

Earth Sciences Centre feasible ? for \$16 million

By Tony Pearson

A consortium of consulting firms has deemed the proposed Earth Sciences Centre a good fit for Bancroft, based on the town's position as the Mineral Capital of Canada. It's known nationally and internationally for its unique geology. The study, unveiled on Monday, also suggests that the centre could become an economic engine for the area, attracting both tourists and serious geologists to explore the land and its resources through the agency of the centre's programs and research facilities.

The project will not come cheaply. It's estimated construction of the building and the exhibition space will take about \$9 million. The building's exterior, including parking and a rock garden exhibit space, would take another \$1.5 million. These don't include landscaping, or the cost of acquiring the land for the centre.

Planning costs, such as architect fees, plus initial operating costs would require nearly \$3 million. Add to these expenses \$700,000 for fit-out, and a 20 per cent contingency fund, and the final total comes to \$16.7 million - not counting the cost of acquiring and servicing the land.

In addition to the costs of building and equipping the centre, the study projected an annual operating budget of between \$350,000 and \$375,000, covering staff salaries, utilities, exhibitions and programs.

No indication was given as to where the centre might be located, 12 different sites were analyzed, but remained confidential to prevent land speculation.

Asked what amount of land might be needed for the building, projected at over 14,000 square feet, Bancroft chief administrative officer Hazel Lambe gave three acres as a minimum, although the consultant suggested more might actually prove necessary.

Presenting the report was Hugh Spencer, senior consultant at Museum Planning Partners, a company which began as the advisory service to the Royal Ontario Museum.

Spencer has previously worked on developing the Canadian Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg, the Canadian pavilion at Expo 93 in South Korea, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, the Singapore Discovery Centre, and the Experience Music Project in Seattle. Spencer felt that getting capital funding would actually be easier than obtaining on-going operating subsidies. The study specified that most of the operating budget must be supplied by annual government grants: \$125,000 from the county, \$30,000 from the province, and \$75,000 from the Town of Bancroft.

The study identified the next step in the process as Bancroft agreeing to a capital budget ? what they want built, and for how much ? and then identifying no more than two potential sites. After that, stakeholders should establish a registered charity, which would become the operating board of directors for the centre. Then architects should be engaged, and fundraising should begin.

At the morning meeting, Bancroft councillors expressed general support for the project, though they wanted more detail on capital expenditures, as well as on funding prospects.

Questioned about gradual construction, Spencer noted that there isn't a phase two. The minimum size for a sustainable museum had to be built at one go. Asked about adding other aspects of Bancroft, like exhibits on logging, he counselled focus ? not diffusing the main attraction.

At a public meeting Monday afternoon, local stakeholders and members of the public were invited to make comments. Here as well, there seemed to be general support for the project, which was seen as having the potential to transform the Bancroft area, as other museums had transformed their communities. Spencer gave the example of the Tyrell Dinosaur museum in Drumheller. He proclaimed that museums were investments in attracting both visitors and new residents.

MPP Todd Smith, who attended the meeting, noted that while there was a definite provincial government interest in museum and attraction development, there were also a lot of communities now attempting to go down this road. He suggested also looking for private investment ? for example, from mining and mining related companies. One of the founders of the current Bancroft Mineral Museum noted that they had tried this route, with little success.

All agreed that partnerships must be pursued, among North Hastings municipalities, with schools and school boards, and with other museums.

Some concerns were expressed, for example, the ability of the region to handle a growth in demand for food and accommodation. A representative of the Bancroft Gem Club noted that having just built their museum, they would be loath to move, although Spencer suggested that a partnership was possible.

Asked about the next steps, Bancroft Mayor Bernice Jenkins stated that council would review shortly where and how to proceed further.

'We hope to set up a board fairly quickly,' she remarked. Others in the audience believed it was important to get a project manager in place as soon as possible, particularly with respect to budgeting and fund-raising.

Overall, Jenkins gave her take that people in the community support the project.

'I've heard today people saying 'Yes, you should move forward', which is vital, as we must have community buy-in. I'm discovering optimism and a lot of enthusiasm for the centre as an economic development initiative.'