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Rendering of NCCC
Photo courtesy of Niagara
Convention and Civic Centre



If you build it,

Convention centre aims to heat

written by SAMANTHA CRAGGS

TODAY, THE SITE NEAR THE SOUTHWEST corner of Stanley Avenue and Dunn Street in Niagara Falls doesn't look like much.

Near the long shadow of the high-rising Sheraton Hotel, mounds of dirt line the perimeter of the construction lot near Zappi's Pizza. The fledgling foundation still looks like a deliberately shaped hole in the ground. There are portable toilets. Aluminum tubes. A diesel tank. On the fence is a sign: "Hours of operation, 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday." Even the builders of the city's new year-round tourism generator need days off.

To those involved with it, the Niagara Convention and Civic Centre is nothing less. Plenty of tourists flock to the famous Falls in the summer. But the Niagara region's namesake city has slow months in the winter, when business owners struggle to stretch their profits. In 2007, hotels were nearly half-empty with an overall



they will come

up tourism during Niagara's coolest months

occupancy rate of 56 per cent.

The convention centre, with its estimated 175 full - and part-time jobs and potential to draw half a million people per year, is poised to change that. It will bring an estimated 173,000 more hotel room nights to Niagara Falls, 70 per cent of which are predicted to be in the off-season.

"For the whole city of Niagara Falls, we're hoping for an extension of our tourism season more than anything," says Amy Bignucolo, chair of the centre's board of directors and owner of the nearby Rodeway Inn. "Right now, with our economy the way it is, to have a new market open up is exciting."

A sign at the construction site shows an artist's rendering of what is to come. The centre gleams with a multicoloured glass front. Young, affluent-looking tourists tote shopping bags, while a large vehicle sits in front of the centre after carrying a group of convention-goers to

Niagara. The centre's floor plan shows 288,000 square feet, enough space for large conferences, conventions and events. There will be an 82,000-square foot exhibition hall, 17,000-square foot ballroom and a 1,000-seat theatre. It will also have more than 26,000 square feet of meeting space. As of September, there were 430 event days on hold, representing 77,000 potential room nights in local hotels.

The project began about a decade ago when Dragan Matovic, who heads a Niagara Falls real estate development firm, spearheaded an effort to, as he says, "bring the right people together to talk about it." The idea for a convention centre "had been filtering around for about 50 years," says Bignucolo, who became involved as a member of the Fallsview Business Improvement Association. "It's just been a matter of timing, and timing is everything."

Each of the city's business improvement associations supported the idea, and between them, they collected \$10 million from the

private sector, Bignucolo says. That showed government officials they meant business, she adds. To date, the federal and provincial governments have committed \$35 million each to the project. Other major contributors include the Falls Management Company (operator of Casino Niagara and Fallsview Casino Resort), the Fallsview Business Improvement Association, the Victoria Business Improvement Association and the Niagara Parks Commission. The City of Niagara Falls waived \$2 million in development charges, while the Niagara Region contributed \$3 million worth of land.

Six feasibility studies – the most recent a 2006 study by PKF Consulting – supported the viability of the project. PKF analyzed 13 potential sites in 2001. In 2005, an independent selection committee that included Niagara College president Dan Patterson and VinCor founder Donald Ziraldo selected the Stanley Avenue location, about 500 metres southwest of the Horseshoe Falls.

The Niagara Convention and Civic Centre operates as an independent corporation that will lease the building from the city for \$1 a year for 50 years. In March 2008, it hired Kerry Painter as president and general manager. Painter's eclectic management resume includes working on Detroit's Joe Louis Arena, co-ordinating tours for magician David Copperfield and being on a team that supervised the \$293-million renovation of San Francisco's city hall.

And Painter is no stranger to stress. She managed the construction of the Northshore Harbour Convention Centre in New Orleans, which opened two months before it was hammered by Hurricane Katrina. The centre was used as a FEMA disaster recovery site, and Painter was responsible not just for repairing the building, but housing 600 people without the benefit of electricity and running water.

With the Niagara centre, Painter is the ultimate multi-tasker. One moment, she is deciding room sizes and colours. The next, she is handling the onslaught of resumes, or looking online for the best lounge bar supplies.

"(The centre) will be modelled after the best parts of everywhere," she says from her temporary office in the Fallsview Casino. "I'm answering questions like, do we want armchairs or benches? If we switch colours, will we lose the warmth? On my desk right now, I have little blocks of table tops and brochures about sculptures."

While there will be no waterfall in the lobby, the colours should be relevant to Niagara Falls, she says. "They should make you think of water." From a general manager's perspective, Painter is starting from scratch with a project where there is no pre-existing rental contract or policies and procedures. "You invent the wheel every time you do something," she says. "If someone wants to go on vacation, there is no vacation request form. You have to make one."

In addition to developing that structure, Painter has been signing contracts with businesses and corporations to use the centre. While she is pleased with the interest so far, the recession has made many people reluctant to sign, she said. With any luck, the centre will open its doors just as the economy is flourishing, Painter says. "We all know the economy goes up and down," she says. "People will be coming back to business in 2012."

Anna Olson, renowned local chef and host of two Food Network shows, will be the endorsing chef of the convention centre and is designing seasonal field-to-table menus, Painter says. "We were really lucky to have her in the area," she says. "Not



Above: Kerry Painter, Niagara Convention and Civic Centre president and general manager

everyone has a Food Network chef in their community."

With Niagara's unemployment rate at 10 per cent, Painter advertised for an office assistant and received 213 resumes. When she arrived in Niagara Falls, Painter immediately spotted that year-round need for economic activity. She shares the hope that the centre will bring a steady flow of crowds to the city, during every season. "It was really fascinating when I got here that everything is closed in the winter," she says. "Things will have to open up in the winter because there are going to be 3,000 people in town wanting to do things."

So far, the Niagara Convention and Civic Centre falls on the list of "people who are also considering Ottawa, or also considering Hamilton," she says. As executive director of the Panoramic Group of Companies, Matovic has been involved with the development of hotels, restaurants, resorts and golf courses in Canada and the U.S. He was given a Niagara Entrepreneur of the Year award this year for his involvement with Fallsview Golf.

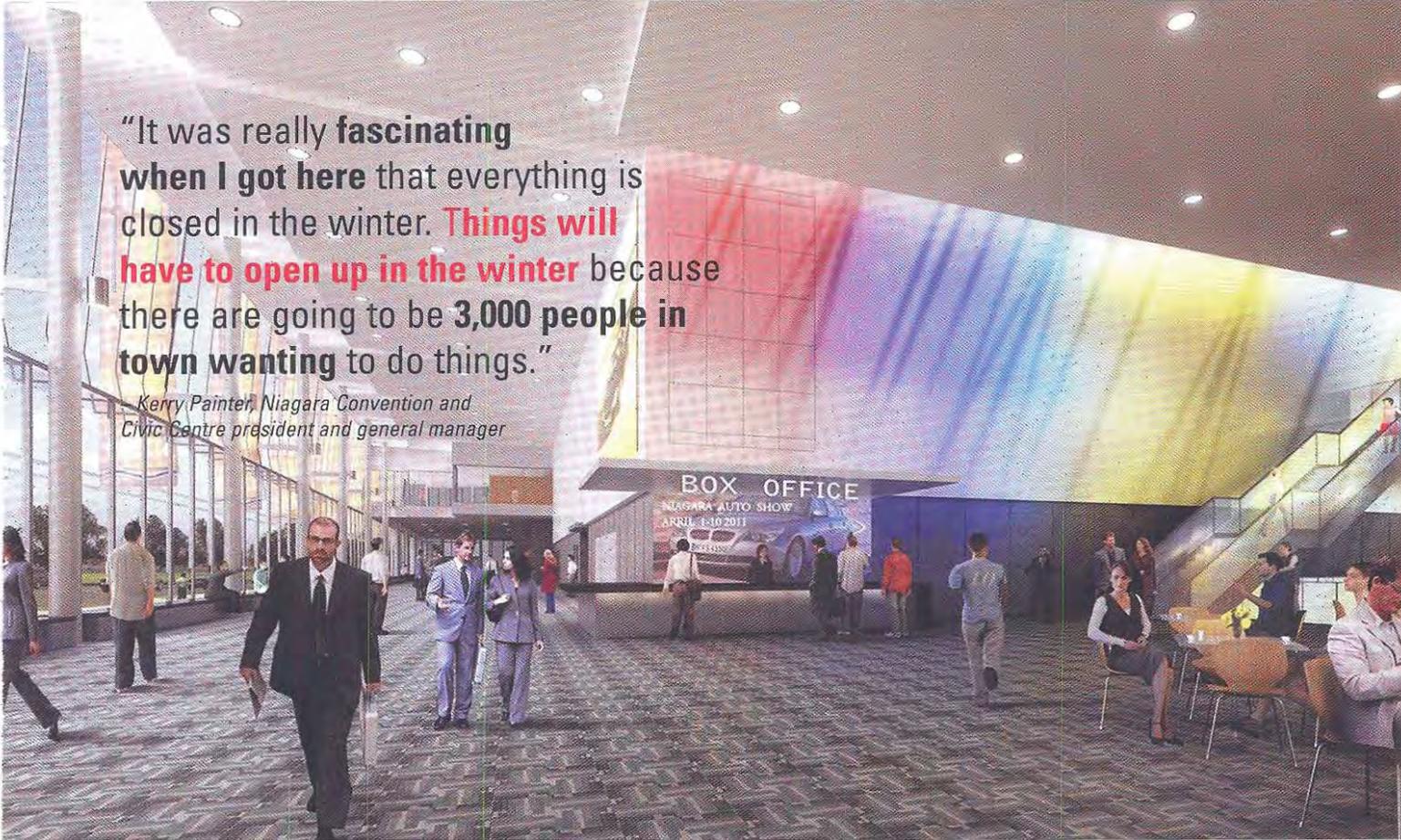
He has seen first-hand the impact convention centres have on a community. The Niagara centre could spark more than \$100 million in new revenue to Niagara, he says. "Niagara Falls has all the ingredients and infrastructure to accommodate an appropriate-sized convention centre," he says. "It's very gratifying that it's proceeding." The community is witnessing "the ongoing evolution of a destination," says Matovic, who was project co-ordinator from 2002 until recently. He is now "more of a casual supporter of the project."

"There's been pretty good interest from the convention community, convention planners and their various sub-markets," he says. "We're excited about the benefits it'll have to (Niagara)."

Bignucolo also sees the NCCC as an idea whose time has come. Niagara Falls has first-class hotels and attractions, ingredients other communities would need to establish before accom-

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Kerry Painter, Niagara Convention and Civic Centre president and general manager



Conceptual illustration of Niagara Convention and Civic Centre lobby

modating a convention centre, she says.

Niagara Falls, Painter says, is an environment ready for a convention centre. “People say ‘if you build it, they will come,’” she says. “But that’s a recipe for disaster if you don’t have an environment ready to accept it.”

The current tourism season, Bignucolo says, is April to November. As a hotel owner, the winter months are “sporadic.” Bignucolo expects convention-goers will head to the larger hotels, like the Radisson or the Marriott. But she expects to see a noticeable gain.

“(The convention centre) is just another piece to the full tourism sector that we need here,” she says.

“I have a smaller property. To me, I look at the bigger picture. And I hope all the big highrises fill up so I can have the overflow.”

The centre’s project designers and builders are Bondfield Construction Company Ltd. with CS&P Architects, Stanford Downey Architects and the Kirkland Partnership. The group also designed and built Niagara College’s Niagara-on-the-Lake campus and the Hilton Fallsview Hotel. The project will be built to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Silver Certification.

Ground was broken on the centre on May 1, when federal, provincial and local politicians lined up to dig in a ceremonial shovel. The Canadian Tire Dealer’s Association and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities were announced as the first official clients to commit to using the facility.

“The NCCC will become an important part of our city, giving a boost to our economy as tourists and Niagara residents alike will enjoy the facility,” Niagara Falls Mayor Ted Salci said at the groundbreaking ceremony.

Already, the centre represents “an important piece of our city’s

infrastructure,” he added.

Niagara Falls MPP Kim Craitor called it “a new beginning for the year-round economic prospects of our community.”

It was yet another of the “significant milestones” the project’s supporters have been tracking since its inception.

“We are feeling very optimistic and very positive,” Bignucolo says of the project. “We’re new. We’re fresh. People are always looking for something new and fresh.” BN

FACT...

The Niagara Convention & Civic Centre:

Cost: about \$92 million
Size: 288,000 square feet, including 82,000-square foot exhibition hall and 1,000-seat theatre.
Location: Stanley Avenue, just south of Dunn Street
Estimated completion: spring 2011
Construction management firm: MHPM
Contact: 905-357-6222, 1-888-997-6222, info@fallsconventions.com
On the web: www.fallsconventions.com

Estimated economic impact of the NCCC:

- \$93 million per year in new visitor expenditures
- more than \$100 million in private sector projects
- 75 full-time jobs, 100 part-time jobs
- 867 person years of direct employment for the construction, 1,000 to operate the centre
- 514,000 new visitors per year
- 173,000 new room nights per year, 70 per cent of which will be in the off-season