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New convention centre: Dexter takes right tack

DEBATE over a new convention centre for Halifax is heating up, as if in a convection oven. But Darrell Dexter is playing it cool.

"I have said all along that whatever project comes forward has to be the right project," the premier told The Chronicle Herald in a recent interview. "The only thing people have seen so far is a kind of a visual representation of what a proposal might look like."

We agree. An artist's conception does not a concrete proposal make. Apart from how the view from the Citadel might be affected, there are many other factors to consider, not the least of which is economic viability. "We want to see the right business case," Mr. Dexter said. "The decision needs to be on the basis of fact and on an actual proposal. I mean, the convention centre has become a symbol rather than a reality."

The province is waiting to examine the nuts and bolts of Rank Group's proposal for the former Herald building site. Without provincial support, and an investment of tens of millions of dollars of taxpayers' money, the project won't get off the ground. On April 19, Infrastructure Renewal Minister Bill Estabrooks is expected to make a recommendation to cabinet on whether to back the development, which could cost at least \$300 million, once you factor in private investment in an adjacent hotel, plus an office tower and retail space.

The three levels of government are being tapped to kick in about one-third of the cost. HRM Mayor Peter Kelly is firmly in the camp of the convention-centre boosters, calling it a no-brainer because of the economic spinoffs the city stands to realize from increased visits. So far, Ottawa remains on the sidelines.

In the public arena, a healthy debate has erupted between citizens who believe debt-ridden governments can ill afford to sink more money into a P3 project and those who believe such a project would be the perfect catalyst for Halifax's renaissance after decades of construction stagnation downtown.

Some analysts say the convention boosters are betting on the wrong horse — the industry is in decline, they claim, and will be further undermined by technology and climbing oil prices. Others argue Halifax is well-positioned to tap into the mid-sized convention market. Furthermore, it has a ready-made clientele in the plethora of national associations that hold annual meetings which are rotated around the country on a regular basis.

The current World Trade and Convention Centre does not fit the bill because it is too small. On the other hand, one should not expect a new convention centre to completely defray its own

bills, or operating costs, Mr. Dexter said. "Convention centres, they don't carry themselves in any jurisdiction, so far as I know. The question is one of economic benefit that comes from having them. So we want to have a pretty close look at that," he said.

"There is a lot of enthusiasm in Halifax for a new convention centre, and we feel it the same as everyone does. But ... if you canvass the business community closely enough, they'll say, 'We just don't want any project. We want a project that makes sense.' "

Mr. Dexter has hit the nail on the head.

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