



City of Nanaimo Events Centre Public Consultations

What We Heard Report

December 15th, 2016



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BACKGROUND

If we build it, will enough people come? That's a question that has been a topic of local community interest and discussion for many years. Would such a facility thrive in Nanaimo? Instead of just speculating, the City has decided to begin investigating. Following the lead of the *Updated Strategic Plan* and the *2014 Culture Plan*, the City is moving forward on determining whether or not such a facility is a positive fit for Nanaimo.

To this end, the City has prepared a timeline proposing six possible phases, beginning in September 2016 and running, potentially, through to September 2019. Earlier this fall, the City completed Phase One, which included reviewing comparative event centres, evaluating site options, developing a concept design, and carrying out the initial design of a feasibility assessment. The City has now completed Phase Two, the purpose of which was to gather information from a range of sources, including the residents of Nanaimo. When considering a project of such scope, it's imperative to provide the public with opportunities to offer their thoughts, opinions, and insights (if Council, after reviewing the results of Phase Two, chooses to proceed with the project, further public consultation will take place in Phase Three and Phase Four).

Between November and mid-December, the City used a wide range of engagement instruments to consult the greatest number of Nanaimo residents possible, including:

- an information notice and survey sent to every household in the city;
- a phone survey that contacted a random and representative sample of Nanaimo households with a landline;
- an online survey that was widely advertised through a number of channels, including newspaper, radio, the city website and social media;
- soliciting emails with a dedicated address;
- a Facebook thread on the city of Nanaimo's Facebook page;
- monitoring comments on other social media platforms and local news websites; and
- three public engagement sessions at which participants were asked to give their input by placing sticky-notes on a series of whiteboards posing critical questions, as well as by filling out a separate paper survey.

Public Consultation By the Numbers

- *Online surveys completed: 1,155*
- *Telephone survey participants called: 500*
- *Household surveys returned by December 12th: 40*
- *Public engagement sessions: 3*
- *Public engagement sessions participants: 412*
- *Surveys completed at public engagement sessions: 214*
- *Facebook comments: 255*
- *Tweets: 19*
- *Emails: 162*

This report summarizes the output of all these consultation streams, highlighting the dominant themes that emerged. Across the engagement, the concerns and hopes expressed were largely the same. Something else was consistent too: those who support an Events Centre didn't go into much detail, whereas those who are on the fence or against the proposal were far more forthcoming with the reasons why.

This report is split into four sections:

- 1) **KEY THEMES:** A short review of the key themes that emerged from across the engagement.
- 2) **WHAT WE HEARD AND WHAT IT MEANS:** Based on the feedback the public has offered, the questions City Council should consider exploring and communicating if it chooses to proceed with the project.
- 3) **BREAKING DOWN THE INPUT:** A review of the specific results, where available, from the different input mechanisms.
- 4) **EXPLORING THE INPUT:** A qualitative review providing the full range of opinions and feedback that resulted in the themes and questions contained in this report.

Please note: As the results of the phone survey are quantitative and statistically valid, they are treated separately. The key themes, however, are reflective of all the input gathered through the other instruments.

KEY THEMES

The synthesis of all the public input yielded 10 persistent themes:

More Information Needed

- Many respondents felt that they simply don't have the necessary information to make an informed decision. Respondents frequently said they wanted to see a business plan developed by an unbiased third party that includes such details as projected operations costs and an assessment of viability based on the experience of similar markets.

A Much-Needed Addition

- Many respondents were enthusiastic about the proposed Events Centre, saying it's a much-needed and long overdue addition to the city's cultural and recreation landscape. According to some, it's an opportunity to realize Nanaimo's potential.

An Investment in the Future

- Nanaimo is one of the fastest growing mid-size urban centres in the province, so it's time to start building for the future, and that includes an Event Centre.

Funding

- Whose pocket will the funding for the Events Centre come from? For a significant number of respondents, the answer was "not mine!" The vast majority of respondents either wanted a mix of public and private funds or private funds only. Very few were in favour of solely public funding.

Impact on Taxes

- A lot of respondents want City Council to read their lips, "No more taxes." There is palpable concern that a project of this size will inevitably raise property taxes, and many residents say they can't afford the additional financial burden. Many respondents want to know how much they can expect to pay if the Events Centre goes ahead.

Can Nanaimo Afford It? And Can the Community Sustain It?

- \$62-\$83-million is a lot of money, and many respondents wanted to know if the City can afford it. Even if Nanaimo's population seems large enough on paper, its demographics – a preponderance of seniors living on fixed incomes and blue-collar workers – make an Events Centre less likely to succeed, according to some.

Be Wary of White Elephants

- Many respondents were quick to point to the Conference Centre, the Port Theatre, and the cruise ship terminal, all of which they claim were costly missteps, to justify their opposition to the proposed Events Centre. According to many, this project is being sold to the public in the exact same way as those “failed” (or at least, not living up to expectations) projects.

Does Nanaimo Need an Events Centre?

- Many felt the Port Theatre, the Conference Centre, and the city's many recreation facilities are adequate, and Nanaimo, therefore, has no need for an Events Centre.

Parking and Traffic Concerns

- According to many, parking and traffic congestion are bad enough already without building a 5,700-plus seat Events Centre nearby.

More Pressing Priorities

- Surely Nanaimo has more important priorities than building an Events Centre. Whether it's addressing child poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, or investing in better transit and infrastructure, the City should be spending money on issues that really matter to the community.

WHAT WE HEARD AND WHAT IT MEANS

Judging by where the respondents stand, Nanaimo residents as a whole are divided on the proposed Events Centre. The feedback spanned the spectrum from outright enthusiasm to outright opposition in principle. There are those who believe such a facility is necessary if the city is to realize its potential, and others who think an Events Centre would be an utter waste of money, a “bauble” that Nanaimo can't afford.

This is not a particularly acrimonious discussion. To be sure, there are fierce detractors and supporters of the concept within the community, but they make up a minority. From what we heard – whether through the public engagement sessions, the various surveys, or other engagements instruments – a lot of people are looking for some answers before making up their minds. Many of them see this as the beginning of a period of information gathering about the Events Centre.

If City Council chooses to move forward with this proposal, it may wish to consider the following:

- How will the construction – and the subsequent operations – of the Events Centre be funded? The overwhelming majority want to see a project that is either wholly, or at the very least, partially funded by private funds.
- Is such an Events Centre feasible in Nanaimo? A lot of respondents aren't convinced. They would like to see a comprehensive business case by an unbiased third party that includes such details as projected operations costs and whether the project is viable based on the experience of similar markets.

- How will the Events Centre differ from the Conference Centre and the Port Theatre? Many people are confused as to why an Events Center is needed when Nanaimo already has these facilities. Others are fearful that an Events Centre will undermine the Conference Centre and the Port Theatre. The City should be able to make a clear and compelling case as to why the Events Centre is necessary, and how it will complement, not detract from, the two facilities.
- The projected cost of \$62-\$83-million is a significant expenditure. A substantial number of the respondents want to know what that means for their property taxes. Can the City provide a clear idea as to what the Events Centre will mean for their bottom line?
- Finally, how will the City continue to engage and inform the public moving forward? Will it clearly make its case for why an Events Centre is in Nanaimo's best interests? Would it be open to putting the decision to the public in the form of a referendum?

If City Council chooses to move forward with this project, providing answers to these questions would help a lot of residents make an informed and considered decision around their support of the Events Centre.

BREAKING DOWN THE INPUT

PHONE SURVEY

To gain a greater understanding of opinions on the proposed Events Centre, the City commissioned a phone survey by Banister Research and Consulting Inc., a management consulting firm with 19 years of experience in market research and evaluation services. From November 29 to December 4, 2016, the firm contacted a random and representative sample of Nanaimo households with a landline. In total, 500 residents, evenly split between men and women, participated in the survey. Respondents were asked about their interest in the proposed Events Centre and their thoughts on a number of related issues, including funding options and event choices. The results are accurate with a margin of error of +/- 4.4%, 19 times out of 20.

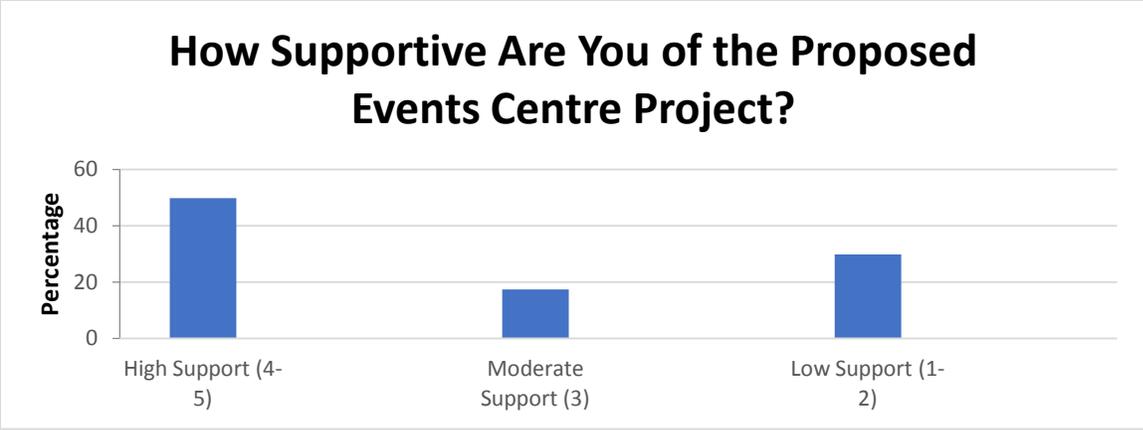
Respondent Profile

The majority of the respondents (51.8%) were 65 years or older. A quarter (25%) were between the ages of 55 and 64, while just over a tenth (11.2%) were between the 45 and 54 years old. Only 8% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 44. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority (96%) of respondents didn't have children under the age of six. Only 7% had children between the ages of 6 and 11, while just under 10% had children aged 12 to 17.

The vast majority of the respondents had not attended an event in Vancouver or Victoria in the past 12 months. For those who had, the most popular forms of entertainment, in descending order, were concerts, musical theatre and comedians (and events in a similar vein), sporting events, family entertainment, and, finally, events such as rodeos, motocross, and wrestling.

General Support

Using a scale of 1 of 5, where 1 meant "not at all supportive" and 5 meant "very supportive," the respondents were asked how supportive they were of the proposed Events Centre. Nearly 50% were highly supportive, with approximately 18% moderately supportive and 30% not supportive.



Proposed Location

Using the same scale, respondents were asked to rate their support for the two proposed locations, the Howard Johnson site and 1 Port Drive site. The Howard Johnson site was the more popular choice, with 46.2% of respondents indicating high support (compared to 16.4% moderate support and 33.2% low support). Just over a third (34.2%) of respondents indicated high support for the 1 Port Drive site (compared to 16.8% moderate support and 42.4% low support).

Potential Benefits

Respondents were queried on the potential benefits of an Events Centre. Unlike with most of the other questions, respondents were allowed to choose more than one response (and as a result, the percentages don't add up to 100%). The opportunity to attend concerts, sporting events, and other activities that otherwise might not come to Nanaimo received the most support (38%), followed by increased tourism (24.4%), encouraging business development around the facility (13.2%), and revitalizing downtown (10%). Other responses included: enabling more and better local concerts and activities (6%), job creation (5.4%), revenue generation (4.8%), a WHL/junior hockey team (3.4%), give youth more to do (1.2%), and attract more people to live in Nanaimo (1%).

Event Preference

Respondents were asked if someone in their household would be "very interested," "somewhat interested," or "not at all interested" in attending certain events. Concerts were the most popular choice, with 80.2% saying they were "very" or "somewhat" interested. "Other entertainment" (a category that includes comedians, musical theatre, Broadway performances, and lectures) was the second most popular choice by the same measure (76%), followed by sporting events (67.8%), family entertainment (56.4%), followed by "other events" (e.g. rodeos, motorcross, and wrestling) (43.2%).

Funding

For this question, respondents were provided with two guided responses (i.e. a suggested response): a mix of public and private funds and public funds only. The mixed funding model was by far the more popular of the two, favoured by 62.8% of respondents. Only 9% said they wanted public funds only. Although not offered as a guided response, 15.8% of respondents said they wanted private funds only. The remaining responses included: don't know (9.6%), user pay (1.2%), and funds with revenue generated by events (0.6%)

The respondents were also asked to rate their support for a series of funding options. Of the four presented, the most popular (with 67% indicating high support and 15.2% moderate support) was additional private funding, including corporate donations, naming rights, and casino revenue. A close second was securing grants from the provincial or federal governments, followed by a user pay model (e.g. a ticket tax), and earmarking revenue resulting from additional development around the proposed Events Centre.

Concerns and Other Comments

When asked about their potential concerns regarding the proposed centre, the most common concern was higher property taxes (28.4%), followed by the underutilization of existing facilities (15.2%), traffic congestion and parking (15%), and concerns about debt (14%). Other concerns identified by respondents included: duplication of existing City facilities (4.2%), more pressing priorities (4%), the cost to use the proposed Event Centre (2.2%), lack of accommodation for out-of-town guests (1.8%), concerns related to location (1.8%), and concerns about crime (1.2%). Again, respondents were allowed to choose more than one response, so the percentages don't add up to 100%.

When asked if they had additional comments they wished to share with City Council, 52.6% of respondents said "yes." The most popular responses included: the proposed facility is a good idea (13.2%), a bad idea (10%), don't raise taxes (9%), more pressing priorities (4.2%), problems with City Council (4%), don't duplicate existing facilities (3%), and the inadequacy of the proposed locations (2.4%).

OTHER ENGAGEMENT INSTRUMENTS

Public Engagement Sessions (and Accompanying Survey)

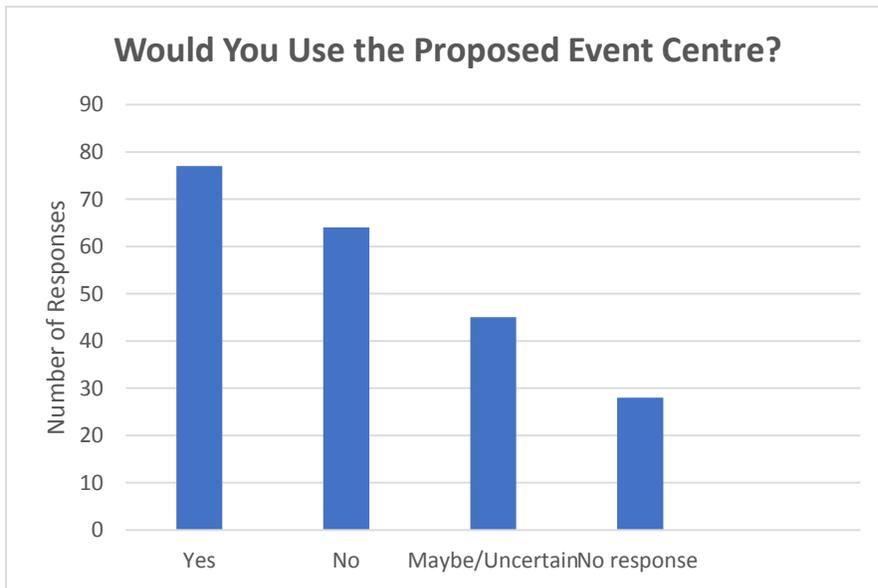
Three public engagement sessions were held on the evenings of November 24, December 1, and December 8 at Beban Park Social Centre. The sessions featured six large blank boards – each posing a specific question – situated around the room.

1. *What is your position on building a new multi-purpose Events Centre in downtown Nanaimo?*
2. *What activities and events do you think the Events Centre should focus on?*
3. *If a new Events Centre proceeds, what should the City consider in terms of:*
 - *The facility design and location*
 - *The impact on Nanaimo's downtown*
 - *Public use and access*
 - *Community benefits?*
4. *How do you think the Events Centre should be funded*
 - *A mix of private and public funds*
 - *Public funds only*
 - *Other ideas for funding options?*
5. *How supportive are you of pursuing these other funding options?*
 - *User pay models (e.g. a ticket tax)*
 - *Additional private funding*
 - *Funding from other orders of government*
 - *Other ideas for funding options?*
6. *What other considerations does City Council need to take into account about the Events Centre?*

Participants were asked to write their answers (and other thoughts) on sticky-notes and post them to the boards. To enhance the interactive nature of the event, City staff encouraged participants to add sticky-notes to complement and/or react to others' contributions. Participants were also urged to fill out a brief survey asking "What are your thoughts on an Events Centre?" and "Would you use it?" Representatives from BBB Architects were on hand for the first and third sessions, making a brief presentation and then answering questions.

Roughly 400 people attended the three public engagement sessions. Many of the participants offered their thoughts in the form of sticky notes, and 214 took the time to fill out the additional two-question survey.

Those who attended the public engagement sessions were split as to whether they would use the proposed Event Centre.



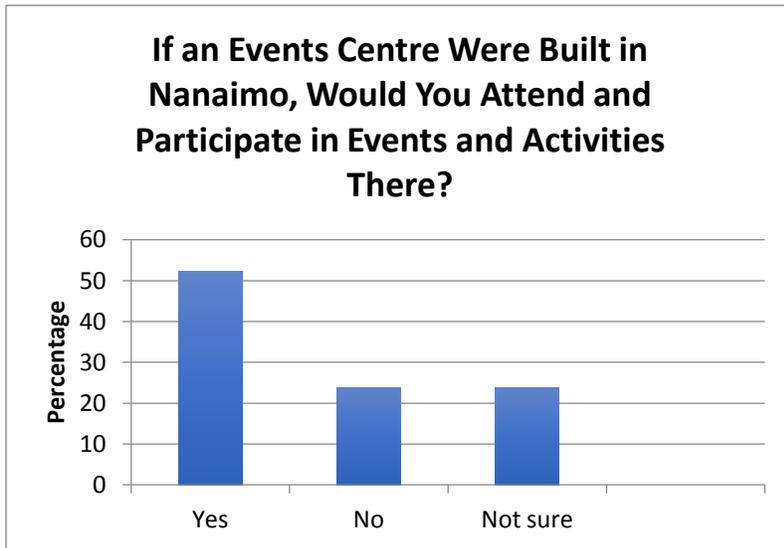
Online Survey

The City of Nanaimo also administered an online survey. Advertised on the City's website, in a householder sent to every Nanaimo household, and additional channels such as social media, newspaper and radio, the survey posed five questions:

- *What are your thoughts on a proposed Events Centre for Nanaimo?*
- *If an Events Centre were to be built in Nanaimo, would you attend and participate in events and activities there?*
- *What kinds of events or activities would you like to see at the Events Centre (e.g. sporting, concerts cultural, recreation programs, indoor walking route, etc.)?*
- *Do you reside in the City of Nanaimo?*
- *What is your age?*

As of noon December 12, 1,155 people had participated in the survey. Nearly 94% of the respondents live in Nanaimo. The largest age group was 60 or older (28.6%), followed by ages 40-49 (21.4%), 50-59 (21.1%), 30-39 (18.61%), 21-29 (8.7%), 18-20 (1.13%), and 17 or younger (0.43%).

Of the 1,155 respondents asked about if they would attend events and activities at an Event Centre, just over half (52.2%) answered “yes.” The remaining 47.8% were evenly split between “no” and “not sure.”



Household Survey

On December 1, 2016, an information notice and survey was mailed to every household in Nanaimo. The survey consisted of three of the questions used during the public engagement sessions:

- *What activities and events do you think the Events Centre should focus on?*
- *What other considerations does City Council need to take into account about the Events Centre?*
- *What is your position on building a new multi-purpose Events Centre in downtown Nanaimo?*

As of noon December 12, 40 of these surveys had been returned by mail, email, or dropped off at select City facilities.

* Note: as an alternative option, the household survey also directed people to the online survey. A notable spike in online submissions following December 1 indicated that many chose to complete the online survey over the household survey.

Other (Emails, Facebook, Twitter, Nanaimo News Bulletin Comments, Etc.)

The City also solicited additional public input through email (eventcentre@nanaimo.ca), Facebook, and by monitoring Twitter and comment threads on local news websites.

EXPLORING THE INPUT

The six questions (please see above) used at the public engagement sessions provide a comprehensive framework to evaluate the feedback provided through the various channels, particularly as the surveys used many of the same questions. The feedback provided in less structured forms (i.e. emails, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) also fit well into these categories. What follows is a breakdown of the public input with an emphasis on recurring themes and typical comments.

1. What is your position on building a new multi-purpose Events Centre in downtown Nanaimo?

The responses varied from those who are strongly in favour (“Long overdue. Totally for it!”), to those who could be convinced given the right circumstances (“Yes, but only if it is funded privately (or by other levels of government), to those who are outright against the proposal (“Very poor idea. Harebrained scheme”). It’s important to note that those who support the project were far less likely to provide details than those who are either unconvinced or against. The question generated a wide range of responses, the most common of which included:

A Much-Needed Addition

For those who support the proposed Events Centre, many say it’s a much-needed, long overdue addition to the city’s cultural and recreation landscape. Many see it as an opportunity to realize Nanaimo’s potential. “Absolutely a MUST,” as one respondent noted, “Nanaimo is a beautiful city in the most accessible location on the Island. If we are to continue to grow and prosper we need to offer residents, current and potential, more cultural and entertainment opportunities akin to our larger neighbor municipalities.” As another respondent remarked, “I have witnessed these types of centres bring life and monetary goodness to other cities I have lived in. Why this appears to be an issue for Nanaimo is beyond me. My husband and I, taxpayers both, want to see an Events Centre built in our city. This will not only bring in a junior hockey team but it will also bring many large events that we at present cannot offer our citizens. Great musical acts go elsewhere.” The need to enhance Nanaimo’s cultural infrastructure was cited by many of the respondents supportive of the proposed Event Centre.

Picking up on a point made by BBB Architects in its presentation to Council (and one that the firm made again during its presentations to two of the open houses), a number of respondents pointed to the fact that Nanaimo is the only mid-size city in Western Canada that currently does not have a modern Event Centre. Not only can Nanaimo’s population support such a facility, the city’s growing population makes it ever more necessary in the near future.

Many respondents also said the proposed Event Centre would not only attract people from neighbouring communities such as Parksville and Lantzville, it would help to draw young professionals and their families to relocate to the city. For those young people already living in Nanaimo, it might give those who are considering moving away a reason to stay. As one enthusiastic respondent wrote, “I think it is a great idea. It is something this city needs to keep people here especially young people my age (mid 20s). I have to go to Vancouver or Victoria to do anything.”

An Investment in the Future

At least one respondent referred to the proposed Event Centre as “visionary.” Another argued that it was incumbent on the city and its residents to back a project that would serve the needs of the generations of tomorrow. We must remember, another wrote, that the facilities Nanaimoites enjoy today required future-focused thinking in years past by both residents and previous City Councils. “This thing needs to be built already! Everyone who is scared of their taxes going up are essentially saying they are afraid of growth and if that’s the case, it’s time to move to smaller city. Nanaimo has been stagnant for way too long.”

Got for It! But Not with My Tax Dollars

One of the most common sentiments expressed by respondents is that an Event Centre is a great idea, if, and only, it is funded exclusively by the private sector. “If it can be built with private money, great,” ran one typical comment.

Concerns About Cost and Cost Overruns

The attendant price tag for the proposed Events Centre was top of mind for a significant number of respondents. For many, the roughly \$62-\$83-million project cost was simply too expensive for a community of Nanaimo’s size. And that, as many stressed, is simply the capital cost. “It is not

the cost of the building but the recurring annual facility maintenance and energy costs which would increase our taxes,” as one respondent wrote. Many were also skeptical that the final cost would fall within the projected range, with a number pointing to the cost overruns encountered when building the Conference Centre. As one respondent who works in construction wrote, “There are always costs overruns with big construction projects.”

Impact on Taxes

A related and, judging from the tone of the comments, far more contentious issue is the potential impact on property taxes. In order to get his or her point across, one respondent offered one clear sentence, “DO NOT INCREASE MY TAXES BECAUSE OF THIS.” In many cases, arguing that taxes are already too high, respondents wanted to know if the proposed project would increase their property taxes, and, if so, by how much. The potential for higher property taxes was a particular concern for seniors. “As a senior on a supplemental income,” one wrote, “I cannot afford a big increase in property taxes and that will happen.”

No More White Elephants

“White elephant” is a term that appeared time and again throughout the responses. The most common examples that respondents pointed to were the Conference Centre and the Port Theatre. Drawing a parallel to the proposed Events Centre, one respondent wrote, “The Port Theatre and the Conference Centre were promoted the same way (bringing events and life to Nanaimo) and remained unused. So why bring in more buildings if we can’t fill the current ones.” As another less than enthused respondent noted, “I don’t believe citizens want another ‘wonderfully sounding idea’ that just loses money.” Without citing specific studies, a number of respondents said studies show that event centres in similar mid-sized cities rarely, if ever, live up to expectations.

Existing Facilities

A number of respondents questioned the need for an Events Centre, arguing that Nanaimo already has sufficient recreational, sport, and entertainment facilities, including the Port Theatre, Beban Park, and the Oliver Woods Community Centre. If the City is looking to spend money, a number argued, then why not use those funds to make existing facilities more affordable? Another commonly expressed concern was what a new Events Centre would mean for the Conference Centre and the Port Theatre. Would it not, they wondered, simply undermine those two facilities? “On the economic value scale,” as one respondent wrote, “I think it would be salient to identify what the proposed Events Centre will take away from venues like the Port Theatre, Conference Centre, Beban Park, etc.” A number of respondents wondered why the Conference Centre couldn’t be retrofitted to host some events.

More Pressing Priorities

Many respondents questioned why the City is contemplating an Events Centre when there are, they argue, more pressing priorities. As one respondent wrote, “I believe we have higher priorities than assuming more debt for an entertainment centre.” The priorities cited by these respondents ranged from improving transit and infrastructure, to realizing a Nanaimo-Vancouver foot ferry, to providing more subsidized housing. Other respondents questioned why City Council is considering the project when a recently completed Core Services review suggested a series of money saving measures, including closing Beban pool for three months in the summer as opposed to just one. “Why did the City spend money on a Core Review when they have no concept of saving money vs. spending money,” asked one respondent.

Where Did This Proposal Come From? What's the Rush? And I Need More Information

A significant number of respondents were confused as to where the idea for an Events Centre came from. Furthermore, many wanted to know, in the words of one respondent, why "this is happening so quickly?" Another common comment was that respondents needed more information to make an informed decision. As one respondent who was favourably disposed to a potential Events Centre wrote, "I believe that this is a good question and worth pursuing. However, I find it difficult to answer this question without more details around how the project is to be funded." Time and again, respondents said they wanted to see a business plan developed by an unbiased third party that includes such details as projected operations costs and an assessment of the project viability based on the experience of similar markets. "I would support a private builder such as Graham Lee who did both the Kelowna and Victoria arenas to do a feasibility and development study of an Events Centre," wrote one respondent. "He has a proven track record in a community similar in size to Nanaimo."

Referendum

A significant number of respondents said they want to have the final say through a referendum. "This type of facility should ONLY be moved forward with the consent of Nanaimo residents which can ONLY be given through a referendum," ran one typical comment. Another said that the referendum should include "information that includes a business plan with a proposed schedule of events, and the revenues and costs for a five-year cycle."

Can Nanaimo Support an Events Centre? And If So, Who Will It Serve?

Unlike other respondents who argued that Nanaimo's current population makes it an ideal location for such a facility, a number argued that the city is too small to support an Events Centre. Even if Nanaimo's population seemed large enough on paper, its demographics – a preponderance of seniors living on fixed incomes and blue-collar workers – made an Events Centre less likely to succeed, argued others. As a result, many respondents were concerned that an Events Centre would only serve a very narrow demographic. "Will this be a centre for all or only for those with money in their pockets," asked one. "Can the average Nanaimoite afford to attend events? Or will we be subsidizing those who can already afford to attend events?" Some respondents were clear that the answer to the latter question should be "yes," arguing that the City needs to do what it can to make events accessible to the entire community.

If You Build It, Will the WHL Come?

A number of respondents weren't optimistic about Nanaimo's chances of securing a WHL team. "Has it been shown that there would be support for a WHL team in Nanaimo?" Even if Nanaimo did manage to get a team, there wasn't any guarantee it would stay, many said, citing the case of Abbotsford's AHL team, which recently relocated to California. Some respondents further argued that the project shouldn't proceed unless the City is able to secure an anchor tenant. A handful of respondents were also concerned that a WHL team would spell the end for the Nanaimo Clippers.

Miscellaneous

Although not raised as frequently, there are a number of other comments and concerns that warrant a mention. For instance, some respondents wondered whether Nanaimo had enough hotel rooms to handle the influx on event nights. Others were concerned that the facility would sit empty on the days events aren't held. The proposed Events Centre, according to some, is too hockey centric. Some respondents were concerned that the proposed Events Centre wouldn't be large enough to attract big name acts. "I'd like to see examples of who performs in venues of this size," said one.

And finally, a number of the respondents complained about the questions in both the phone and paper surveys used by the City to gauge public support for the proposed project.

2. What activities and events do you think the Event Centre should focus on?

From boat, horse, and dog shows, to monster trucks, to graduation ceremonies, to the World Juniors and WHL games, to rodeos, to spectacles like Cirque d Soleil and War Horse, to big-name entertainers like Elton John and U2, Nanaimo residents were full of ideas as to what they would like to see at a potential Events Centre. Although difficult to quantify, concerts appeared to be the most popular response. “Commercial events that provide a self-sustaining revenue stream for the private owners,” was also a common response. “Anything that doesn’t take away from the Port Theatre or the Conference Centre.” Other respondents were interested in seeing a more artistic and community-based approach. “Nanaimo spends too much money on sports ventures, and not enough on arts facilities. It is a cultural backwater for a city this size,” remarked one respondent. “As a Nanaimo-based musician,” wrote another, “I feel very strongly that a taxpayer-funded [Event Centre] must include affordable and accessible performance space(s) for locals.” Other ideas included a year-round farmers market (“Think Seattle’s waterfront,” wrote one respondent), small meeting rooms for community groups, and an additional ice sheet (or sheets) for the public’s use. A proposed indoor walking concourse split opinion. Some thought it was a wonderful idea for seniors and the disabled, while others contended it was, in the words of one respondent, “stupid” given Nanaimo’s temperate climate.

3. If a new Events Centre proceeds, what should the City consider in terms of:

- **The facility design and location**
- **The impact on Nanaimo’s downtown**
- **Public use and access**
- **Community benefits?**

Location (Including Parking and Access Concerns)

Both of the proposed locations – the Howard Johnson site and the 1 Port Place site – had their supporters and detractors. While some preferred the Howard Johnson site for such reasons as perceived safety, its proximity to downtown, and because the proposed Events Centre would be more aesthetically pleasing than the current hotel (and for many respondents, the simple fact that the site isn’t 1 Port Place), others argued it was a poor choice for reasons including the noise and traffic it would generate for nearby residential neighbourhoods, the lack of parking, and poor access and egress. As one respondent wrote, “The site would be an absolute nightmare for traffic leaving after an event.” Others were concerned that the site isn’t currently owned by the City.

For the proponents of 1 Port Place, their reasons for support were similarly varied. Some thought it would help to revitalize the waterfront, while for others the site’s chief attraction was its superior accessibility. Those who opposed the site, however, were generally in agreement that they didn’t want to see a portion of the city’s scarce waterfront lost to such a project. Others cited the City’s own planning for their opposition. “The 1 Port Place location is an inappropriate site for an Events Centre of this size, as was determined by the extensive 2013 public engagement process titled ‘South Downtown Waterfront Initiative’ ... why engage the public if the resulting report is ignored?” Remarkd another respondent, “@cityofnanaimo I like the idea but wrong location. Land parcel too small, potential congestion & wrong concept for WF [waterfront] project.”

Other proponents opted for neither, asking why the facility couldn’t be built farther away from downtown. “I believe an Events Centre outside the downtown core would make the most sense. It’s already a pain to go into town due to parking, traffic, security ... I feel a location closer to Vancouver Island University would make sense,” remarked one respondent.

A significant concern for many respondents was parking, traffic, and (to a lesser degree) public transit. A number of respondents were skeptical that current parking spaces downtown were

adequate for a 5,700-plus seat Events Centre. Even if it were, said others, nobody, particularly seniors, want to walk that far. Others argued that traffic congestion was already an issue downtown, one that would be exacerbated by such a large facility. As a result, the City needs to give serious consideration to these issues. One respondent summed up the thinking of many others well: "One of the greatest issues with similar centres is parking and people rely heavily on a transit system to attend events," one respondent wrote. "Therefore, transportation should be a core discussion in any concept stage report, not an afterthought when you decide on a site."

Design and Scale

Respondents were split on the preliminary design for the Events Centre. While a number thought the design was "great," the majority who chose to comment weren't favourably disposed for a number of reasons. A handful of respondents, for instance, suggested that the design was a distasteful example of cultural appropriation. Others thought it wasn't culturally inclusive enough. "There are so many immigrants coming to the area," one explained, "[so] why can't we choose an inclusive design that all people can enjoy? I would like to see a design that celebrates ALL our cultures." Still others didn't think it honoured Nanaimo's local First Nations. People were similarly spilt on the proposed grass roof. While a number thought it was ugly, others were able to see a "green" lining. Indeed, one respondent was so enthusiastic that he or she wondered if it could be made publically accessible. Other respondents proposed another option: solar panels to help save on electricity costs.

Revitalize Downtown and Economic Spinoffs

In addition to enhancing Nanaimo's cultural infrastructure, many respondents believed an Events Centre would help to revitalize the downtown area and generate economic spinoffs, including increasing the number of tourists, dissuading event-related travel to Victoria and Vancouver, and attracting more patrons to local shops, restaurants, and bars. "Great idea and build it as large as possible. Brings people to Nanaimo to spend their money as well as keeps Nanaimo residents at home to spend their money locally. Beautiful way to encourage development and investment in City of Nanaimo," wrote one respondent. As another remarked, "It couldn't be more needed. Anything to revitalize the downtown and bring people downtown after the exodus post-frantic mall building phase."

4. How do you think the Events Centre should be funded?

- **A mix of private and public funds**
- **Public funds only**
- **Other ideas for funding options?**

While not listed as one of the options, arguably the most popular choice among respondents was private funds only. "No taxpayers' dollars" and "100% private funds" were common comments. "If it's such a great idea, it should be privately funded and [private investors] can reap their rewards," was also a popular sentiment. A proposal by a group of private investors to build an Events Centre on the Howard Johnson site (the status of which is currently uncertain) was a complicating factor, with many respondents wondering why the City is so intent to go it alone if such an offer is on the table. Asked one respondent, "How did this go from a private enterprise hotel suggestion, to a full taxpayer funded monster on the waterfront?"

A close second to private funds only was a mix of private and public funds. Very few respondents said they preferred public money only. For those who did, the reasoning was generally along the lines of wanting an Events Centre that serves the community's interests, not those of the private sector.

Respondents were also forthcoming with ideas for funding options. For instance, some suggested that the City should provide the land (and perhaps some tax breaks) and the private sector should do the rest. Others pointed to the route chosen by Kelowna: the city builds the facility and then leases it back to the developer. Other potential options included: naming rights and other

sponsorships, box rentals, membership fees, shares sold to the public (i.e. community ownership), and lottery funds.

5. How supportive are you of pursuing these other funding options?

- **User pay models (e.g. a ticket tax)**
- **Additional private funding**
- **Funding from other orders of governments**
- **Earmarking increased tax revenue from resulting development?**

Again, even though it wasn't one of the suggested options, "private funds only" was a popular choice among respondents (as were comments along the lines of "no funding at all"). Respondents were also open to the idea of a ticket tax, as well as approaching the provincial and federal governments for funding ("Go ask Justin," as someone wrote). Of the four outlined options, earmarking increased tax revenue from resulting development was the seemingly least popular.

Respondents also offered options of their own, including pay parking, advertising space (and, once again, naming rights and box rentals), and even selling the Conference Centre.

6. What other considerations does City Council need to take into account about the Events Centre?

The vast majority of these responses covered the same themes and concerns as previous questions (e.g. the aversion to using public money for the proposed project, the need for a business case, inadequate accommodations for out-of-town guests, addressing other priorities first, parking and traffic concerns, the need for a referendum, disliking one or both of the proposed locations, examining the experience of similar sized municipalities, etc.). A few respondents used the opportunity to implore the City to consider other options. One respondent, for instance, asked, "Why aren't we getting a Community Arts Centre! Shocking state of affairs for Nanaimo. Shame on you!" Others were concerned about the impact on preexisting facilities, smaller local productions, and local artists and musicians. Although not overwhelming in numbers, several respondents expressed concerns about City Council's ability to work together.

SUMMARY

This engagement period has not produced a significant groundswell in one direction or the other. But that does not mean that engaging the public should stop. It is important to remember that this is still early in the public conversation, where many participants are still forming their thoughts on the issue, even as they actively participate in engagement. While there are strong opinions on either end and there is a well-defined set of issues to tackle, there appears to be a sincere desire for more information about the Events Centre before the general public is comfortable with City Council making a decision.

Those participating in this phase of engagement have done this process an exceptional service by shaping the questions that need to be answered in order to move forward with a productive public debate. Providing those answers in advance of the next round of public engagement will inform the public's ongoing participation and help them form more definitive opinions based on a more defined set of information as engagement continues. The more citizens know on an issue, the easier decision-making will be for Council.