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Discovery Centre closure: 'evolution' or 'political'?

Nicole O'Reilly The Hamilton Spectator

Parks Canada says the closure of Hamilton's six-year-old Discovery Centre and the transfer of property management to the Hamilton Waterfront Trust is only natural.

"It's not a matter that Parks Canada no longer wants to run the Discovery Centre, it's more the normal evolution of the site," said Rod Blair, Parks Canada field unit superintendent for southwestern Ontario. "The original reason for the site was to draw people to the waterfront."

He would not call the closure disappointing, adding that he is proud of the role it has played in increasing traffic to the waterfront.

The Hamilton Waterfront Trust, an arm's-length city organization created out of a settlement with the federal government over a decade ago, signed a 43-year lease to take over management of the building from Parks Canada on Tuesday.

But former Liberal MP Sheila Copps, who was heritage minister when the Discovery Centre was created, said the decision to close the museum and educational centre was political, not bureaucratic.

"The original creation of the discovery centres were intended to be enduring and permanent," she said.

The Hamilton centre was intended to be the first in a series of centres meant to make "Parks Canada's urban footprint more accessible to Canadians that live far from National Parks."

Copps said the federal cabinet voted to close the centre three years ago to save money.

The Discovery Centre cost Parks Canada around \$800,000 a year, Blair said.

The first year it opened, there were more than 50,000 visitors, he said. But after adding an entry fee, attendance dropped. It has grown back to 27,000 visitors annually.

"Under our watch that wouldn't have happened, no way it would have closed down," Copps said.

But there is some consolation in the fact that the waterfront trust will take over the site, she said.

That "makes me feel comfortable that there will be a public mandate," Copps said. "Without that, it would have been an orphan."

Werner Plessl, executive director of the Hamilton Waterfront Trust said the centre's closure at the end of this month is disappointing, but he is hopeful development will begin early next year with at least part of the building re-opened by Christmas 2011.

They hope to hear proposals for restaurants, shops and a banquet hall in the fall, he said.

The trust runs all the public areas along the waterfront, including the trolley, trails, Williams Coffee Pub and boat tours. They have 85 staff, with most part-time in the summer.

About 15 months ago the trust signed a lease with Parks Canada for green space, near the Discovery Centre site, Plessl said.

A public skating rink is complete and set to open this winter, but just over \$2 million of the \$4.2-million grant remains. That money was intended to add a separate building, but now Plessl hopes to use that money to build an addition onto the Discovery Centre.

The trust will be responsible for the shell of the building, but tenants would cover their own interior renovation costs, he said.

The addition would also likely house additional Parks Canada staff currently downtown.

Parks Canada has about 30 staff, of which 20 are summer employees who work at the Discovery Centre and HMCS Haida National Historic Site on Pier 9. Since the Haida will continue to be operated by Parks Canada, no staff will lose their jobs, Blair said.

City Councillor Chad Collins, who chairs the waterfront trust board, said they had told Parks Canada of their interest in being involved with the building's development years ago.

"Those discussions blossomed into what we signed Tuesday."

Conservative MP David Sweet echoed Parks Canada's assertion that the change is the "natural transition."

"I think now is a good time for this transition" he said.

The centre has been underutilized, said Lainie Tessier, Bay Area Restoration Council spokesperson.

Tessier said she supports responsible development that brings people to the waterfront.

noreilly@thespec.com

905-526-3199