

REPORT OF THE MUSEUM CURATOR

Re: 40 Hillside Drive North Cultural Facility Operating Plan

RECOMMENDATION

That Council approve staff's operational plan of the proposed Cultural Facility located at 40 Hillside Drive North, to have the main floor function as a Welcome Centre and a hybrid museum and performing arts space, and the basement used for storage and other staff operations.

BACKGROUND

On September 25th, 2023, Elliot Lake Council approved the purchase of the 40 Hillside Drive North property. This purchase was made with the understanding that this building could bridge current operational deficiencies, with the recommendation that the City's museum and Welcome Centre function out of this facility. In order to minimize the expenses, effort, and timeline involved in this renovation project, it was further recommended that public access be limited to the main floor of the building.

Since the consequential loss of the Lester B. Pearson Civic Centre in 2019, the museum and Welcome Centre have been displaced and without a permanent home. The museum found temporary residence in 2019 in Hillside Plaza but the size and location of this facility was not conducive to hosting exhibits for public visitation nor providing ample workspace for storage and archiving the collection. Operations for the museum have since been hosted out of the Collins Hall with storage of the largely undocumented collection at Rio Den in a humidity controlled room. This leaves little opportunity for the public to interact with the collections aside from pop-up exhibits at the Elliot Lake Public Library and certain community events.

The Welcome Centre has experienced the same issue with permanent housing, bouncing around from the Westview Trailer Park, Collins Hall, and City Hall. Visitors seeking information have similarly been shuffled between these locations before receiving satisfactory answers to their queries. This inconsistency of venue and operating hours puts a strain on public relations and our ability to offer reliable services, as well as interrupting the regular operations at the Collins Hall and City Hall. To best serve visitors and residents, it is imperative that the Welcome Centre finds a permanent residence in a centralized location with consistent business hours.

On October 22nd, 2023, ARIEL (a community organization that functions as Elliot Lake's Arts Council) conducted a community consultation to explore ways in which the 40 Hillside Drive North property could

support the Arts community. Input from the 40-50 participants led to a conclusion that the space should be multi-functional so that it can be used by multiple groups for various activities. Emphasis was placed on developing the main floor assembly area into a performing arts space—theatre, concerts, recitals, public presentations—but other suggested uses included accommodating weddings and other large celebrations, youth programming, and movie theatre presentations.

ANALYSIS

Staff recognizes the input offered at ARIEL's meeting, and agrees that there is an opportunity to utilize the former United Church as a performance venue for small events and as a place to have small gatherings. Staff is also of the opinion that by putting some consideration into the design of this facility, there is an opportunity to create a unique cultural space that can serve as a means by which to share Elliot Lake's strong and varied community performance programming as well as its collection of historical artefacts with visitors and residents alike. It is staff's opinion that the opportunities to incorporate aspects of what have traditionally been separate programming streams in a cohesive way can improve the quality and uniqueness of the City's cultural programming, and can serve to create a unique tourism asset that also serves the needs of its constituents.

Based upon the information available, it is staff's recommendation that the 40 Hillside Drive North facility be retrofitted to accommodate a Welcome Centre and hybrid museum and performing arts space on the main floor, and a storage and working space for the museum's heritage collection and archiving activities in the basement.

The Welcome Center would inhabit a counter and office space at the main entrance of the facility to accommodate tourist information queries and to facilitate the rental of the City's campsites, parks, and boat launch. The location is central and easy to find for visitors, and the two points of entrance into the parking area could accommodate those pulling large trailers.

The proposal of a hybrid museum and performing arts space for the assembly area on the main floor would allow for the space to be multi-functional and accommodate various arts groups and organizations in the community seeking a venue for their activities, while providing a publicly accessible exhibition space for the City's extensive heritage collection. Positioned on the main floor, the museum will be more visible and the Welcome Centre will be able to easily direct tourists to visit and experience Elliot Lake's collective heritage and cultural offerings.

The space designated to the museum for exhibition in the Lester B. Pearson Civic Centre was 3,787 SF, with the specifications for storage unknown as this was spread throughout the building. While the 2,454 SF of the assembly space at the 40 Hillside Drive North facility is significantly less than the museum's former allotted area for exhibition, the vision is to make the most of the space through a modular design, emphasizing circulating exhibitions and accommodating travelling ones.

With this framework, the museum would be composed of both permanent and temporary exhibits, with the stage area as adjunct space for video viewing experiences or other interactive displays. Permanent exhibits of our core collections would exist on the perimeter of the assembly area, and modular displays



and seating would be arranged in the center. These center displays would be flexible units or panels, able to be easily disassembled or rearranged to accommodate bookings at the facility.

Outside of museum operating hours, the assembly space could be used by various performing arts groups or organizations for rehearsal and performance opportunities, or other activities. The 40 Hillside Drive North venue would be available as ancillary performance and activity space to the Collins Hall, for more intimate gatherings. The occupancy capacity for the main floor assembly area of the 40 Hillside Drive North facility, with non-fixed seating, is approximately 300 people (subject to the particulars of the pending final design of the space). For reference, the capacity for the Collins Hall, with the same parameters, is 725 people. Although these are the maximum occupancy limits, Collins Hall *comfortably* seats approximately 550 people, so we must apply the same reasoning to the 40 Hillside Drive North facility when imagining a realistic, comfortable occupancy, while also keeping in mind that equipment, like sound and light, and permanent installations will further reduce occupancy capacity. Due to the comprehensive sound and lighting system installed at the Collins Hall facility, it is recommended that this investment be prioritized for update, and that an additional system be implemented at the new facility.

Moving museum storage on-site to the 40 Hillside Drive North facility would help consolidate and streamline museum operations. Storing the collections at Rio Den compromises the utility of this facility whose space can be optimized for more suited uses. Removing the collection from this location would free up the staff time and resources needed to check and maintain the environmental controls of the designated storage area. The Rio Den storage is an intermediary solution as the lack of weatherproofing and HVAC system leaves the entire collection at risk to be compromised should our environmental controls fail. In particular, failure and leaking from dehumidifiers, in several instances, has led to damage and costly rental equipment and staff callouts.

Using the basement of the 40 Hillside Drive North facility for storage will provide a safe environment for the collection, will eliminate the transportation of artefacts back and forth (which requires manpower and invites risk of loss or damage), and will also allow for the space necessary to continue properly archiving and monitoring the collection. Ample workspace is needed when working with the collection as each artefact needs to be assessed, cleaned, photographed, recorded, and stored. The water and counter space in the basement kitchen, attached to the proposed storage area, will be essential for the cleaning and care of the collection.

The 2,131 SF available in the basement of 40 Hillside Drive North for storage in combination with the 2,454 SF of hybrid exhibition space on the main floor creates a total of 4,585 SF. This is roughly the same amount of space as what we can estimate was available to the museum whilst housed in the Civic Centre, just with more space prioritized for storage and upkeep than exhibition. It is anticipated that a significant portion of this space will be required for the storage of seating for the main floor performance venue, but these design details would have to be clarified during the commissioning of the facility.

FINANCIAL IMPACT



Without direction on the design and use of the 40 Hillside Drive North property, it is difficult to speculate on the costs for renovating the facility. With a clearly defined project scope, estimates for the renovations of the facility can be sought as well as provincial and federal funding to offset the amount taken from the Arts and Culture reserve to realize this project. A mandatory renovation to make the main floor viable for public use is the addition of accessible washrooms and entrances which will likely further limit the main floor square footage.

Stationing the museum on the main floor of the facility and using the basement for storage offsets certain operating and renovating costs. This would decrease the amount of full-time staff necessary to run the facility as museum staff can oversee the Welcome Centre throughout off-season months (October-April). This could also eliminate the necessity of installing an elevator between floors to ensure the facility is accessible as a single-use space, as the basement level will only be occupied by staff.

In alternative solutions, such as having the museum occupy the basement level with storage off-site and the main floor reserved for rental space, an additional full-time staff would be required so that both levels remain secure. Moreover, both levels would need to be renovated fully in preparation of public reception, whereas the layout, floors, and walls of the basement can remain relatively untouched, aside from needed upkeep, should access of the basement be limited to staff.

Incorporating a performing arts space into the facility would come with certain capital costs including an accessible stage area, non-fixed seating and tables, as well as a sound and light system.

Due to the cost and irreplaceable nature of the City's heritage collections, it is Staff's strong opinion that oversight of the facility must remain with staff and volunteers specifically trained in the care and handling of the artefacts as well as the museum's policies and procedures to ensure their safety and integrity. Due to the liability inherent in the value of the collection, it is important that the facility remain under City staff care and not be outsourced to a third party so that all public access can be carefully monitored.

This proposed use of the 40 Hillside Drive North facility would generate revenue through the typical Welcome Centre operations (camp site reservations, boat slip passes, park permits), museum gift shop, and rental fees for the assembly area. Through this proposal, the entirety of the facility will be optimized and not remain underutilized or vacant should there be limited rental of the main floor assembly area in the case that this space be solely designated to performing arts and other activities.

LINKS TO STRATEGIC PLAN

This project aligns with the City's Strategic Plan to:

- Support the Arts and Culture Community
 - To build a strategic, vibrant, relevant museum for the future
 - To cultivate in the citizens of Elliot Lake an appreciation of arts and culture through accessible programming, arts and cultural facilities and entertainment that is available to all citizens



- To further develop successful relationships with the diverse and vibrant arts and culture organizations within the community
- To maintain and improve arts and cultural facilities

SUMMARY

To maximize the use of the newly acquired 40 Hillside Drive North property, it is staff's recommendation that the main floor be available for public use, with the entrance retrofitted for a Welcome Centre and accessible washrooms, and the assembly area used as a hybrid museum and rentable performing arts space, while the basement be assigned for staff use, for storage and workspace. This proposal envisions a multi-functional space which can accommodate a variety of performing arts, programming, events, presentations, and other activities, while providing access to our community's heritage and ensuring our collections are protected for future generations. With the information available, this operational plan provides the most cost and time effective solution to have the 40 Hillside Drive North facility open to the public, and with approval of this project outline, staff can begin plans for renovations and funding opportunities.

