

Former Mendel board member Annemarie Buchmann-Gerber provides important insight into why things have gone so terribly wrong at the Mendel Art Gallery in 2009. She writes:
"Before the board was stacked by the mayor, previous Mendel boards voted unanimously to keep the wonderful Mendel Art Gallery at its original site, which is one of the most beautiful sites in all of Canada and a very family friendly place beside the Kinsmen Park. The original Mendel building is an award-winning design and the proposed new design has integrity and consideration. Congratulations to the previous boards and directors."

Indeed, in 2005, the board of the Mendel Art Gallery did not include current chair Art Knight and almost all of his fellow board members, and took a very firm stance against the idea of moving the Mendel Art Gallery to River Landing. A written public response from the 2005 board stated:

"Of concern to the board was the extraordinary spontaneous groundswell of support from the Gallery's membership, art professionals from within the community and across Canada, and the Mendel/Mitchell family itself for our highly regarded landmark institution — one of the finest examples of modernist architecture in Saskatchewan — to remain in its present location. It is important to remember that the building of the Mendel in 1964 was accomplished through a partnership between the city of Saskatoon, the Province of Saskatchewan, and Fred Mendel, whose dream it was to find “a first-rate, creative architect and build on a visible site chosen specifically for the Gallery.” . . . This history is part of the identity and heritage of the Mendel, which has an obligation and responsibility to ensure that decisions about its future honour the spirit and the vision of its beginnings."

The 2005 board also stated, "Saskatoon is not just a point on the map between Toronto and Vancouver. It is an emerging creative centre in the heart of Canada. As such, it deserves visible symbols that reflect a city on the rise. Significant landmarks such as the Mendel Art Gallery, which tie the city's past to its vision for the future, are key to its identity as a “Cultural Capital” for the 21st century. An expanded vision of Saskatoon's future must include a state-of-the-art Mendel Art Gallery on its present beautiful tract of property where there is free and ample parking, opportunities for further site development, and a proximity to the river that can't be matched by moving to River Landing."

It is important to note that Art Knight was only appointed to the Mendel board one year before he was appointed to the position of chair, which is not enough time to absorb the history, operation and culture of the Mendel Art Gallery, let alone the specific details, nuances, and vision behind the renovation and expansion project that was in the works when he joined the

board. The fact that he was also appointed to the city's special volunteer steering committee to recommend the attraction for the proposed destination centre at River Landing, and didn't proclaim a conflict of interest or step down from the Mendel board when he advocated abandonment of the Mendel Art Gallery for the so-called Art Gallery of Saskatchewan, further reveals how this debacle has come to pass. Knight and the current Mendel board appear as willing pawns in the mayor's displaced agenda with little care about the significance of their act of betrayal to the very entity they are charged with protecting -- the Mendel Art Gallery.

The current Mendel board has failed the community it serves. It is, therefore, long overdue for the governance structure of the Mendel Art Gallery, the city's board appointment process, and the evaluation of individual Mendel board members and board accountability as a whole to be addressed through a formal outside review process. This is something city council should endorse. However, a major stumbling block towards ensuring that this action happens is the fact that the mayor and members of city council are complicit with the idea of abandoning the Mendel Art Gallery. As Joe Kuchta points out, "On July 9, 2009, The Art Gallery of Saskatchewan Inc. was incorporated as a non-profit charitable corporation. According to records filed with the corporations branch of Saskatchewan Justice, the mayor and all ten ward councillors are directors of the new entity. They have been named as the current board of the Art Gallery of Saskatchewan." Based on this information, and the lack of transparency and public participation in this deplorable, behind-the-scenes transaction, the very workings of city hall demand outside scrutiny. Something stinks in the city of Saskatoon!

by John Hoskins