



COLLABORATING FOR COMMUNITY SUCCESS

by Mark Hentze, Principal CEI Architecture

The recently opened Poirier Sport & Leisure Complex in Coquitlam is truly a testament to the success of community collaboration and shows what communities can do when they set their minds to achieving great things. CEI Architecture were privileged to be part of the team that assisted in the completion of the City's flagship recreation facility, and the perspective we wish to share with RFABC membership is to recap how the public consultation process not only allowed the project to meet the programmatic needs but how it frankly helped to save the project from potential cancellation.

When we began with initial project design meetings in fall of 2006, we had no idea that the user group meetings that would follow in winter of 2007 would have such a dramatic and positive influence on the project. By the time those program confirmation and user group meeting started we began to realize the complexities and challenges being faced by a separate but related City project (the then under construction new aquatics centre) were causing enough doubt that the City needed to re-examine whether moving forward with the remainder of the project still made sense.

Our successful proposal had included a process we call a Design Charrette in which we had proposed to include stakeholder groups and staff directly in the concept design. We'd used this process on a number of BC projects such as Gibsons Community Centre and Armstrong Arena and knew it was a good way to initiate a consensus based concept design and were aware that in Coquitlam there was a desire to make sure the program would capture the need of the very active community. What we didn't realize is that those consultation sessions with the user groups would totally transform the project and allow it to go forward and at even larger magnitude than originally anticipated.

17 specific user groups attended multiple meetings, sometimes as individual groups, sometimes collectively and usually with the participation of key parks and recreation programming and operations staff. The initial sessions were sometimes a bit tense as some stakeholders sensed that the project might not be able to meet their needs. Over time trust was built and these user groups worked together to distinguish "needs" from "wants" and began to creatively come up with ideas that would create multi-functionality and efficiency. The shining example (of which there were many) is that with the assistance of key Coquitlam staff, the Curlers and Figure Skaters banded together to propose that if a second sheet of new ice were provided, they would be able to share primary use, and that if that sheet of ice were sized to meet NHL standards of 200 x 85', should either sport ever wane in popularity, the City could cost effectively convert the space to a hockey/ lacrosse venue. This kind of thinking became the norm in the consultation sessions with staff and user groups and allowed us to creatively confirm a program that could meet the demonstrable need in the community.

Once the program had been established, we knew very quickly that the area required to suit the program was not doable within the then \$31M project budget. Knowing this in advance of the Design Charrette was crucial as it allowed the City and design team to strategically develop a plan for the charrette implementation plan that would allow two options to be developed in concert with one another. The first option would be to develop a concept that fit as much of the program as possible into a \$31M budget, while the second option was to develop the needed program and then cost it.

On the eve of the Design Charrette the project team was bolstered by the addition of Storrier Consulting Group as project manager and TASK Construction Manager as the construction manager. This proved to be timely as both groups were able to participate meaningfully with the rest of the design team in the charrette process therefore ensuring that programming, design, construction, budgetary, permitting and operations issues would all be able to be addressed effectively during the charrette.

The charrette occurred over a 4 day period held right in the lounge of the old curling rink which contributed to the entire group's acute awareness of how badly the facility needed replacement and more importantly how great a renewed centre could in fact be. By the conclusion of the charrette a successful open house was held that showed both design options and their associated costs. As construction pricing ran rampant, our entire consulting team felt sure that while the programmatically complete option had been a fun exercise it was inconceivable that the City of Coquitlam would choose to spend more money rather than less and felt it was simply a formality that we would proceed with the \$31M option that did its best to meet programmatic needs, however imperfectly.

That's when we found out just how powerful public consultation and consensus building can be. Over a series of meetings with City Council in which the two primary options were presented and discussed, a sense that the program focused option actually had a chance to be realized began to emerge. Council recognized that not only did the program make sense to a City looking towards its future, but it was also supported and validated by those 17 users groups, who literally represented thousands of residents in Coquitlam. Council then moved forward and approved a \$50M+ project that met all programmatic needs and anticipated future adaptation and uses. In a marketplace of wild construction cost escalation, that Coquitlam stakeholders stayed committed to creating a long term sustainable program and that Council were able to dramatically increase the scale of a publicly funded project with confidence based on the public consultation says a lot about Coquitlam- hats off to you!

When the project opened earlier this fall, it was enormously gratifying to see all the user groups proudly wearing their uniforms and colours at the opening ceremony and it brought back a particular memory of the design charrette and consultation process that I think sums up the power of encouraging communities to contribute to the design of their community centres.

During the charrette, the lacrosse groups had made it known on the very first day that they felt strongly about a particular orientation of how the new rinks should be laid out. While their idea was tested we actually ended up doing something a bit different. When it came time to present the design concept at the Open House, I began to describe the plan. Very quickly I was challenged by the lacrosse folks. Fortunately several of their colleagues had spent the full four days designing with us and knew why we had made the change. One of them stood up during my presentation and tapped me on the shoulder like a big sister would and said, "Mark, let me take it from here." She calmly and effectively described why the change made sense and had her constituents approval in seconds because all could see that the design was not the product of design professionals working in an office somewhere, but rather it came from the people of Coquitlam who will play in this facility for the next 50 years. Its great that the project was completed a year ahead of schedule, millions under budget, and is an attractive building, but its especially rewarding to realize that organized and thoughtful public consultation that encouraged stakeholders to be creative and demanded they be accountable has resulted in a facility they are so proud of.