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## New convention centre needed now, proponents tell open house

Critics say business case just isn't there

By MICHAEL LIGHTSTONE City Hall Reporter | UPDATED 1:44 p.m.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This story has been updated. Due to an editing error, an earlier version was incorrect. This is the correct version.*

Economic development in Halifax is at a critical point and needs a new course that a proposed downtown convention centre could set, an open house heard Wednesday.

Supporter Bernie Smith said the consequences could be dire if the plan doesn't proceed.

"I think there's a sort of psychological watershed here, that if this doesn't go ahead, people will say: 'Ho-hum. So much for the downtown. It's too difficult to develop there — we'll think about it in five years.' "

Smith, of the Spring Garden Area Business Association, said if the contentious proposal doesn't fly and developer Rank Inc. uses the Argyle Street site for something less grand, "I don't think Plan B would have the same immediacy."

Project boosters say a new convention centre would revitalize the sagging downtown core.

But Mayor Peter Kelly, a convention centre backer, said the proposed structure needs to be more than just a meeting place for delegates from large organizations. He suggested it could be part convention centre and part performing arts centre and also include other elements in its design.

Proponents hosted the first of two open houses this week — the second is set for today at noon — and presented their case for going ahead with the development of the Argyle Street site of the demolished Halifax Herald Ltd. building.

Opponents say there isn't a business case to support such a project but supporters say just the opposite. Proposal foes are also worried about sightlines from Citadel Hill to Halifax Harbour being affected.

Allan Robertson, a retired management consultant, supports the concept of a new convention centre and acknowledged the value of tourism to Halifax and its environs. But he's not at all keen on this proposal, one that includes two towers that opponents have said are inappropriate for the site.

Scott Ferguson, president and CEO of Trade Centre Ltd., said it remains to be seen what the final blueprint will look like.

"If the developer can't sell a 14-storey office tower, he's not going to build it," he said. "We need to wait and see what he's proposing" at the end of the planning process, Ferguson said.

Rank Inc. has until July 19 to submit a detailed proposal to the Dexter government.

Neither the province nor Halifax regional council has made a decision on the project because each level of government is waiting for the final proposal to be submitted.

Officials from Trade Centre Ltd., a provincial Crown corporation, are hosting the open houses. Last week, the public debate over the development sparked duelling sales pitches.

Convention centre boosters essentially hijacked a news conference that the Coalition to Save the View had organized to present an opposing position. The coalition suggests renovations to the World Trade and Convention Centre would be a lower-cost alternative to building a new one nearby.

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