

30 more years for the dome?

Province wants to build towers near BC Place to pay for refurbishment

Frances Bula

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BC Place isn't at death's door after all. The Crown corporation that manages Vancouver's stadium, which achieved national fame last year after its inflated roof blew out, is trying to work out a deal with the city to keep it going for 30 more years by acquiring the right to build towers on the land around it.

The money from those developments, likely a mix of residential and office space, would be used to pay the 25-year-old stadium's expensive maintenance and refurbishment costs.

The decision to hang on to the stadium comes after several years of speculation that the provincial government would tear it down, speculation that was fanned by some of the people eyeing the valuable piece of downtown land for development. The speculation reached fever pitch last year when the roof on what's billed as the world's "largest air-supported domed stadium" ripped and then collapsed during a period of heavy snowfall.

Bob Rennie, the condo marketer who has enormous influence on Vancouver development, said then he thought the stadium should be torn down.

On the other hand, said Vancouver city planner Trish French, tourism and hotel officials were anxious to see it stay because of the benefits it brings them. The stadium, which is home to the BC Lions football team, generated \$58 million in economic activity last year.

French said one benefit of PavCo's request is that at least it gives the city a clear idea of what is happening in that area.

The staff report notes that PavCo also says it wants the stadium rehabilitation to be the only public benefit the city gets out of giving density.

That's an unusual request in an era in which Vancouver planners routinely



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BC Place Stadium

negotiate everything from social housing to film theatres to daycares from developers, in return for giving them what is becoming increasingly valuable space in the downtown.

In a staff report going to council next Thursday, planners recommend pushing through a special process by October to revise the plan for the northeast False Creek sector and figure out exactly what the deal should be.

In a previous study, city planners had tentatively suggested that the land available on the site could support 730,000 square feet of development, with three towers of 14, 16 and 30 storeys.

French said city officials don't want the proposed towers to be strictly residential buildings. Instead, the city has high expectations for the site as a job space, she said.

PavCo chairman David Podmore, who was appointed in April, said he has no firm figure for what it will cost to upgrade and maintain the stadium for the next 30 years.

But he did say the roof, which was meant to last a maximum 25 years, will have to be replaced.

The Crown corporation would also like to upgrade the concession stands and public areas, including the restrooms and the plaza outside.

"With the capital improvements, if we can get everything pulled together, I hope we'll have a really good asset," he said.

The potential deal is already provoking sharp differences of opinion among the councillors who have to decide on it.

Non-Partisan Association Coun. Suzanne Anton, part of the majority on council, said she's wholeheartedly in favour of preserving the stadium and allowing building on the spare land around it to finance that.

"There's a huge environmental argument for not tearing it down," said Anton. As well, there's an economic one, since replacing it would cost perhaps \$1 billion, she said.

Anton said there's also an esthetic side benefit.

"The stadium is not one of our most beautiful pieces of architecture," Anton noted tactfully of a building that has been frequently reviled and nicknamed by some the "boiled egg in bondage." She said with development around it, "it has the possibility of making it into a more interesting facade."

But opposition Coun. Raymond Louie said he has problems with the deal, although he doesn't object to giving the provincial government some development rights in order to salvage the stadium.

Louie said it's not enough for the city to get nothing more out of the deal than the stadium as a public benefit.

"I disagree with that. They should get something but it's underutilized land. ... It's inappropriate not to get more [than the stadium rehabilitation]."

He also said it's unfair to allow the stadium to jump the queue ahead of three other major landowners who were all supposed to be part of an official-development-plan review.

GM Place, the Plaza of Nations, and Concord could find that they end up getting something less than what they wanted because BC Place has been allowed to jump in ahead of them, he said.

It will take \$290,000 to go through the planning process for BC Place.

PavCo has offered to pay half of that. The other half will come from the city.

fbula@png.canwest.com

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