



A Vision for the Hamilton Discovery Centre

February 15, 2023

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2022 HPL participated in a roundtable discussion with Hamilton heritage institutions and other key stakeholders to gather feedback on an emerging vision for the building that was once the Hamilton Marine Discovery Centre. An earlier draft of this document was shared for discussion at that meeting.

The vision we have articulated has generally been well received but it is clear a lot more work is needed to turn the vision into a viable plan. HPL will be bringing to the Library Board a request for funding to engage in a detailed feasibility study. If approved, we will then be asking for Hamilton City Council to endorse our approach and be given time to complete the study so that can inform decision making going forward.

THE DISCOVERY CENTRE AND THE WATERFRONT

Hamilton’s waterfront, once a gathering place, was transformed by many years of industrial activity. Decades of work has helped restore it for people and nature. While that work is not complete, it remains a tangible reminder that renewal is possible.

The former Hamilton Marine Discovery Centre is a beautiful building located on Pier 8. It should be a bustling place welcoming residents and visitors. City Council will be deciding its future in the next couple of years.

Whatever plan emerges for the Discovery Centre, it is essential that it lives up to the great potential of the building and its location. We are pleased to share a vision for the site that HPL has been developing and consulting on. That vision needs more conversations, expert input and reflection to be realized. As we develop with you our vision, we need to ensure that whatever plan emerges, it advances the goals of West Harbour renewal and becomes a space that brings us together and helps us move forward more unified.

A successful Hamilton Discover Centre will be:

- A vibrant space that welcomes residents and visitors from all walks of life to share
- Full of experiences that keep its doors open all week long and all year long
- Engaging for residents of both new and existing North-end neighbours
- It should be free to access, so all Hamiltonians can experience it
- It should be a place that helps us understand our individual and collective heritage
- It should be a gathering place, where differences are set aside, and we come together to learn each others’ stories
- Both the inside and outside will be revitalized and animated with activity

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Today, we face many challenges as a City that no one group can solve. The last couple of years we have experienced a global pandemic that has exacerbated divisions and left many isolated and frustrated. We hope that 10 years from now, we will all look back on this time and reflect on how much better we have made things and that the revitalization of the Marine Discovery Centre is part of that renewal.

In our busy and rapidly changing world, it is more important than ever that we stop, take a deep breath and think about the fundamental challenges we are facing. The Library Board does this periodically, to make sure we do not lose sight of the big picture and we make necessary adaptations to our organization. In March of 2022, the Board adopted the 5th in the series of papers titled *Meeting Community & Member Needs: Thoughts on the Next*

Decade. In comparing 2022 to the trends and assumptions that appeared in the last two versions of the document (2010 and 2017) it states:

The assumptions about what we as a public library need to do have not changed a lot, however, the context of the societal challenges we are facing seem much more urgent. The scientific consensus and recent events point to climate change being an urgent threat that needs collective action on a massive scale. The horrors of Canada’s residential school system are a stain on our country and were able to happen because many Canadians remained ignorant of the systemic racism underlying Canada’s relationship with Indigenous peoples. The voices of racism, hatred of people with different beliefs, orientations and identities seem louder today and more widespread. In Hamilton, like elsewhere in Canada, the toll of increasing income inequality, mental health problems and drug addiction are more acutely felt today than at any time in recent memory.ⁱ

Public libraries at their best exist embedded in communities, where many of the gifts and challenges that exist in those communities flow into our spaces. The picture on the ground in some places, is not what we would have ever thought we would see in our community. Between the vitriol of some political leaders, social media amplification of divisions, the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of hope, we have seen a nastiness, and at times, blatant racist insults in our spaces. None of this is new, but the scale of it should be a warning to us.

In moving forward, HPL is looking to be very deliberate about advancing Social Cohesion. Social Cohesion refers to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society. It identifies two main dimensions: the sense of belonging of a community and the relationships among members within the community itself. *“Although much about what we may face in the coming decade may not be clear, the need to work with others to contribute to Civic Renewal is no doubt urgent and should be woven into all our work”ⁱⁱⁱ.* One way we do that is by deliberately creating spaces, programs and services that attract people of all ages, cultures and economic backgrounds. Let’s work together for a future where everyone feels that they belong, and we get to know our neighbours.

VISION FOR THE DISCOVERY CENTRE

The vision that is emerging involves three related and complementary uses of the space. There are several advantages to working together to realize this vision:

- **Financial Sustainability** – it is going to take both capital investment and ongoing operating funds to ensure that there are the resources to create a program that lives up

to its potential. Combing these uses will help create a base funding and staffing to ensure the place is open and well maintained.

- **Mutually Reinforcing** – each program, attracting distinct audiences, will help support the underlying goal of bringing people from different backgrounds together.

HAMILTON PUBLIC LIBRARY STEWARDSHIP OF THE DISCOVERY CENTRE

HPL’s vision for the Discovery Centre sees the Library Board working with other stakeholders to develop strong vision and business plan for the site that ensures it lives up to its great promise. It envisions HPL taking responsibility for the site, working with Indigenous partners to ensure the Indigenous programs in the space are shaped by their aspirations and the heritage-based experiences tell Hamilton’s stories. HPL’s Local History and Archives (LHA) Department will oversee the animation of the heritage exhibits, working in collaboration with City Museums, other heritage organizations and stakeholders. We will look for opportunities, where appropriate, to host exhibitions from other partners and bring exhibits from the Discovery Centre to other public facilities in Hamilton.

BRANCH LIBRARY

A Library embedded in the space will compliment other uses and serve both residents of the north end and other visitors to the Waterfront. The Library Branch will help ensure the space can be sustainable and open robust hours and provide multiple ways for residents to engage with the space. In the coming years as the City and its residents cope with multiple financial challenges, we need to ensure we create an effective business plan that supports our goals of Indigenous reconciliation and creating meaningful experiences that explore our histories while also providing vital access and supports that residents need.

The Library program includes a range of services that are complimentary and together generate a robust amount of usages that helps create dynamic public space. This includes, books and other library materials, computer access and printing, WiFi, children and teen areas, study places, spaces for collaboration and library programs.

INDIGENOUS GATHERING PLACE

The nature and composition of this cornerstone for the space needs to be both Indigenous inspired, defined and led. Other major Canadian public libraries have worked together with their Indigenous partners to come up with a program that is informed by the local Indigenous experience and stories.

What that space looks like, what programs it offers and how it is managed is for the Indigenous Communities to define. HPL is currently gathering information from libraries across Canada. In that survey we are asking for program information and contacts from both the libraries and Indigenous partners. Our purpose for doing this is to be able share this so Hamilton’s Indigenous community can pursue models they find informative.

How the program is governed will need to be part of conversations we have in the coming months. All I can say with confidence is that the Library is open to a full conversation and we need to ensure that the design and ongoing program is Indigenous inspired, defined and led.

Some might question why an Indigenous gathering place would be in a shared space. From our perspective, this creates the potential for Indigenous stories and traditions to be brought to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. We see a future where Urban Indigenous residents connect with their history; where newcomer students from traditional cultures feel at home; where collectively we learn about the histories we tried to pretend did not exist and where we all learn about living in harmony with the Earth that gives us life.

HERITAGE BASED VISITOR EXPERIENCES

Another core program of the space will be dedicated to showcasing and celebrating Hamilton’s history and environment. HPL’s *Local History and Archives Department* will work with Hamilton’s *Civic Museums*, other memory institutions and stakeholders to bring engaging exhibits. The Discovery Centre lacks the space to store and preserve artifacts, so the focus will be on ensuring the space is continually animated with high quality engaging exhibits.

HPL will need to work with our Indigenous and heritage partners to clearly define the vision and principles which will inform the Heritage Based Visitor Experiencesⁱⁱⁱ. We start that conversation with some core assumptions about the importance of this work and what we need to strive to achieve together.

Respectful access to and preservation of cultural heritage is a cornerstone of all democratic societies. It is widely known that cultural heritage supports economic, social, legal, and cultural understanding and growth, and fosters innovation. Understanding the past requires access to documentation and records of lived experiences of that past. There is still much more to be done to surface the diversity of the Canadian experience and to explore how a variety of cultural approaches to documentary heritage can be surfaced and respected.

Canada is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and HPL strives to ensure that we adhere to the rights related to cultural heritage that are guaranteed in the Declaration and that create space for the marginalized voices to share their own narratives. Respectful access to and preservation of our histories is a human right and an incentive for civic engagement that can give rise to systemic change. We cannot have an inclusive future if we are not fully aware of the past or when people are severed from their past. Without trustworthy and sustainable access to our

cultural heritage, misinformation and polarization can fester and further divide us. The more we are able to expand our knowledge and learn about our histories and the histories of others, the more we can build mutual understanding and respect.

As a Memory Institution HPL is committed to working with other like-minded organizations and individuals committed to the following:

- It is our responsibility and promise to future generations to preserve Hamilton’s heritage content.
- We intentionally and respectfully surface the diverse stories of Hamilton’s past, as told from many voices and perspectives.
- Justice, human rights, and sustainability are advanced through equitable and respectful access to heritage.

HPL currently has great partnerships with other local cultural organizations and we see the Discovery Centre as a potential site that will deepen our mutual relationships and help bring stories to each other. HPL is committed to the Ottawa Declaration^{iv}, signed at the 2016 GLAM Summit jointly hosted by Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and the Canadian Museums Association (CMA). *“By adopting this Declaration, the GLAMs agreed to continually adapt and reinvent their institutions, and to promote the full value of galleries, libraries, archives and museums to Canadians*

FOOD, CAFÉ AND EVENT SPACE

The vision that we are articulating for the Discovery Centre envisions a place that is open and free to the public without an admission fee. We also see an opportunity for the space a place for community gatherings and receptions. Embedding a café and the ability to cater events presents a revenue generation opportunity that would enable the facility to bring more people into the space. As we further develop our business plan, we will be looking at the best options for how to develop this component of the space.

CONCLUSION

The Hamilton Discover Centre provides a unique opportunity for us to work together for a better future where we have more understanding and respect for each other. In the coming months we will be developing our consultation process and working towards seeking Library Board support and City Council approval to complete a feasibility study on our vision of the Discovery Centre. The feasibility study will explore the core programs, governance, capital improvements and operating costs. We look forward to working with our partners on defining the requirements of the feasibility study. Let’s keep the

conversation moving forward so we can create something positive that Hamiltonians can embrace and be proud of.

ⁱ <https://www.hpl.ca/sites/default/files/MeetingCommunityMemberNeeds2022.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hpl.ca/sites/default/files/MeetingCommunityMemberNeeds2022.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ This vision is derived from the NHDS (National Digital Heritage Strategy) developing Mission and Strategic Plan.

^{iv} <https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/corporate/about-us/our-partners/glam/Pages/glam.aspx>