

Ralph Surette column/ for March 27/2010

Convention centre: now we're talking

There, that's better. We're talking openly at last about the proposed new convention centre for Halifax. Better yet, Premier Dexter assures us that he wants "the right business case" and to make a decision "on the basis of fact and an actual proposal" before he commits \$100 million-plus in public funds, adding that all we've seen so far "is a kind of visual representation of what a proposal might look like."

Do we dare, then, extend the debate to an actual examination of the facts and even to a discussion of alternatives on how we could fill the empty spaces of downtown Halifax?

The industry has been going all out arguing that the new convention centre is vital, but none of these contentions amount to the kind of facts needed for government to draw a sound conclusion.

For one, there's the notion that the downtrend in the convention business merely mirrors the economy, and to build now will bring Halifax online just in time for the economic recovery--the point made recently in these pages by Michael Hughes, a major trade show figure in the U.S. Alas, the figures in both Canada and the U.S. show a sharp decline in trade show and convention business from peaks in the 1990's, long before the recent recession and right through the preceding boom. The indication, rather, is that the decline is mostly detached from the economic cycle.

There's the idea that the centre will revitalize the downtown and boost the economy, a "no-brainer" according to Mayor Peter Kelly. I've been talking to Heywood Sanders again, the University of Texas professor of urban planning whose research revealing the bleak economics of convention centres broke our silence on the issue. He says he's been going city to city studying new convention and trade show facilities for 15 years, in the U.S. but also occasionally in Canada. "That argument was made every time, and nowhere have I seen it come true," he says.

In those 15 years, marked mostly by continuous construction of new convention space while business declined, here's something else he says he hardly ever saw: a case where expanded facilities brought more business. He says he doesn't want to judge how well Halifax would do, "but one wishes people wouldn't keep doing the same thing over and over." He adds that the desire to "do something" is "perfectly understandable to me. But I don't think this is it."

As to the facts, promoters of the centre have been putting out figures: nearly 93,856 people through the convention centre in 2008, 70 conventions lost in the last 18 months because the current centre isn't big enough, eight million attendees in the last ten years. But how many of those 93,856 were Nova Scotians--Haligonians in fact? How many of those 70 conventions were mere requests for information made to Halifax along with other cities? Who were those eight million people, and how does it relate to more convention space?

"These are simple questions," says Sanders. "Government should know the answers before going ahead."

Meanwhile, industry writer Allan Lynch raised an interesting point in Wednesday's paper. "We used to have statistics proving that attendance was five to six per cent higher in coastal cities like Halifax or Vancouver," he wrote, because they had more appeal for landlubbers. That may still be true, but it's not saying much. Vancouver's centre has slid from 317,500 delegate-days in 1998 to 215,400 last year. Now, with its huge new place opened before the Olympics, it will have to drum up 50 per

cent more business just to get back to the levels of ten years ago.

And if we really need more space, how about upgrading the existing centre? Craig Blois, who was in the trade show business until recently, says he and some others in the industry think that's the solution, taking over several floors now dedicated to offices. But has that question even been asked?

As for alternatives in the larger sense, Sanders says cities all have their own personalities, and just ``doing what everyone else is doing is not a good idea.'' He recalls the trend to enclosed downtown malls of the 1980s. It worked with the Eaton Centre in Toronto, it worked in Boston and a couple of other places, but in many places it didn't. Some have been demolished, some turned to offices or apartments.

At any rate, if this convention centre idea dies, it should unleash some thinking that will have the virtues of being open rather than manipulated behind the scenes. As far as getting information, Halifax was one of the ``more secretive'' places Sanders says he's delved into. Touché! That is to say, this is not just about a convention centre. It's about our old, secretive ways. Putting an end to that alone would be a big deal.

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