

The Standard

Port theatre bad idea: report; Developer, proponents dismiss feasibility study that says the 400-seat venue doesn't make sense

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Port Place's much-hyped proposal for a 400-seat live theatre has been panned in a new consultant's report released to Niagara regional councillors.

Toronto theatre consultant Janis Barlow prepared the feasibility assessment free of charge at the request of project opposition group Port Realizing Our Unique Distinction (PROUD).

But the St. Catharines resident opted to give the report first to councillors, who will debate an official plan amendment for the development Oct. 12.

"I'm aware it's a contentious issue," Barlow said, adding she's not a member of PROUD and hasn't followed the controversy closely enough to offer an opinion on the development as a whole.

"I didn't interact with either the proponent or (PROUD) in making this report. I wanted it to be about the message, rather than the messenger."

Barlow called her report a "preliminary assessment," noting the developer hasn't provided many details about the proposed theatre.

But her written opinion of the theatre, billed as a way to attract tourists to the adjoining hotel, is bleak.

"Based on the limitations of the Niagara market, the nature of the programming proposed by the developer and the seating capacity ... the theatre component is not financially viable or sustainable.

"The details they've provided don't make sense," she added Thursday, a day after councillors received her report.

Developer Eric Moog disagreed, dismissing the assessment as "yet another PROUD report."

"I'm sick and tired of those reports," he said. "We wouldn't be spending \$10 million if we didn't think it would work. I think that says it all."

Moog said he trusts the expertise of former Shaw Festival director Christopher Newton and Port Mansion founder Dan Raseta, who are both involved in the project.

The theatre is slated to seat 400 patrons and operate as a full festival-style theatre eight months of the year.

It would be available for community and touring companies the rest of the year.

Raseta didn't return phone calls Thursday to discuss the report.

In the past, Newton has said the theatre can be successful. He was in Calgary Thursday and was unavailable for comment.

Port Dalhousie Vitalization Corp. lawyer Tom Richardson later added the developer was disappointed Barlow didn't talk to Newton in preparing her report.

Moog described the theatre as an important element in the mixed-use design of the development.

"I could understand (PROUD's) concern if we were asking for government money. But it's not government money, it's our money.

"If it's not your money, why are you concerned about someone else taking the risk?"

If the theatre proposal isn't feasible, perhaps regional councillors should take a closer look at the rest of the development, said PROUD spokesman Carlos Garcia.

"If the theatre doesn't work, what else doesn't work?" he asked Thursday.

St. Catharines Regional Coun. Judy Casselman had similar questions after reading the report.

"I think (the report) is relevant," she said. "I already had some questions about the theatre's sustainability."

Casselman said if supporters are willing to overlook heritage in the name of economic development, the theatre assessment "raises some pretty big concerns."

"This is supposed to be part of an economic driver, an important part of the development."

St. Catharines Mayor Tim Rigby, on the other hand, called the report irrelevant.

"It could provide some interesting information, but it has nothing to do with what regional councillors have to decide," he said.

The Region is deciding whether to approve an official plan amendment based on provincial policy and heritage guidelines, he said.

The economic feasibility of the theatre "is not what we're there to talk about," he said.

PROUD will release another heritage assessment of the Port Place project today.

A Closer Look

Concerns "meriting further investigation" in Barlow's report:

- Barlow is "unaware of any other stand-alone, 400-seat theatre in North America that consistently sustains the types of productions and lengths of run" envisioned for Port Place.
- She notes "significant omissions" in figures related to the business operation plan for the theatre.
- She found no information offered on how the new theatre may affect or be affected by the Shaw Festival.
- She found no information about how the theatre will establish itself in an Ontario theatre market that has been in decline for the last five years.
- Facility design is "promising but deficient in a number of areas." For example, Barlow suggests 2,800 square feet of auditorium seating isn't adequate for 400-plus seats.