

Niagara Falls Review Local News

Building a low-risk convention centre; Design-build plan puts onus on builder

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Plans for the Niagara Convention and Civic Centre are taking shape, but it will be later this year before anyone knows how the building will look.

"Now that we have a game plan in place, a lot of people are curious to see what the convention centre will look like," said Dragan Matovic, project director for the \$92-million centre to be built on Stanley Avenue, about 500 metres west of the Horseshoe Falls.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any information. Sorry to tease you," he said at a luncheon Wednesday hosted by the Niagara Falls Canada Chamber of Commerce.

But the "design-build procurement process" being used for the convention centre means private companies that will bid on the project will be responsible for the design, said Matovic.

It's a different way to build from what developers of private hotels and attractions are used to. When private hotel owners want to expand, they typically hire an architect, then a builder to go from blueprint to concrete.

In a design-build contract, the city will provide general specifications about what the convention centre should include, then ask companies to submit proposals.

Each proposal will have its own architect, and therefore its own unique design, Matovic said.

The advantage of a design-build contract is that it guarantees the price and timetable.

"This method transfers the risk of cost overruns from the city to the winning proponent," Matovic said.

It's an increasingly popular way for the public sector to protect taxpayers in building projects.

It's similar to the way the provincial government built the Niagara Fallsview Casino Resort. Falls Management Co., a partnership led by Hyatt Hotels, won the competition to design and build the four-year-old casino complex.

In the summer, the convention centre board will issue a request for proposals, asking construction companies, architects and engineers to submit their own designs and bid on the project.

Some of Ontario's prominent construction companies, including PCL which built the Fallsview casino, and Ellis-Don have already expressed interest in building the convention centre, Matovic said. Their inquiries were forwarded to a project management company hired by city hall.

"There is a fairly significant interest in doing this building," Matovic said.

In public presentations, Matovic has been using a drawing to give audiences a sense of what it could look like.

Studies indicate a convention centre could generate \$93 million in new spending in Niagara's tourism economy. It could encourage \$100 million in new private-sector development, a figure Matovic said was conservative because the cost of a new high-rise hotel is about \$50 million.

"If only a fraction of these benefits materialize, one could say a convention centre makes sense for Niagara Falls," Matovic said.

Operators of other attractions are eager to see the facility bring convention business to Niagara Falls in the fall and winter.

Tim Parker, the general manager for Ripley's Entertainment, said more off-season business is the "driving force" in his company's decision to build a \$70-million aquarium.

"The most important thing for us is to have that off-season business. That's what makes or breaks our big attractions," Parker said after Matovic's speech.

Matovic used the chamber of commerce lunch to introduce the convention centre's general manager Kerry Painter, who arrived in April after running a convention centre in Slidell, La. near New Orleans.

Painter spent her first weeks as an "anonymous tourist."

The quality of existing attractions will make Niagara Falls an appealing option for meeting planners who book large conventions, she said. "Most convention centres never start with this kind of calibre of hotels, food and wine and warm, hospitable people. So I know this is going to be a success," Painter said.