

Submitted to The Globe and Mail on November 8, 2009 by Joe Kuchta

In recent weeks *The Globe* reported that Conservative ridings across Canada have received the majority of federal stimulus spending; and, that the Harper government is more interested in reporting how much stimulus funding has been allocated to projects, rather than making a priority of detailing how much is actually stimulating activity. One of the victims of this disturbing behaviour is the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon.

The nationally recognized, publically owned and operated gallery opened in Oct. 1964, thanks largely to industrialist Fred Mendel whose \$175,000 donation helped get the facility built.

In June 1965, Mendel donated thirteen paintings to the gallery in-trust, including paintings by the Group of Seven which became the nucleus of the gallery's collection.

Earlier this year that trust was betrayed when the city of Saskatoon and Mendel board of trustees decided to move the gallery and strip the Mendel name from the building. The public, Mendel family, gallery donors and supporters were never consulted.

On Jan. 8, Mayor Don Atchison and Mendel board chair Art Knight sent a letter to Saskatchewan's then Tourism, Parks, Culture, and Sport Minister, Christine Tell, telling her that the long-planned expansion and renovation of the Mendel was a "worthy and important project" that "will be successful."

Two days earlier Knight and gallery CEO Vincent Varga posted an open letter on the gallery's website saying the project was "shovel ready" for federal stimulus funds and could "be tender ready by March of this year." Two months later everything had mysteriously changed.

At an in-camera meeting on Mar. 14, Mendel trustees approved in principle the construction of a new art gallery at the city's troubled River Landing development. Four days later Atchison sent a letter and brochure to Saskatoon's four Conservative MPs stating that the city, Mendel board,

provincial and federal governments had “come to the conclusion” that a new building was needed.

It wasn't until Mar. 23, however, that the city's executive committee, which is composed of all members of city council with the mayor sitting as chair, decided at a closed-door meeting to approve in principle, a new art gallery as the anchor facility at River Landing Destination Centre.

At a press conference on Apr. 3, Atchison and Knight announced plans to move the Mendel and rename it the Art Gallery of Saskatchewan. The mayor said in a new release the project was “ready to go.”

“Shovels can be in the ground constructing the first phase of the project – a 250-stall underground parking structure – this year,” he said.

On Apr. 1, Infrastructure Canada received an enquiry from a StarPhoenix reporter asking whether the new art gallery or Mendel renovation would qualify for Building Canada funds. Department officials replied that both were potentially eligible.

What federal officials didn't tell the reporter, though, is that the decision to pursue a new building had already been made.

According to an Apr. 7 e-mail between senior Western Economic Diversification Canada staff in Saskatoon, which was obtained through an access to information request, the city had originally placed the Mendel sixth or seventh on its list of priorities for Building Canada funds. To move up in priority trustees were advised they'd have to agree to move the gallery to River Landing, which they did. The public was never told about this despicable backroom deal.

On Sept. 23, the provincial and federal governments announced funding for the Destination Centre. The \$13-million federal contribution will be provided through the major infrastructure component of the Building Canada Fund.

The Building Canada website notes the federal government's economic action plan is meant to speed up project funding "and cut red tape to ensure infrastructure funding gets into the economy when it is most needed – in the 2009 and 2010 construction seasons." Atchison told the StarPhoenix on Sept. 23 that construction wouldn't begin until 2011, following the architectural design of the structure, and is scheduled for completion in 2014. Clearly, the project was never "ready to go."

The Mendel renovation on the other hand has been ready to proceed for a quite a while. The cost of the project is estimated at \$24-million – less than half the \$58-million for the new gallery. The only thing holding it back has been the federal government who won't explain why.

It makes you wonder how many more questionable stimulus projects are out there.