



1 Washington Crescent, 704
Elliot Lake, ON, P5A 2 W9

November 13, 2023

Ms. Kari Kluke
Director Department of Recreation and Culture
City of Elliot Lake
45 Hillside Drive North
Elliot Lake, ON P5A 1X5

Dear Ms. Kluke:

Re: Round Table held October 22, 2023

Attached please find our report of the community consultation held October 22, 2023. The purpose of the meeting was to explore ways in which the new United Church space could be used to support the Arts community. Over 40 people attended from a diverse group of Elliot Lake citizens.

You will read from the report that most people who attended expressed interest in developing the building as a multifunctional public building with a focus on performance arts. This would include all types of performances including music, theatre, public presentations etc. While the group supported the important work undertaken by the Elliot Lake Museum, many felt that dedicating one of the few public buildings to one single organization or activity was shortsighted particularly when pairing the work of the Museum with other community activities will increase attendance for both parties.

A city is not just a collection of houses, it is a place for individuals and families to feel connected and to build a sense of collective identity. People don't just stay in their home but go out and experience the environment around them. They meet others, participate in mutual interests, attend events, learn new skills, develop friendships and, in short, experience the world around them. When individuals and families choose places to live, they consider more than their new house, they look at available resources in their chosen community.

Elliot Lake has historically experienced an 'embarrassment of riches' due in great part to the vision of past leaders who took advantage of the human and natural resources in the area to build a thriving community with many amenities. This includes activities that take advantage of the beautiful environment that we live in as well as the numerous clubs, guilds, recreational and social activities available to its residents. When considering a move to Elliot Lake, many report that the breadth of activities is one of the main reasons they choose to settle in Elliot Lake.

Recently the city has been challenged with the loss of important community buildings. These losses have been devastating to many and have increased the level of isolation many community members feel. The losses have influenced, and will continue to influence, decisions to locate and stay in Elliot Lake. People will not move to Elliot Lake or raise their children in Elliot Lake if they don't have enough options for healthy recreation or leisure activities. Further, if the city continues to ignore, or minimize the social needs of its residents, particularly the younger members, it will pay the price in increased vandalism, drug and alcohol use and other anti-social behaviours.

The fact that over 40 people came together on a Sunday afternoon is a sign that people still believe that Elliot Lake is worth investing their time and energy to rebuild the town to the glory days it once enjoyed. This report is a testament to that interest.

The community needs the city to harness that interest and energy and work with the community to find solutions to some of these challenges. This is the time to sit with interested community members and look at options for meeting the social and recreational needs of the community. This may include (but not limited to) undertaking an audit of available or unused spaces in the city that can be converted into usable spaces for the community.

We are asking therefore, that the city work with a group of community leaders to help us find ways to increase collaboration and activities for people of all ages and interests.

Sincerely,

Prisca Campbell, Chair

ARIEL

Cc: Andrew Wannan, Acting Mayor
Amelia D'Amato, Museum Curator

Developing a Performing Arts Centre in the Elliot Lake United Church Building
Report From Community Roundtable
Held October 22, 2023

Report Presented: November 10, 2023

By Kathy Jones, BSW, Ph.D

On behalf of ARIEL

Executive Summary

The City of Elliot Lake recently acquired the United Church building located on Hillside Road North across from City Hall. They are currently considering ways in which to use that space.

On October 22, 2023 a group of over 40 community members came together to talk about ways in which that space might be used. A priority for the group was to develop a space that was multifunctional and could be used by a variety of groups for a variety of activities. This is the report of that meeting.

The vast majority of people attending were interested in developing a theatre/performing arts space. This would include concerts, public presentations/lectures, and theatre. People wanted the space to be versatile such that priority be given to building partnerships between interest groups. Some participants suggested that some attention should be paid to building programs/activities for youth who were identified as a high-risk group.

Developing a Performing Arts Centre in the Elliot Lake United Church Building

Report From Community Roundtable

Held October 22, 2023

Preamble

The closing of the CIVIC Centre in 2019 was a great loss to the city and to the Arts/theatre Community. The building was well used by many, represented what was and continues to be unique and special to the City. Some attempts have been made to develop a new space tentatively titled the *Arts Hub*. However, to date, the city has only been able to find funding to develop a small studio space in the old Reel to Reel theatre for Artists/Artisans. This has left many groups, particularly the Performing Arts without space.

Recently Elliot Lake City Council acquired the former United Church building. Some community members felt that this space would be used to house the Elliot Lake Museum and perhaps a small Welcome Centre. Others believe that the building could be developed to allow for a more flexible, multi use space that could host the Museum as well as some of the needs of the Arts/Artisans/Performing Arts community.

It is with this in mind that ARIEL convened a community meeting on Oct 22, 2023 to meet with interested community members to discuss options for the United Church building.

Background

2.1 History

Unlike other towns/cities, Elliot Lake has had a relatively short history. The town was founded in 1955 when Uranium was discovered in the area. Over the first 40 years the fortunes of the town rested on the boom and bust of mining, and to a lesser extent, logging, in the area. The town had a strong workforce paying property taxes offset by support from Mining companies who donated money and resources to build a strong infrastructure for the community. During this period numerous public buildings (the Civic Centre, the Arena, the Mall, the Elliot Lake Centre for example) were constructed, opened, and became an important part of Elliot Lake life.

The arts/artisans/performing arts community developed very quickly in the newly built town. The first theatre group started in 1962 followed by numerous other theatre and musical groups. These included the *Ptarmigan Players*, *ELATE* and the *Elliot Lake Entertainment* series (among others). In 1962 the Art club began followed by numerous groups representing many other arts, crafts and leisure activities.

Art schools also played a big part of the growth of the city. In 1965 The *Elliot Lake Centre* opened and began offering courses. At that time the Premier and cabinet declared that the

Elliot Lake Centre to would develop into the *Banff School of the Arts*. That program morphed into Sault College which, (in 1976) built a satellite campus in Elliot Lake to offer programs in Arts and later other fields in the building that is now Grace Christian Church. Finally, a partnership between the city and a group of First Nation communities partnered and opened White Mountain Academy. Sadly, it closed eight years later.

Perhaps the biggest loss to the Art community was the loss of the Civic Centre in 2019. The Centre had become the Hub of the Arts and Performing Arts community and its loss was profound. The Centre held studios for Artists and Artisans, a theatre for performing art and musicians as well as the Museum and Welcome Centre. The building was very well used. By 2016 the Civic centre had over 5,000 people visiting the Centre as well as hosting 49 events in the building.

2.2 Threats

Public buildings are an important part of a healthy community. During the 'boom' years the Mines supported the city by working with them to build buildings and fund activities to support their growing workforce. Unfortunately, most of those buildings went up between 1970-1980 and funding was not always available to maintain these buildings. The result is the increasing instability and loss of important landmarks in the city. Perhaps one of the biggest recent 'blows' is the closing of the Arena and the attached ballpark and outside skating rink.

As suggested earlier, the Mines closed in 1990 creating a loss and void in the community. Many community members left the community early in the 1990's. Census data shows that the population has steadily declined from a high of 17,800 in 1986, to a low of 11,600 in 2001.

Rebuilding buildings is difficult with a declining population of residents with considerably lower (and often fixed) incomes. The average family income in Elliot Lake is approximately \$32,000 compared to \$68,000 in the general population. Further, 16.6% of Elliot Lake is unemployed. The location of the Town/City also discourages any industry beyond extracting the natural resources in the area. Mining and logging are not options in Elliot Lake at this time.

These threats created an important dilemma for the city. Residents, particularly children and youth need recreational facilities which the city cannot afford without making much harder decisions about the distribution of resources elsewhere. And, at a time of limited resources, hard, and often unpopular decisions need to be made.

2.3 Opportunities

COVID hit the city in 2020 closing down all public spaces and public activities for two years. Residents of Elliot Lake were unable to use facilities like the arena or pool. Normally this would be seen as a 'Risk' but given the fact that COVID began very shortly after the Civic Centre closed,

one could instead call it an opportunity to undertake an evaluation of needs and resources available for residents of Elliot Lake.

Generally when there are shortages in any area, (housing, food, recreational facilities etc.) people tend to become entrenched in their need to protect their own areas of interest. This creates what has been termed 'Silo' thinking by some. However the opportunity that also exists is to look at better ways to use limited resources in a more collaborative manner. For example, developing spaces that can be used by multiple groups/interests for multiple activities.

The Meeting

3.1 Preparing for the Meeting

The community meeting was convened on October 22 at 1 pm. Prior to the meeting the Chair of ARIEL connected with many community organizations, including staff at City Hall, to invite them to the meeting. Notices were put on Facebook for many days prior to the meeting. Between 40-50 people attended the meeting from numerous arts organizations, representatives from the EL Museum and Historical Society, school teachers and community members interested in knowing more about the plans for the church.

The meeting was facilitated by Dr. Kathy Jones. Kathy is a community member, has a Ph.D. in Social Work and has many years of experience in Community Development and facilitating Community Plans. She is also a board member on ARIEL and a member of the Arts Club.

3.1 The Agenda

The agenda/plan for the meeting was as follows:

- Introduction (Facilitator's introduction and review of the days event)
 - review the timeline
 - discuss the diversity of activities
 - Talk about the need to pivot after COVID/ build partnerships
- Round One: (In 4 Groups)- Discuss
 - What Would An Arts Space Look Like?
- Round Two: (In 4 Groups)- Discuss
 - How might we incorporate these ideas into the United Church space.
- Round Three: (In large group)- Priorities

- What would be your top 4 priorities for this space.

3.2 Timeline

Prior to the meeting the facilitator developed a timeline of activities/clubs that opened/started since 1950. The streams outlined in the timeline included;

- History of City including buildings opened and closed
- Mining activities from 1955 to 1990 when the mines closed
- History of Arts Colleges in area
- History of Art/Performance Arts clubs and groups

The timeline showed a rich history of arts activities in Elliot Lake since the first theatre group opened in 1962 and the Art Club opened in 1965. As well, the timeline showed that professional art schools and colleges began developing in 1965 and only ended with the closing of White Mountain Art School in 2006. Finally the timeline showed that Arts activities continue to flourish despite the lack of space, a declining population and the effects of COVID.

3.3 Question #1 What Would an Arts Space Look Like?

Question #1 garnered a lot of creative thinking. In small groups participants brainstormed ideas for building an arts community in Elliot Lake regardless of space and finances. Groups were encouraged to 'think big' and not confine themselves to any particular art form, costs and location.

Some groups floundered, and others did very well with this section of the exercise. Most felt somewhat limited by their knowledge that money was difficult to secure due to competing demands. One group felt a little hope for the community with the pending opening of the new Arts Club building in the old Reel to Reel building. It was noted that this was not really fully public space. They also said that the space was not flexible enough to accommodate new ideas, shows or other community activities.

The facilitator asked groups to consider finding ways to collaborate with other groups in thinking about space. One participant talked about a partnership between the Arts Club and ARIEL in incorporating an Art Gallery in the new Arts Club space.

Two groups took the assignment out of a building and looked at increasing the use of outdoor spaces in the community. Both spoke of the development of an outdoor amphitheatre (similar to the one in Sudbury) in one of the parks in town. They saw this as a cost saving method of increasing opportunities for theatre and music and the use of the town parks. Some people also expressed interest in a permanent outdoor market that could sell produce as well as art and craft items.

In the end, all groups argued that what the community really needed was a performing arts space/centre. They saw it as a space where all types of performing arts (theatre, music, children's recitals etc.) could book and use.

There was a bit of a split on how that might work as some felt the space should be totally dedicated to a theatre with a fixed stage/lighting etc. while others felt that the space should be more portable with a stage that can be assembled and taken down when needed. All groups felt that the stage area, lighting etc. should be a type that all groups (theatre, movies, music, dance) could use.

Finding opportunities for collaboration, exhibit or community space was also seen as a need within most groups. This could include opportunities for classes, guest speakers, exhibits (arts or other community projects). One group talked about incorporating artwork on the moveable walls such that people attending events would be able to enjoy, and perhaps purchase pieces when attending other events.

Another facet of the flexible space could be to incorporate a tea room/refreshment stand to be used during events or shows. The church currently has a kitchen which could be used to support the tea room. The kitchen could also support the use of the building for weddings and other large family or community celebrations.

3.4 Question #2 How might we incorporate these ideas into the United Church space.

As an introduction to this portion of the review, the facilitator talked about managing expectations and looking at finding ways to negotiate to share the United Church space rather than wait for a purposely built space. There was some frustration that there had already been community consultations regarding rebuilding the CIVIC centre and why that project wasn't pursued. A couple of people were curious as to what was happening to the old White Mountain space and wondered if it could be refurbished.

Flowing from previous small group exercise, the consensus was that the group was interested in the development of a theatre space. The other important theme was the need for the space to be flexible to accommodate numerous activities. Many agreed that the Museum was an important part of the city but felt that at a time with diminishing resources and diminishing public spaces whether dedicating an entire building to one group or activity was short sighted.

Most of the people in the room felt that there should be a way to share space with the museum. Most believed that the Museum should be housed in the basement as it would have garner less traffic than a performing arts space. They also felt that the basement was a better place to store artifacts that needed to be mounted and displayed in a semi permanent manner leaving the upstairs as more flexible space.

One of the challenges presented by the Facilitator in the first group session was ways that both groups could incorporate each others activities into their own. One woman suggested that the same moveable walls proposed for the upstairs space and display cabinets of museum artifacts (with casters) could be brought in during events to increase the profile of the Museum to a wider range of people. Another suggested adding a film or activity with a similar theme as the museum displays.

There were a number of people in the group that had been involved with the local choir and spoke of the excellent acoustics in the church. They were somewhat concerned that the installation of moveable walls might dampen those acoustics but felt that this could be rectified with the thoughtful placement of the walls.

Two teachers participated in one of the groups. They made a compelling argument for keeping in mind the needs of the youth, particularly teens in the development of the space. They argued that there were not enough community spaces that offered teen programming and the result is, in their estimation, a growing group of higher risk youth in the community. While the church space may not be the best space for youth programming (beyond movie night etc.) it is worth considering doing a further program review to look at options (current and future) for youth in the community.

3.5 Priorities/Discussion

After all groups had presented the Facilitator provided each participant with four coloured 'dots' and asked each to put a sticker in front of their four top priorities. This part of the presentation was very thoughtfully done and really represented people's final thoughts about the project.

Overwhelmingly participants wanted the space to be used a public space for a variety of activities. They saw the importance of developing a Performing Arts space but wanted the flexibility to also use the space for movies, concerts, large groups etc. They wanted the space to be cost effective so that groups could book and use the space at a reasonable cost.

Most people believed that the museum should be housed in the basement with exhibits displayed upstairs when possible. They also felt that the Museum might use the upstairs space for special exhibits or shows.

A smaller group felt that some attention should be paid to ensuring that there are activities for kids and youth. They argued that the Arena had been an important place for young people to undertake healthier activities and that the loss of the Arena was particularly hard for the youth in the community, many of which were high risk for drug and alcohol abuse. They felt that including a regular program of healthier activities for youth in the space would reduce some of the vandalism and illegal activities in the community. This has been demonstrated by numerous studies in other high-risk communities that showed that increasing activities targeted to youth does reduce vulnerability in youth and makes a healthier community.

3.6 Funding

One of the issues noted was the cost of converting the church into a Performing Arts Centre. One participant talked about applying to the Rick Hanson foundation for costs associated with making the church fully accessible. Another group of participants thought a 'gofundme' campaign might raise some needed money. It was clear that there were people in the room that were interested in helping fund raise for the project. ARIEL has also expressed interest in helping facilitate the development of a group that will meet with representatives in City Hall to determine a reasonable fund-raising plan.

Conclusion

Raising money and developing new facilities is difficult in the best of times. It is much more difficult when money is very tight and there are many other priorities. However, the options for a successful campaign are generally much better when groups work collaboratively and work towards sharing resources. It is important to note that over 40 people attended this event, the vast majority because they believed this town needed a Performing Arts facility. This is a unique group, different than groups arguing for sports facilities and spaces. This is also a group that have historically been very good at developing and maintaining the Arts in Elliot Lake and are prepared to help make the Centre a priority. A follow-up meeting with the City may well prove fruitful in finding ways to make this project a reality.

Respectfully submitted

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Kathy Jones', with a stylized, flowing script.

Kathy Jones, BSW, Ph.D