

IN THE NEWS

City's seed money starts to sprout

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It may not look like much -- a great hole in the ground at Heritage Park -- but it is one of the first signs of progress sprouting from the city's \$102-million community investment fund.

Initiated more than two years ago amid a flurry of controversy, the fund was set up by city council to provide seed money for big- ticket upgrades at four of Calgary's top tourist attractions and a downtown library. Battling Alberta's rising construction costs and beating the bushes for other funding, work on the projects hasn't exactly raced ahead, with some still in the concept stage.

But Heritage Park has started on the first two phases of its much anticipated \$50-million expansion, which will include a detailed re- creation of a 1930s streetscape. The park used the community investment fund's \$10-million pledge to win financial support from the provincial and federal governments. "You can really see progress being made, so it's quite exciting," said general manager Alida Visbach, adding the goal is to have the full project completed in 2008. "Every day, there's something different."

The community investment fund was created in spring 2004 with a council decision to set aside the city's GST rebate for five years, amounting to roughly \$102 million. The Calgary Zoo is in line for \$30 million, while a downtown library will get \$40 million and the science centre will receive \$20 million. Heritage Park is getting \$10 million, and another \$2.1 million is slated for Fort Calgary.

Critics of the plan felt the \$102 million should have been directed toward transportation. That debate has long since died, but the next one may be over the requirements for accessing the fund.

To receive the money, each group must raise 90 per cent of the cash required for the project after the city's contribution is factored in. For example, if a project is worth \$100 million and the city is providing \$20 million, the group must have a commitment for 90 per cent of the remaining \$80 million. With construction costs rising and fundraising a tough slog, there could be interest in trying to loosen the city's requirements.

But Ald. Gord Lowe, who sits on the fund's subcommittee, says he's not tempted to revisit the rule. "If we lower that bar, what we do is we expose the city to additional cost, or committing the GST funds for a longer period of time," he said.

Here's an update on how some of the projects are doing: Telus World of Science Calgary/ Creative Kids Museum Plans are moving along, with some funding in place and construction expected to start by spring 2008. The \$160-million centre will house a series of exhibits promoting study of the human body, the environment and sustainability, astronomy, technology and design. "This centre will allow everyone to build learning into their whole lives," said chief executive Bill Peters. With \$20 million in land already provided by the city just north of the Calgary Zoo's north parking lot, the new science centre will be 130,000 square feet in size, twice the size of the existing facility. Peters says in addition to the land, the city has committed \$2 million for planning and is expected to provide another \$18 million once the remainder of funds are raised by the centre, either through the corporate sector or other levels of government.

CALGARY ZOO

The Calgary Zoo's high-profile expansion plans carry a price tag of roughly \$120 million, including a new home for the elephants, Arctic Shores and a conservatory upgrade. The zoo has already received \$3 million of the \$30 million it's getting from the city's fund for a feasibility study and preliminary design work. It will seek the balance of the money from city council by June.

The province has also committed \$35 million to the project, but the zoo is still waiting to hear whether Ottawa will come through with \$40 million. Work on the elephant enclosure is well underway. Grahame Newton, the zoo's director of corporate affairs, said revamping the north entry is next. How things proceed with Arctic Shores -- the centrepiece of the expansion, featuring polar bears and other cold-weather mammals -- may hinge on help from the federal government. "We think that (the federal funding) is really critical," he said. A spokeswoman for Calgary MP Jim Prentice, the regional minister, said the zoo's plan is being reviewed.

CENTRAL LIBRARY

Library director Gerry Meek says the new central library will be about 360,000 square feet, more than twice as large as the existing 167,000-square-foot downtown branch. Meek adds the new building will most likely be a renovation of the old site, although a final decision on that hasn't yet been made. The jump in size will allow designers to add unique components, like an interactive kids centre. Fundraising for the \$120-million project hasn't yet begun. The city has pledged \$40 million through its community investment fund, with the remainder expected to come from the corporate sector and the two other levels of government. When a decision on the site is confirmed by the city, an international architectural competition will open for final design. Construction could start by 2010, with completion for 2012.