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Dream unfolds in Cobourg

By ED ARNOLD

Cobourg Bureau Chief

COBOURG — In 1971 a dream began to unfold in Cobourg — restoration of the 112 (now 114)-year-old Victoria Hall, reinstating the grandeur of the past.

The building, still in use during part of 1971, was vacated then by the municipal staff, which expected to be back in the fall of 1975.

Nature and improper building methods of the past caused the floors to bend, the bricks to loosen and the walls to crack.

The Society for the Restoration of Victoria Hall was formed and with the help of public funds work was started and the optimism was widespread.

John Taylor the executive director of the society, made Cobourg his permanent home, coming from Toronto. He devoted his time to the society and the Cobourg Art Gallery.

His office is now a trailer standing behind Victoria Hall. The restoration dream has faded a little but is still very much alive.

According to Mr. Taylor the hall will be completed, but it now has become a question of when.

Work on the hall will have to be stopped at the end of June if more money is not obtained.

But it's a question of more money needed, not the money already pledged not being available.

According to society member and ex-president Don Philips, there has only been one pledge cancellation of a small amount.

If the total money needed to complete the restoration was available now, Mr. Taylor said the building would be completed at least three months before schedule.

But the total needed, estimated at \$1½ million, is not available and the society must continue its endless search for financial aid.

The total now pledged is \$878,500, but the financial future looks bleak.

Mr. Taylor said close to \$400,000 will have been spent by the end of April and this will run the cash pledges almost dry if nothing more is donated in the meantime.

More money is pledged but there is a problem of post-dated cheques.

Mr. Taylor doesn't blame anyone.

"We knew we were going to be short of funds when we signed the construction contract on Oct. 16, but we wanted to start work," he said.

Mr. Taylor insists the hall be completed and work will not stop.

One of the problems is the \$100,000 grant the art gallery recently received from the National Museums Board. The gallery, which will be moved from Chapel Street back to Victoria Hall upon completion of the project, pledged this money to the hall's restoration.

But without town council's consent to have the gallery incorporated Mr. Philips says the money can't be touched.

The society received a direct grant of \$250,000 from the province but at \$70,000 per month for contractual work it doesn't last long.

It also received \$80,000 from the federal government for labor under the Local Initiatives Program.

This Mr. Taylor believes, was an indirect grant more to boost employment in the winter months than for the hall.

That grant was for the winter months of 1972-73.

Mr. Taylor said they have not received a direct grant from the federal government.

The National Museums Board is federally-sponsored but, once again it was not a direct grant, Mr. Taylor said.

Mr. Philips disclosed the society is negotiating with other foundations and is still hoping for grants from other levels of government.

Both men agree the work is well ahead of schedule. They are hopeful the governments will give more money to the project.

Mr. Taylor feels the project is setting a precedent in Canada, claiming it could be the only public appeal campaign to preserve architectural heritage.

He feels publicity will help people know the project exists but he still feels there are prospective donors in the area who know about the project and haven't contributed.

He says local merchants and businessmen will benefit when the hall is completed, by way of increased tourist trade.

"Motel and hotel owners will benefit as Victoria Hall may become a convention centre and the people most likely to benefit should be donating," he said.

Most of the town industries have donated and when the annual financial meetings are held at companies Mr. Taylor feels hopeful more contributions will come in.

Pledges have come from Japan, England and the United States in the past.

Usually it is people who were connected with the town at some time but some just hear about it and send money, said Mr. Taylor.

He doesn't think threats of the work stopping will make people donate.

The society approached the federal government three months ago and now must wait final word.

Final word from the provincial government took 15 months.

Steel and the erection of it to reinforce and replace past mistakes will cost \$112,000, according to society figures.

A new heating, cooling and humidity control system has to be installed to replace the delapidated old system at a cost of \$425,000.

Dickie Construction Co. of Toronto signed the agreement with the society without tendering because as Mr. Taylor pointed out at a council meeting in the fall of 1973, there is a lack of companies specializing in restoration of buildings of this type.

The company has 30 men on the job and 90 per cent are area skilled workers, according to Mr. Philips.

Administration and full-time resident architect complete the substantial bills.

The tedious work of replacing steel with wood, reinforcing support, tearing out the past mistakes and replacing is now being done.

Over 100,000 volts are needed and the workers are working in each individual room. Mr. Taylor feels the workers are doing an excellent job and feels a lot has been done.