

The Closing of the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson in 1984

Douglas P. Ormond, Administrator/City Clerk, City of Nelson
August, 1991

Advanced Certificate in Municipal Administration
A Case Study

This case study deals with closure of the David Thompson University Centre (DTUC) in Nelson in 1984 and the Council and the Community's commitment to keeping the DTUC campus open as an educational institution and reinforcement of post-secondary education as a significant component of the community's economic base

Introduction

Nelson has been a university centre since the early 1950's with the establishment of the former "Notre Dame University" (NUC). NUC carried on as a highly recognized degree granting university, with annual enrollments as high as 750 students, until the provincial government took it over in 1976 and renamed the facility "David Thompson University Centre" (DTUC). DTUC was funded by the province with university programs being offered by the University of Victoria and Selkirk College. The province closed down DTUC on May 1, 1984 under the provincial government restraint program because the cost per student to operate was too high compared to other universities and colleges in the province.

Community Reaction:

When the closure of DTUC was announced in January of 1984, the entire community almost to a person, as well as people throughout the Kootenays and indeed the province, were outraged by this decision. The reasons for outrage could be summed up as follows:

- there was no consultation with the City Council or anyone else in the community prior to the announcement on January 1, 1984 that DTUC would close on May 1, 1984;
- the people did not believe the government's claim that DTUC had become too costly to operate and honestly felt that the government closed DTUC in order to divert additional funds to other universities in the province including Selkirk College at Castlegar;
- Nelson has a long history of being the educational and cultural centre of the Kootenays;
- the community was concerned that government had a hidden agenda and would sell the campus to the private sector or others for uses other than education or post-secondary education;
- DTUC represented a substantial component of the community's economic base;
- the closure was the last straw, as a substantial number of other jobs had been lost since 1980, i.e. shutdown of Kootenay Forest Products plywood plant, sawmill and logging operations employing 550 people, transfer or reduction of provincial government agency staff of some 300 employees, reduction of staff by other major employers such as C.P.R. and B.C. Tel of some 160 employees.

The Problems:

The community was adamant that DTUC should remain a post-secondary education facility and the province should keep the facility open. The Council and the community offered to work with the government to find ways to reduce costs.

The Provincial government was just as adamant that the facility would close on May 1, 1984 and made good on their decision.

A related and very important issue to this whole event deals with the DTUC library which contains some 70,000 volumes of books, reference material and periodicals, including the valuable "Kootenianna Collection" containing numerous volumes of books on the history of the Kootenays. The community was extremely concerned that all of these books would be dispersed elsewhere or destroyed if DTUC was closed, so about 70 community residents staged a "sit in" at the DTUC library to protect the books and other library equipment. The sit in lasted about 2 1/2 months.

It should be noted that the government had taken the position that it would turn the DTUC campus over to the City of Nelson if the City could find a viable alternative use for the facility and on the condition that the government would not have to provide any further funding for the facility. The government invited the City to make proposals for alternate uses.

The Solutions:

Recognizing that the City Council and the people of the community were solid in their position that the DTUC campus remain as an educational facility, I was able to make recommendations that were acceptable to Council as a means of resolving the many problems associated with the closure of DTUC. It took almost two years to resolve this whole issue to the general satisfaction of the Council and the community, with the situation improving more each successive year. The recommendations and proposals that were approved by Council over the course of the period January 1, 1984 to December, 1985 are as follows:

1. Recommendation

That the Council establish a new zone entitled "Educational Institution Zone - P-3", to permit, schools, colleges and universities only as a permitted use.

Rationale

Notwithstanding the fact that the provincial government is not legally obligated to adhere to municipal by-laws, it was felt that this initiative would indicate to the government that the Council was serious in its position that DTUC would always remain an educational facility.

2. Recommendation

That the Council engage qualified consultants to market the DTUC campus and facilities with a view to finding new tenants in educational field, particularly in the post secondary education field.

Rationale

Obtaining an interest from other institutions in the DTUC campus would assist the City in putting forward a comprehensive proposal to the government for the City to acquire the campus for continuing educational purposes.

3. Recommendation

That the Council establish a separate Society under the "Societies Act" with the purposes being:

- to provide administration and facilities for offering of courses on behalf of various educational institutions which have degree and diploma powers;
- to provide facilities for the development and furthering of community programs and educational or cultural activities;
- to provide such other community services as the Directors may deem desirable, within the limits set out in the Society Act.

Rationale

Establishing the Society would relieve the Council from the day to day involvement with the consultants, city staff and others in finding users interested in the campus, negotiating with the various agencies of the government and preparing proposals on behalf of the City for the acquisition of the campus for educational purposes. While the Council would have the final decision in all matters, the Society would do the technical work, the leg work and present to Council for approval. The Council appointed the Mayor and myself to the Society's Board of Directors

under the terms of the Society's by-laws. I also served as Secretary to the Board of Directors.

For several months after the closure of DTUC, I was involved with on-going negotiations with the government, having presented a number of proposals on behalf of the Society and the City, and also in a number of meetings with parties and institutions which expressed interest in establishing an educational facility on the DTUC campus. The Society and the City were unable to make a breakthrough on an acceptable proposal to the government.

In July of 1985, I decided to draft my own version of a proposal for the acquisition of the DTUC campus, that I felt both the City and the government could accept. I presented the proposal to City Council as well as the Society and both parties accepted the proposal for presentation to the government. The proposal was accepted by the government, with some minor modifications, at the very next meeting with the government. A copy of the actual proposal and my covering report to Council is attached for your information. With agreement with the City and the province which basically gave the City title to the DTUC land, buildings, equipment, etc. for \$1.00, it made it much easier to resolve the other outstanding issues.

As I mentioned earlier, a related, but very sensitive, very potentially volatile issue was the occupation of the DTUC library by some 70 residents to protect the 70,000 plus volumes of the educational books from leaving the campus and the City. At the same time we were negotiating with the government for the acquisition of the DTUC campus,

we were also separately negotiating, with the government and the library occupiers to resolve the issue of the books and equipment in the library. The situation was complicated because both the University of Victoria and Selkirk College had books and equipment on campus and in the library particularly. After 2 1/2 months were able to reach an agreement which was accepted by all parties including the library occupiers. Basically the government agreed to turn over to the City all of the books, materials and equipment on the campus, including the library. The University of Victoria and Selkirk College were allowed to remove any books or equipment that they would require for their existing programs. This removal was supervised by both the City and the government, with representatives from the library occupiers as observers.

While all of this was going on we were also talking to and meeting with parties interested in leasing the DTUC campus for educational purposes. In November, 1985 we were successful in negotiating a long term lease with a company called Nelson International School Inc. In 1987 the former DTUC campus reopened under the name of Canadian International College for some 290 Japanese post secondary students to learn the English language and business management. The School is in its fourth year and is getting stronger each year. It has created 80 direct jobs and its positive impact on the local economy is substantial. In addition, another university has made a beginning on campus. Nelson University is in its second year with about 25 students in the liberal arts and other programs.

In conclusion, the disaster of the 1984 closure of DTUC has been turned into a very positive thing for the City in terms of social, financial and economic stability. I take great pride in having been able to participate so fully with the full support of the Council and the community, in a situation that has such positive effect on the community and has served well as a focus or catalyst in turning the community's economic misfortunes around 180 degrees. You really had to be there to experience many different emotions experienced during the whole process.