

# Daphne Bramham: Plug pulled on \$10-million North Vancouver Museum

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN

FEBRUARY 17, 2016

It's a good thing Vancouver is pretty because other than scenery there's sure not much else to look at.

Glaringly absent in this metropolitan region with its presumptions of greatness are museums. Of course, UBC's Museum of Anthropology is spectacular. But beyond it, most museums across the region simply do the best they can in cramped quarters and usually in out-of-the-way locations.

North Vancouver promised to buck that trend with its renaissance plans that included a museum as well as an art gallery on vacated shipyard lands along the waterfront.

Shovel-wielding politicians from the three levels of government proudly dug in last month to mark the construction start of the \$12.25 million Polygon Gallery, which will be the new home of Presentation House. The federal, provincial and municipal governments had provided \$2.5 million each, while the rest came from private donations.

But, less than two weeks later, city council pulled the rug out from under the proposed \$10-million North Vancouver Museum, which was to have been a regional attraction with interactive exhibits and artifacts displayed in a restored shipyard building just a few steps from the art gallery.

The numbers simply didn't add up, says Mayor Darrell Mussatto. He echoed the conclusion of the accountants at BDO Canada, who were hired by the city to review the plans for the museum. They pronounced the project "too risky to contemplate" and "no commercial case" to be made.

One of the accountants' touchstones was the failed Storyeum — a private, quasi-museum and theatrical experience that lasted less than two years in Gastown.

The other was the Museum of Vancouver, which had an operating loss of \$82,000 in 2014 on a \$2.1-million budget even with increased attendance and an 18-per-cent jump in membership.

Because of the dearth of a good history museum to draw a comparison with, the accountants concluded: "It is very difficult to get a historic museum profitable in Vancouver."

And far from believing that if you build it they will come, council agreed.

When museum fundraisers came up \$1 million shy of the \$5 million needed to get the city's matching funds, council in a secret and split vote took away the museum's promised spot in the city-owned Pipe Shop.

Instead, the city will spend some money adding heating and washrooms to the 10,000-square-foot heritage building and try to maximize rental revenue that last year brought in close to \$350,000.

Museum supporters rightly point out that the accountants' and the city's conclusions were based on the faulty premise that public museums must not only break even, but generate profits.

They rightly note that it's a rare museum that doesn't have an annual operating deficit, which is why most are non-profits that do various forms of fundraising throughout the year.

But what the museum supporters seem to have been too polite to mention is that government-supported sports and convention facilities rarely have to pass the same rigorous financial hoops as museums.

The B.C. government paid \$514 million for new roof on BC Place even though it has never and likely will never break even or turn a profit. The same is true for the \$883-million Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre and the millions more spent on other 2010 Winter Olympics infrastructure.

Those were deemed to be investments, justified on the basis of their spinoff benefits.