

Letter from Dave Geary, June 13, 2012

The 68 signers of the ad (page E7, June 9 SP) supporting the Remai Gallery of Saskatchewan (RAGS) express a certain viewpoint. However many others, including myself, are anything but excited about the "vision of this project". That's because the Mendel expansion/renovation plan of 2009 includes all the features the Remai promises and then some - and at a better price and better location - and that plan continues to be a real option.

The structurally sound Mendel building would almost double in size to more than 45,000 square feet. The Grand Gallery would triple in size to 4,600 square feet. And the Conservatory would increase by 40 percent. The expanded and updated Mendel would have the same area of exhibition space as the proposed RAGS, "shell space" excluded. It would be a state-of-the-art world class facility that could serve a city of 500,000 and accommodate large "A list" exhibitions previously unavailable here.

The planned LEED gold Mendel expansion includes space for the storage and continual display of selected permanent collection works plus a 1,130 square foot cafe with outdoor decks on the river side. The renovation/expansion would cost about one-third the price of the RAGS. And contrary to recently published figures, Saskatoon's contribution, as clearly stated in the city's 2009 budget report, would be only \$4.6-million (in 2009 dollars), not the entire amount. That is a mere fraction of the city's share of the RAGS current estimate - namely \$34-million (including parkade).

Unlike at the Mendel, the exhibition space for non-collection changing/travelling art shows at the proposed RAGS would be way up on the third floor. That's because much of the first two floors of the multi-purpose structure would be open space reserved for events like business meetings, conferences, receptions, and weddings.

Many believe that the city does not need yet another (80% tax-funded) event centre that would compete with TCU Place and every hotel in Saskatoon. Furthermore, art galleries typically do better as stand-alone facilities, not as part of multi-utility complexes. The Mendel is proof.

It enjoys one of the highest attendance rates of any Canadian art gallery. It's very popular with young adults, as evidenced by turnouts at openings and notably by the large crowds at LUGO events. RAGS proponents have launched an intensive taxpayer-funded media and public relations ("branding & marketing") campaign to garner public approval for the project.

Despite this, in February, 2012, a CTV online poll showed 70 percent of 600 respondents supported keeping the Mendel Gallery where it is. That same week, an unprecedented 7,837 voters on a NewsTalk 650 CKOM online poll voted 72.2 percent to keep the gallery at its present site. As well, there are now at least 2,500 supportive testimonials, from the public and from the art community, logged on to a Save the Mendel website.

Contrary to popular perception, the RAGS proposal is definitely not a done deal. Full financing is not yet in place and materials & labour costs are rising. Groundbreaking has been inexplicably put off, for the third time, until 2013. Clearly this project has an uphill battle.

To many taxpayers the unnecessary RAGS has become a symbol of our city administration's profligacy. If the project is tendered as planned in late 2012, the municipal taxpayer is sure to feel severe "sticker shock," as the costs will doubtless have escalated significantly.

Contrary to rumour, federal funding was and is available for the expansion/renovation of the Mendel Gallery. In fact numerous Canadian cities have received federal monies for their art gallery renovations and expansions. The new gallery in Edmonton, for example, received \$20-million from two different federal departments for its radical expansion; Toronto's AGO received \$7.5-million for an interior renovation project in September, 2011.

Enterprising forward-looking cities with beloved historically and architecturally significant galleries (like our Mendel) usually choose to expand and update those institutions. A few examples: Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and London's Tate Modern. Let's follow these examples.

The ill-conceived and divisive cultural hijacking of the Mendel legacy seems to be much more about real estate development than art. Hopefully, a more fiscally responsible climate will prevail after this fall's civic election. In that case the more attractive, site-friendly, affordable, and publicly accepted Mendel expansion/renovation plan could and should be re-visited as a golden

opportunity for progressive change and smart growth.

David Geary, Saskatoon