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Vancouver Art Gallery move faces hurdles

Plan to build on shoreline landfill would add significantly to cost of relocation, in a time of difficult fundraising

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The plan to shift the Vancouver Art Gallery to a dramatic new location on the shore of Vancouver's inner False Creek harbour is on shaky ground as reports have revealed that building on the shoreline landfill would add significant costs at a time when arts fundraising is a struggle. The negative outlook led city councillors to press the gallery this week to confirm whether it's going to abandon the site, while city staff and local developers work on contingency plans for the distinctive area on Vancouver's former Expo lands.

People close to the project say the False Creek location is all but dead for the gallery, because of the landfill issue and other building difficulties, like loading and storage in an area with a high water table that makes going underground almost impossible. That's all on top of a poor climate for raising the money needed for a gallery estimated to cost anywhere from \$200-million to \$400-million.

"There are some very difficult issues for them to resolve," David McLellan, the city's community services manager, told councillors as they pressed him for answers during a session this week aimed at trying to make decisions about the city's plan for Northeast False Creek, where the gallery would have been a major component. "We have the changing economy, the impact in terms of sponsorship ... particularly for cultural opportunities. And there are some additional costs above and beyond other sites."

The gallery's board chair, David Aisenstat, confirmed yesterday that geotechnical reports have indicated the site would require special construction.

"And if there's a very significant cost difference, that's going to make a difference to us. The art gallery is going to make a responsible decision."

But Mr. Aisenstat said the gallery is still "considering both options" – referring also to the gallery's original plan to move to a site next to the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

Mr. Aisenstat also acknowledged that fundraising is difficult in the present climate.

"We're not oblivious to that."

But that could change, he said.

"By the time we select a site and choose an architect, the fundraising climate may be very different."

Mr. Aisenstat said both he and gallery director Kathleen Bartels, who received a call from Councillor Heather Deal this week asking about the gallery's plans while she was at the Venice Biennale, were startled to hear that city council thinks it needs an immediate decision. He said neither of them had been told previously there was an impending deadline.

"I'm a bit shocked they would take it to a public forum like this without a conversation with us."

If the gallery turns down the site, as many are expecting, it would all be an anticlimactic end to the glowing kickoff Premier Gordon Campbell gave last May. Just over a year ago, he made the surprise announcement that the gallery would get the site as part of an agreement for that area,

an agreement that also included a decision to refurbish rather than demolish BC Place stadium nearby. He had previously announced a \$50-million provincial grant to the gallery for a new building.

Mr. Campbell's announcement generated huge controversy in the arts, development and city-planning worlds. Some said the site would bring Vancouver's passive shoreline to life.

But others were critical that the Premier appeared to be overriding the city's plans for the area, while people in the arts community wondered about the wisdom of locating the gallery so far from central downtown, amid a couple of sports stadiums and a casino.

Condo marketer Bob Rennie, also a prominent art collector in the city, had been critical of a Frank Gehry-style plan all along.

"It's very, very difficult today to raise that kind of money for 'star-architecture,' and it's not where the world is going," said Mr. Rennie, also currently in Venice attending the Biennale. "I don't know if government or the patrons can give \$300- [million] to \$400-million."

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