

A 'pipe' dream realized for North Vancouver museum

By [Maria Spitale-Leisk - North Shore Outlook](#)

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North Vancouver Museum and Archives director Nancy Kirkpatrick showcases a scale model of a 1950s-era wooden tugboat, the Charles H Cates XV, in front of the 'Pipe Shop' at Shipbuilders' Square where a new museum is being planned
Maria Spitale-Leisk photo

The idea has been 30 years in the making, and now North Vancouver has concrete plans for a \$10-million waterfront museum that will celebrate the community's past and future in animated and engaging fashion.

Nancy Kirkpatrick, director of the [North Vancouver Museum and Archives](#), can hardly contain her excitement, as she peers in the window of the "Pipe Shop" at Shipbuilders' Square.

It may be an unfinished space at the moment, but Kirkpatrick is visualizing its potential as a destination for North Vancouverites and tourists alike.

“The building is so historic,” she says, standing in a spot that was once a bustling shipyard in the 1940s.

It’s stories from that era — the building of the Victory ships and how women stayed behind in the shipyards while men went off to war — that Kirkpatrick wants brought to life again.

Some 80 years’ worth of North Vancouver shipbuilding history is currently squirreled away in an undisclosed warehouse in the city.

When Versatile Pacific Shipyards closed in 1992, the North Vancouver Museum inherited 4,000 artifacts from the company.

“For many years, North Vancouver revolved around the shipyards,” says Kirkpatrick. “They are a significant part of the story of how North Vancouver grew up.”

As it stands now, creativity is stifled by the cramped, antiquated conditions of the museum’s current home at Presentation House, preventing staff from composing engaging exhibits that showcase North Vancouver’s history.

Kirkpatrick cites a 1983 report that called for a new museum back then. She bemoans the museum’s current aesthetics, saying they don’t reflect North Vancouver’s “progressive and forward-looking” character.

“When you look at the building that we are in, it sends the exactly the wrong message: old-fashioned small town,” she adds.

Former City of North Vancouver councillor Bob Heywood’s name is synonymous with the city’s history. His cousin, Arthur Heywood-Lonsdale, was considered to be North Vancouver’s first and most significant investor.

So, it’s only natural that Heywood would be involved in building a new North Vancouver museum. The chair of the North Vancouver Museum and Archives Commission is also uninspired by the current offerings at Presentation House.

“It is really an old-fashioned museum; it’s not one that tells stories, Heywood told The Outlook last Friday.

The city brought the idea of building a new North Vancouver museum in the Pipe Shop to the NVMA Commission’s attention in November 2011.

“Only after 2010, when the maritime museum proposal fell through, was the idea of going back to the waterfront a reality for us,” says Kirkpatrick.

The commission then began working on three city-funded studies for a new museum: an architectural concept plan, an exhibit concept plan and a business feasibility study.

A business case and feasibility study was done by Toronto-based Lord Cultural Resources, the world’s largest museum planning firm.

“They confidently projected that we have significant opportunity for operating revenues,” says Kirkpatrick.

Lord Cultural Resources estimated 45,000 people would visit the museum annually, and suggested a \$7.50 admission rate.

The plans call for interactive exhibit galleries on two floors, multi-purpose areas that would be available for rent, a public lobby and a gift shop — all housed in a 11,900-square-foot space.

Connected by the overarching theme “North Vancouver: A story bound by nature,” the galleries will showcase the community’s past, present and future in an interactive way. Imagine picking up “handlebars,” an input device, for an simulated, adrenaline-fueled ride down Mount Fromme in front of a wraparound screen.

Meanwhile, a suspension bridge, a nod to North Vancouver’s famous tourist attraction, will span the museum’s lobby and lead to a second floor tree canopy.

Cost estimates for the design, fabrication and installation of the exhibits fall within the \$10 million envelope for the entire project.

CNV council, at a July 15 meeting, gave conditional approval for use of the Pipe Shop. The city will also put up half of the \$10 million price tag for the new museum, in a deal that hinges on the proponents providing a solid fundraising feasibility study by next April.

CNV Mayor Darrell Mussatto called the prospect of a new waterfront museum “pretty exciting news” for the community. When asked why the city should invest in the project, Mussatto said: “Well I think we have to remember our history. Council is going to make sure there is a suitable location for a community museum here in North Vancouver.”

Fundraising plans are already underway, with an enthusiastic group of volunteers already mobilized, said John Gilmour, president of the NVMA Friends Society.

“What we are doing is identifying significant potential donors — North Vancouver businesses and individuals,” said Gilmour.

The museum will also turn to the provincial and federal government for financial support down the road.

“Our intention is to open in 2017 – the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation — so we are hoping for some special grant programs,” said Kirkpatrick.

reporter@northshoreoutlook.com