

The Toronto Star

Is the town ready for a major music festival?; Summer home for orchestras appeals to many, but government funding is key

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Page: V4

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Illustrations: Site of Project Niagara, proposed summer home for the Toronto Symphony and National Arts Centre orchestras.

Passionate and vociferous opponents of Project Niagara like to believe the economic downturn will save them from the perceived horrors of a major annual summer music festival.

In other words, their hopes of killing the proposed new outdoor tourist attraction could be enhanced by the new vows of government frugality recently heard both in Ottawa and at Queen's Park.

The visionaries who developed the project are seeking \$25 million from each of the two senior governments. Within the past couple of months, however, both the Harper Tories and the McGuinty Liberals have made it clear their top priority is to slash spending and wipe out their deficits.

Yet Kari Cullen, the consultant leading the charge for the creation of a 17-week festival on old army land in the historic town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, still sounds like a cockeyed optimist.

"A growing number of people are recognizing that the future health of the whole region could very well depend on the success of this project," says Cullen. "And the potential return on a relatively small investment is so great that we are still optimistic both the Ontario government and the federal government will want to go forward."

Janice Thompson, executive director of Niagara-on-the-Lake's Chamber of Commerce, feels confident governments will sign on.

"I'm still quite optimistic about this project," she says.

"There has been a lot of attention paid to those who have raised concerns about traffic and parking. But we have also been seeing a tremendous level of enthusiasm and support."

In recent years, the National Arts Centre and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra have been floating a joint venture that would give their two orchestras a summer home like the Boston Symphony's Tanglewood in western Massachusetts and Ravinia, the summer music festival near Chicago.

The vision: a summer music festival with a covered amphitheatre and lawn seating on a large, choice piece of lakefront land once used for military training, but in recent years a kind of no man's land controlled by Parks Canada. It's a historic site associated with the War of 1812-14.

Estimated cost of creating the facility: \$76.5 million.
Annual budget: about \$20 million.

Ideal opening: Opening to coincide with 200th anniversary of that legendary war in which Canada fought off American imperialists.

The program: About 50 concerts a year drawing hundreds of thousands of music lovers and providing a major boost to the economy and culture of the Niagara region - a needed new attraction to complement the Shaw festival, local wineries, golf, natural beauty and the casinos at Niagara Falls.

Behind the scheme are Peter Herrndorf, CEO of the National Arts Centre, and Andrew Shaw of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. They have developed a strong board, raised seed money to hire consultants, and recruited KPMB, the prestigious Toronto architectural firm, to draw up plans.

The festival would operate from mid-May to late September, with the NAC Orchestra and the TSO making this their summer home for several weeks each.

But right from the start, local residents have been divided.

For awhile an opposition lobby group, the Harmony Residents Group, grabbed the spotlight. Then there arose a group of supporters that called itself Community Builders.

According to the opposition, Niagara is a lovely, peaceful place whose lifestyle would be wrecked by the traffic and parking nightmares they claim would go along with the launch of such a festival.

Cullen stresses the commitment of project organizers to give a serious hearing to the concerns of local residents who fear that a Tanglewood North, as the project is sometimes called, would do more harm than good to the community.

"We've learned from Tanglewood and Ravinia how important it is to develop a positive relationship with people who live in the areas near our site," says Cullen.

Last year, to underline that point, a consulting firm was hired to undertake a major traffic study. But skeptics rejected the consultant's reassuring conclusions, and the consensus seemed to be that further research was needed.

My prediction: Even if it does not get fast-tracked to mark Canada's triumph in its only war with its powerful neighbour, Project Niagara will be a go. The fusion of culture, tourism, economic growth and a gorgeous site in the ideal location, begging to be redeveloped, is just too tempting to reject.

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