t a practical reality. Arts and culture on our home turf offer us the chance to “bombard” our brain with new stimulus without leaving town.

The important part, as Dr. Berns puts it, is to concentrate on things your brain has never encountered before. If you’re an opera fan, going to see opera season after season will be enjoyable, but you won’t reap the creative benefits that come from exposure to other things. Maybe you need to skip the next performance of *Don Giovanni* and take in some indie rock. Or if you’re a hockey nut, turn off the game one night and take in an exhibit of contemporary visual art. You’re not required to enjoy an unfamiliar art or sport (although if you go with an open mind, you’ll be surprised). The point is to purposely take it in, absorb what’s going on, and let your mind be bombarded. It gets the brain’s neurons firing in different ways.

This is where the economy benefits. Canadians need to keep up with global competitors, but we’re only as good as our last creative idea. If we want to truly be a country of innovators – looking for new products, discovering environmentally responsible ways to extract resources, finding efficiencies in manufacturing – we need to be creative. No government tax credit can do it for us.

The reality is that tax dollars are scarce. Cultural workers often act like serfs, begging for crumbs falling from the government’s table. They need to start exerting more entrepreneurialism – and consumers need to recognize their value. If Canadians purposefully seek out and support cultural events with their own dollars, artists and athletes will have better financial success.

We have to stop thinking about arts and culture as simply nice-to-haves. They are just as important as well-maintained roads and bridges. By giving us the chance to stimulate our minds with new ideas and experiences, they give us the opportunity to become more creative. Arts and culture are infrastructure for the mind.

Todd Hirsch is the Calgary-based chief economist of ATB Financial and author of The Boiling Frog Dilemma: Saving Canada from Economic Decline.

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