



STAFF REPORT

THE CORPORATION OF THE TOWN OF COBOURG

Community Services, Protection, and Economic Development Standing Committee

Report to: Mayor, Deputy Mayor, and Councillors
From: Brian Geerts; Director, Community Services
Standing Committee Date: November 27, 2024
Report Number: COMM-2024-024
Council Meeting Date: December 18, 2024
Subject: **Fire Hall Theatre Proposal - Update**

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1. Recommendation:

WHEREAS the Committee adopt the following recommendation and refer to Regular Council for final approval.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT Council receive this report for information purposes; and

FURTHER THAT Council congratulates the Northumberland Players for their longevity and continuing positive impact in the town; and

FURTHER THAT Council considers the arts to be integral to a thriving town as noted in the Strategic Plan and Culture Master Plan; and

FURTHER THAT Council commends the Northumberland Players on the professionalism and detail included within their proposal; and

FURTHER THAT Council encourages the Northumberland Players to further focus and develop improvement ideas for the Fire Hall Theatre building to

provide a modern, accessible, enjoyable, and home-town experience but at a smaller scale to provide targeted improvements; and

FURTHER THAT Council encourages the Northumberland Players to continue to deliver intimate small-audience experiences in the Fire Hall Theatre and continue to partner with local facilities (including the Town's Concert Hall) to provide larger-scale shows.

2. Executive Summary:

At the Committee meeting of September 5, 2024, representatives of the Northumberland Players presented an exciting concept of expanding the Fire Hall Theatre building to provide a lobby, expanded washrooms, box office, and improved accessibility. In addition, the concept would add approximately 25 seats to the theatre and may improve visibility through the removal of supporting pillars in the building (subject to engineering review).

3. Background

At the Committee meeting on September 5, 2024, the following motion was approved:

Moved By: Miriam Mutton
Seconded by: Brian Darling

WHEREAS at the Corporate Finance and Legislative Standing Committee meeting on September 5, 2024, the Committee considered the delegation from Victor Svenningson, Jack Boyagian, Bill Walker, Jackie Tinson, Lyndsey Sneddon on behalf of the Northumberland Players regarding renovations to the Fire Hall Theatre.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT Council refer the delegation from Victor Svenningson, Jack Boyagian, Bill Walker, Jackie Tinson, Lyndsey Sneddon on behalf of the Northumberland Players regarding renovations to staff for a report back at the December 18, 2024 Regular Meeting.

The Northumberland Players provide a wide variety of theatre experiences for the residents of Cobourg, and beyond.

[Home - Northumberland Players](#)

The Players have used the Fire Hall adjacent to Victoria Hall as a theatre since 1986 under lease. The current lease term was renewed in 2019 and expires February 27, 2029.

4. Discussion:

The Northumberland Players provide a wide variety of engaging performances and activities for residents year-round, as noted in their performance data included on their website: [Home - Northumberland Players](#)

As noted in a staff report in the October 2024 meeting cycle regarding a proposed YMCA facility on the CCC Campus, there are several steps that **any** project goes through to go from ‘initial idea’ to ‘construction’. There’s varying amounts of work to determine whether an idea is feasible; this means reviewing whether the idea is possible, and if so, it is also the best idea considering alternatives. The following highlights demonstrate some of the due diligence that is required when considering a new facility or an expansion of a current facility in culture & recreation services:

- Needs Assessment:
 - Demographics, housing growth, economic growth, population distribution and segmentation
- Current Facility Usage and Capacity Review:
 - Capacity Reports, events and ticket sales reports, program enrollment numbers, other quantitative data and community feedback
- Geographic access & equity:
 - Map and assess current facility distribution and compare to customer maps; analyze travel patterns (how far are customers willing to travel), and ensure equity in access.
- Identifying Unmet needs, future trends, and anticipating needs, flexibility in design to meet changing needs over time

Beyond the initial research, further work is required regarding technical feasibility:

- Sample of criteria for evaluating sites:
 - Accessibility
 - Zoning & Permitting
 - Future-proofing
 - Environmental Impact – flood risk & drainage
 - Heritage considerations & impact
 - Community context
 - Integration with existing services
 - Geotechnical, hydrological
 - Utility access, energy needs, sewage and water capacity

Considering the annual success and the range in size of events that the Northumberland Players offers annually, they may to have the capacity to expand from a program/events perspective. However, considering the availability of other theatre/event space on the Victoria Hall Campus (Concert Hall), the proposed expansion may be a duplication of existing services.

The main challenges proposed in the Northumberland Players presentation were: lack of box office, lack of lobby, limited seating, limited physical accessibility (even on the ground floor). Directly adjacent to the theatre building is Victoria Hall, which has a large lobby, a larger theatre space (including dressing rooms, call system, and practice space), and accessible features such as level entryways, clear signage, and an elevator. While staff recognize the operational challenges in working out of two buildings, a significant expansion directly next to a facility with comparable spaces needs to be carefully evaluated.

Following a tour of the Fire Hall Theatre facility, staff noted that the Northumberland Players have significantly invested in the interior of the building and maintain a very active and professional presence. Their due diligence, energy, and passion for the arts were evident in their programming and how they maintained and designed the interior of the Fire Hall. Current improvements include new lighting, painting, washroom upgrades, and more. Staff and the Northumberland Players maintain a collaborative approach in providing complimentary programming and coordinating technical support and details for shows and events on the Victoria Hall campus.

Cultural Master Plan

Theatre is reflected and aligns well with the Cobourg Culture Master Plan 2019. The ongoing contributions of the Northumberland Players align with all 6 strategic directions of the Plan:

- Strategic Direction #1 – Embrace and Communicate A Shared Vision of Culture Across the Town
 - Objective: The town of Cobourg embraces a shared vision for culture that extends to a wide range of arts, culture and heritage groups, the Public Library, community groups, local businesses, and service organizations.
- Strategic Direction #2 – Improve Communication and Collaboration Within the Cultural Sector
 - Objective: The Town of Cobourg fosters opportunities for dialogue among cultural partners and invites residents to engage and participate in cultural activities.
- Strategic Direction #3 – Promote Cobourg’s Rich History and Heritage
 - Objective: The Town of Cobourg celebrates and promotes its cultural heritage resources in a way that enhances its unique identity and supports economic and tourism development goals.
- Strategic Direction #4 – Grow Culture-Led Economic Development Programs
 - Objective: The Town of Cobourg creates an environment that allows for the growth of cultural ideas and cultural entrepreneurs.
- Strategic Direction #5 – Strengthen Tourism Products by Leveraging Unique Cultural Assets

- Objective: The Town of Cobourg recognizes and supports the growth of cultural tourism as an economic driver.
- Strategic Direction #6 – Increase Community Engagement Among Youth and Volunteers
 - Objective: The Town of Cobourg improves youth and volunteer involvement in arts and culture across the community through effective collaboration and partnerships.

The reader may be interested in reading more about partnerships and the Town's fiscal responsibilities on page 19 of the Plan: [423-19-Cultural-Master-Plan.pdf](#)

Parks Master Plan

The Parks Master Plan highlights Victoria Square as a key component of the downtown as activity centre and cultural hub.



Figure 1: Victoria Square, as noted in the Parks Master Plan 2013

Heritage Master Plan

The Heritage Master Plan ([Heritage-Master-Plan_Final_2016.pdf](#)) provides detailed commentary and an implementation strategy to protect significant cultural heritage resources over the long term. The general goals of the plan may be in alignment with the concept proposal, but detailed review and comment would be required.

1. Protect and conserve significant cultural heritage resources over the long term.
2. The small-town character of Cobourg (typified by the commercial core, low rise development, comfortable streetscapes, and a mix of land uses) is important to maintain and enhance.
3. It is important to have the downtown as the economic and cultural hub of the Town to retain the small-town character.
4. The waterfront is a significant defining feature of the community that provides a critical link to the downtown and an important recreational area.
5. Retaining the broader character of the streetscape and neighbourhoods is equally important to conserving individual buildings.
6. Investment and new development that is compatible with the character of the surrounding area should be encouraged and facilitated

Downtown Master Plan

The Downtown Master Plan highlights (1 & 4, below) as significant areas related to the Northumberland Players Proposal:



Figure 2: Downtown Master Plan highlights areas noted 1 & 4

HEART OF DOWNTOWN COBOURG

- 1 The 'Heart of Downtown Cobourg' - includes implementing the Victoria Square Plan and expansion of the market. (Assumes the space is multi-functional and can transition between a parking lot and public space.)
- 4 Opportunity to convert Second Street as a pedestrian street that permits limited vehicular circulation and can be used for public events and as an expansion of Victoria Square.

Victoria Square – Revitalization Plan

The proposed theatre expansion area, south of the existing Fire Hall theatre building, would impact the Cobourg Market Square revitalization plans, discussed in 1999 and most recently reviewed in 2019. The plans contemplated a multi-use pedestrian-scale public space including the area south of the Fire Hall Theatre building.

It may be prudent in the future to consider both a Fire Hall Theatre expansion and the Market Square improvements in tandem, as part of a major revitalization of the area.

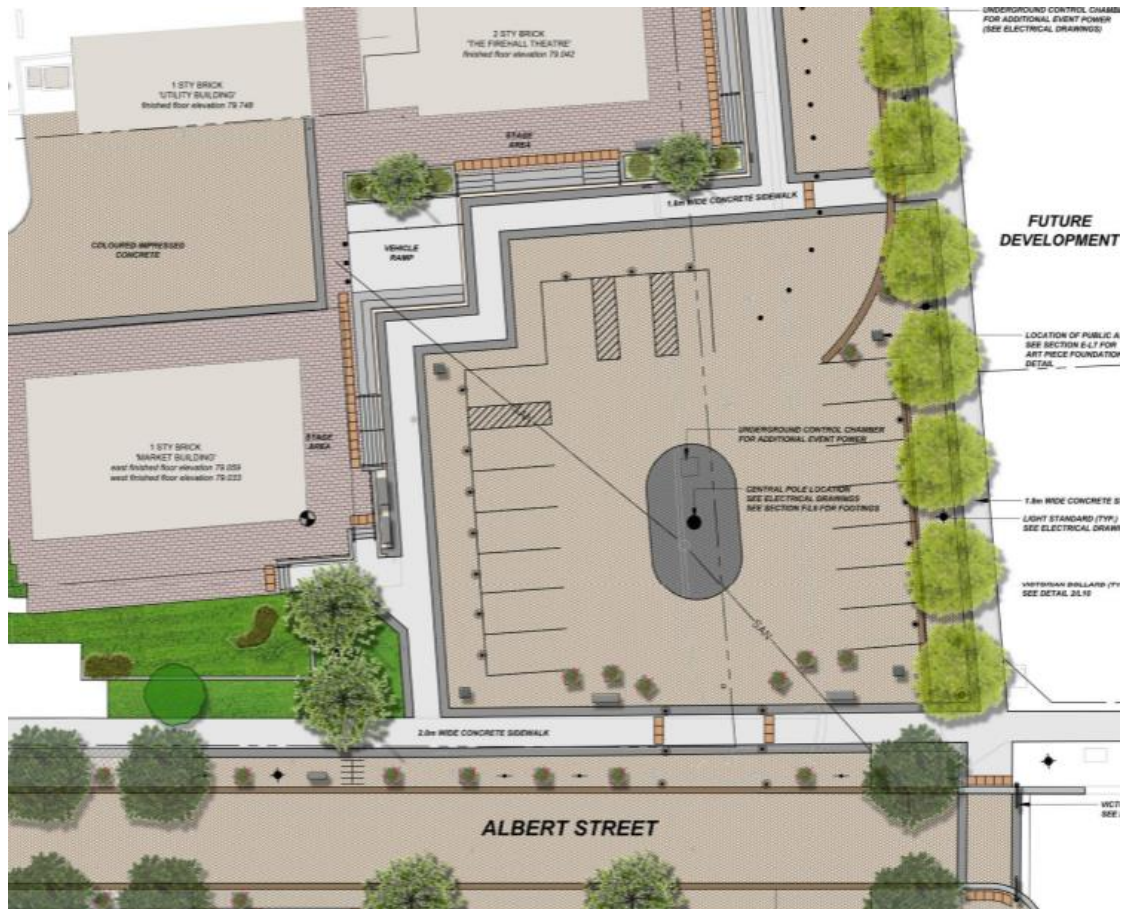


Figure 3: Sample of Market Square revitalization plan

MARKET MODE



Aerial View - looking north east from Albert Street and Third Street

EVENT MODE



Aerial View - looking north west towards the Firehall Theatre from Second Street

BUSINESS MODE



Aerial View - looking north east from Albert Street

Figure 4: Market Square was contemplated to operate as a multi-modal model

5. Financial Impact and Budget

At this time, there is no cost to the Town based on the existing proposal beyond the staff time related to this report.

Historically, the Town has not consistently evaluated the opportunity costs of ultra-low-income leases for recreational and cultural uses. Existing recreational leases are very ad-hoc and based on the community and facility needs of the time. Based on the current lease of the Fire Hall, the Town will continue to maintain the building envelope and shared parking areas of the Firehall Theatre funded primarily through taxes until at least 2029.

However, the Culture Master Plan *strongly* supports the Town's current approach of a complementary mix of direct investment and partnerships in culture and the arts.

6. Relationship to Council's Strategic Plan Priorities 2023 to 2027 and beyond:

Thriving Community

Provide the physical infrastructure to support a healthy community that will enable each of us to flourish and reach our full potential

Service Excellence

Build our capacity to deliver.

Sustainability

Consider the opportunity cost as well as the financial cost.

7. Public Engagement:

This report was posted publicly on the Committee and Council agendas as part of the updated governance model, and is heavily informed by master plans that involved thorough public consultation.

8. Attachments:

N/A

Report Approval Details

Document Title:	Fire Hall Theatre Expansion Proposal.docx
Attachments:	
Final Approval Date:	Nov 7, 2024

This report and all of its attachments were approved and signed as outlined below:

Tracey Vaughan, Chief Administrative Officer - Nov 7, 2024 - 1:09 PM