

City left holding bag on grand plaza plan

TheStar.com



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The schedule for the ambitious new look for Nathan Phillips Square, seen on Oct. 30, 2008 during seasonal changeover, has been cast in doubt for financial reasons.

Search abandoned for partner to help pay Nathan Phillips cost

October 31, 2008

John Spears

city hall bureau

The City of Toronto has quietly put aside plans to raise money from private donors to redesign Nathan Phillips Square.

The renovation of Toronto's signature plaza will go ahead, city officials say – but how quickly and at whose expense is less certain.

When the city approved the square's redesign 19 months ago after a high-profile international competition, councillors were told \$25 million of the \$42.7 million cost would come from private donations.

But the city's capital budget, released yesterday, shows that all the funds will come from the city.

Councillor Peter Milczyn, who has been quarterbacking the redesign, said fundraising was shelved after the city got discouraging signals about donor fatigue from its partnerships office, which co-ordinates public-private sector projects.

"The advice we got was: Don't go out with a big fundraising campaign, because it's going to be a flop," Milczyn said yesterday.

That's a turnaround from March 2007, when the city held a high-profile event in the City Hall lobby to announce the winning design.

"We're confident we'll be able to raise the money to complete it as it should be," Mayor David Miller said at the time.

"It should be magnificent. That's what we deserve in this city, and I think building a partnership with Torontonians is the way to do it."

A news release yesterday said the city has earmarked \$22.2 million for the square, and a further \$21.1 million will come from "reserve funds." It said nothing about private donations.

Cindy Bromley, of the finance department, said the redesign will be paid for in part by profits earned by the Toronto Parking Authority and the city's street-furniture contract with a company that sells advertising on transit shelters.

A fundraising drive at some later date hasn't been ruled out, she said.

The city says the square's new look will be in place by 2012, but Milczyn was making no promises.

"It might take quite a number of years to do the whole thing, unless some philanthropist comes forward," he said.

Milczyn (Ward 5, Etobicoke-Lakeshore) said the partnerships office gave two main reasons against public fundraising.

It said donors are reluctant to give directly to governments, fearing that their money will be thrown into general revenue and siphoned off for other purposes.

Secondly, recent campaigns by the Royal Ontario Museum, Art Gallery of Ontario and some hospitals have left "limited philanthropic space" for other public endeavours.

That could be discouraging news for the Toronto Zoo, which has announced a \$250 million fundraising campaign.

The winning design for Nathan Phillips Square involves a renovation of the elevated walkway around the square that has a sweeping staircase in the northwest corner. A designer compared the staircase, to be shaded in summer by a trellis, to Rome's Spanish Steps as a potent civic landmark.

Other features in the plan include a glass-roofed stage to be erected on the west side, and a restaurant near the reflecting pool.

A "disappearing fountain" would spray water from the pavement in another part of the square, and the roof of City Hall's podium would become a sculpture garden.