

The new North Vancouver Museum plans to integrate indigenous stories into its displays

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A touring exhibit about Chief Dan George, the Academy-Award nominated indigenous actor, may be part of the new North Vancouver Museum.

Although still in its planning stages, the exhibit is being developed as part of plans to include aboriginal stories throughout the museum rather than keeping them in separate areas said Sheryl Rivers, a Squamish Nation member and commissioner of the North Vancouver Museum and Archives.

"Normally, we're sort of put in a glass case and displayed like 'This is who they are, this is how they lived, this is what they did,'" she said.

"So for our stories to be integrated and woven throughout the new museum, that's going to be a big, big step."

The \$5.555 million museum plans to open to the public in 2019. It will be located at 131 Esplanade in city-owned community space in a condo complex across from the Polygon Gallery (the new name and home for Presentation House Gallery) in Lower Lonsdale.

The City of North Vancouver approved the 1,500 sq. m (16,000 sq. ft) museum in mid December.

Rivers said initial indigenous brainstorming has been provided by the museum's Aboriginal Voices Working Group that includes representatives of the Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh, the two aboriginal nations on the North Shore. Rivers said that in 2017 she expects the six-member Aboriginal Voices group will expand to include elders, youth, and artists.

Rivers said indigenous involvement is being taken seriously by the museum.

"For me, it has been so uplifting to hear how it will be integrated," she said.

"It's exciting to see that come forward as an idea, then to get the group formed and actually make what we want to see from the two communities included."

Chief George from the Tsleil-Waututh was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor in 1970 for his performance as Old Lodge Skins in Little Big Man starring Dustin Hoffman.

On July 1, 1967, George gave what is considered his most moving speech when he recited Lament for Confederation before 32,000 people at Empire Stadium gathered to celebrate the country's centenary. He is said to have silenced the crowd with his indictment of colonial appropriation of indigenous land across the country.

George died in 1981.

Rivers said the museum is applying for funding with the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay to design the Chief Dan George exhibit to tour as one of the cultural events marking the 150th anniversary of confederation in 2017. Rivers said she hopes the Chief George exhibit will eventually be included as part the museum even though no final decision has been made on its displays.

Other indigenous suggestions for the museum include recounting the history of the union that represented longshore workers from the Squamish Nation. The importance of canoes to the Squamish and Tseil-Waututh is also expected to be prominently featured in the museum.

"We were more oral," Rivers said. "We don't really have things written but we have artifacts, and we have stories. Not a lot of people know who we are and how we lived here and about our governance, our protocol, our culture."

Rivers said she expects the museum will educate more than tourists.

"A lot of this will be new — even to people who live here," she said.

"I do prayers and open events in North Vancouver. In my experience, people here want to go for coffee and want me to explain more of our history of the Squamish because they've never heard it."

In addition to integrating indigenous stories, the museum will also explore North Vancouver's unique position as a wilderburb: a suburb bordering on wilderness.

Nancy Kirkpatrick, director of the North Vancouver Museum and Archives, said the outdoor experience is a unique part of North Vancouver.

"Many people move here because they want to be surrounded by nature," she said. "They come here to have recreational opportunities."

Tourism, she said, has been part of North Vancouver since the first Capilano Suspension Bridge was built in the 1880s.

"We'll be exploring all those issues about living on the edge of the wilderness."

The NVMA is a partner agency of both the city and district of North Vancouver. The museum in Presentation House will be replaced by the new museum on Lower Lonsdale; the archives will remain at its current location in Lynn Valley.

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