

GRAND TRUNK SITE — PUBLIC STATEMENT

Delivering the Community's 2018 Vision — the Full Cost, and How It's Paid For

The vision for the Grand Trunk site is not new. In 2018, following extensive community engagement, the City's Grand Trunk Master Plan, endorsed by City Council, set out a Community Hub housed in the reused Grand Trunk building — a new YMCA, a new public pool, childcare, and the library, together with space for the arts, heritage, and public gathering. The master plan set that direction. It did not put a price on it. **The Grand Trunk is a multi-generational project, sized to serve a future Stratford population of about 40,000 — up from roughly 32,000 today — and this is the first time anyone has put a full price to that vision, along with a plan for how it is paid for: a total project cost of about \$143 million.**

After the ad hoc committee's term ended, City staff advanced two Build New options of their own. The smaller option, at 75,000 square feet, includes a 10,000-square-foot childcare centre, an atrium, a library, and the YMCA — yet the current YMCA alone is 42,000 square feet, and the library program calls for 40,000 square feet. It is worth asking how that math works: at 75,000 square feet, this option appears to largely rebuild what the community already has, with no real accommodation for future growth. The comparison below uses the second, 100,000-square-foot option, since it offers larger facilities than what exists today. Both options, however, develop a smaller new building on the site rather than making use of the existing 163,000-square-foot Grand Trunk superstructure — building less, not more.

The scale of the Renewal Plan is not without precedent. At 172,000 square feet of community space — with the residential component and parking financed separately — it is smaller than the combined 179,500-plus square feet of the Rec Complex and its adjoining Agri-plex community space, a project the city delivered directly, without a developer. The Renewal Plan asks the city to do again, at its own core heritage site, what it has already proven it can do successfully elsewhere.

The City's New Build Plan has not yet been priced against that same full list of community spaces. Applying that same rate — \$654 per square foot, the rate implied by the City's own partial New Build proposal of 100,000 square feet for \$65.4 million — to a matching program, and budgeting site remediation at an estimated \$2 million per acre for the additional land its footprint requires, shows what it would cost in full: about \$156 million with an open-air parking garage, or about \$161 million with an enclosed parking garage to match the Renewal Plan's — \$13 million to \$18 million more than the Renewal Plan's \$143 million, even though the cost per square foot works out to about the same. Much of that gap comes from site remediation: the Renewal Plan needs it only where the pool addition is built (about \$1.3 million), because the rest of the building already stands. The New Build Plan disturbs the ground under every new building and its parking structure — surface parking in both plans doesn't require remediation — putting its soil remediation at closer to \$12 million. Now is the time to think it through and plan the whole project with its full cost known, rather than building a piece now and meeting the rest, uncoded, in the future.

This proposal comes from architect Robert Ritz (R. Ritz Architect Inc.). The Grand Trunk ad hoc committee was created by City Council to help move the Master Plan forward. Mr. Ritz was not appointed to the committee, though he put his name forward to serve — both as chair and as a general member. He stayed closely engaged with its work regardless: he attended every meeting as an observer and appeared before the committee as a delegation on three occasions.

The committee's mandate, as adopted by City Council, was: to support the Grand Trunk Master Plan; to act as a sounding board to the City on matters dealing with the renewal of the Grand Trunk building, including building designs and architectural plans; to identify fundraising opportunities and support fundraising initiatives; to advise and assist with the development of a public engagement program and promote the activities of the Grand Trunk renewal; and to liaise with other committees or organizations with overlapping roles and responsibilities. Notably, the committee concluded that as much of the existing building as possible should be used, even after a consultant to the committee recommended demolishing it and building new instead, on the grounds that it would cost less. **That mandate did not produce a costed design or funding plan using the existing building for the committee's or Council's consideration.** As an architect, Mr. Ritz saw value that had gone unrecognized: a structurally robust building that others had written off, on a site whose contamination others have long acknowledged but never costed. He pursued the analysis entirely on his own initiative — no one asked him to. Drawing on his engagement with the committee, a full review of the 2018 Master Plan, and the building's structural analysis, Mr. Ritz developed the Renewal Plan to give that work a concrete proposal to weigh — a design and a full cost for repurposing the Grand Trunk building into a Community Hub.

A \$143 million project is not a \$143 million bill to taxpayers. The plan is built so that each part is paid for by the people and the revenues that use or benefit from it. The one exception is the library: as an existing City service, its space may be financed in part directly by the City, potentially alongside fundraising, rather than paying for its space entirely on its own like the other facilities:

Each community facility finances its own space. The YMCA, pool, library, daycare, theatre, clinic and the other uses each rent or buy their space for what it costs to build — about \$654 per square foot, including the shell — the same construction rate the City used for its New Build Plan. The final size of each facility is set by that tenant, and additional spaces are available to buy or rent, which helps cover the building's shared operating areas. By comparison, once the New Build Plan is priced to the same full program, it costs \$13 million to \$18 million more overall — even though its cost per square foot works out to about the same, once it accounts for soil remediation and the cost of demolishing two-thirds of the existing building while retaining and rehabilitating the remaining third.

The residential apartment pays for the connective and site work. In the Renewal Plan, the revenue generated from the development of the apartment finances the construction cost of the concourse and entrances that link the building for year-round access (about \$10.0 million), and the remediation of the site where the pool is built (about \$1.3 million). The apartment is a separate development; its profit contributes to these community elements. Property taxes generated by the residential building also help offset the ongoing operating costs of the concourse and entrances.

Parking pays for itself. The parking garage (about \$23.0 million) is financed by parking revenue — from this garage together with other municipal parking.

Structured this way, the community gains the full Grand Trunk hub while direct municipal capital is kept to a minimum. Identifying and supporting fundraising toward these sources was part of the committee's purpose — and fundraising cannot begin until the full cost, and a plan to pay for it, are on the table. That is what this proposal provides for the first time.

The building is designed in three parts — West, Centre and East — so it can be phased for construction, but to be cost-effective the work is best done at once: the building is ready for infill, and a single construction effort renews and cleans up the exterior in one pass.

At about \$415 per square foot including parking, the Renewal Plan's per-square-foot cost is comparable to the City's New Build Plan. This \$415 figure blends the finished community spaces, priced at \$654 per square foot, with the parking garage, which costs considerably less per square foot — pulling the overall average down. But once matched to the same full program, the New Build Plan costs \$13 million to \$18 million more overall. The difference is that the Renewal Plan reuses the existing building rather than replacing it — requiring far less soil remediation — and it comes with a funding structure that spreads the cost across the facilities, apartment revenue, and parking revenue. For heritage reasons, the New Build Plan retains and rehabilitates one-third of the existing building as a covered outdoor event space.

Reusing the existing building also makes the project easier to fund. The building is structurally robust: it was originally engineered to carry an overhead crane rated at 200 tons running the length of the building — a far heavier structure than the lightweight steel typically used to build something like a shopping mall — giving it more than enough capacity to add additional floors for its new community uses. The Grand Trunk site is also different from the clean sites this kind of redevelopment usually involves: it carries the added cost of contaminated soil that a typical mall-to-housing conversion wouldn't. Because the structure already stands, each facility can buy or rent its space and be financed as it commits — the money can arrive over time rather than all at once — and adaptive reuse qualifies for heritage and sustainability grants through that new construction does not. While individual facilities in a new build could similarly be added over time, the building itself must still be fully funded and constructed before any of them can open.

Now is the time to step forward. With a full cost and a funding plan on the table, the community groups that want a home in one shared Grand Trunk building can move from interest to commitment. Each interested group is invited to inform the City of its intent to be part of the Renewal Plan, to bring forward a program of the space they want — including its size — and to begin fundraising for its part. Every group that steps forward turns a costed vision into a funded one — and brings the Grand Trunk closer to reality, in time for the City's 2032 Bicentennial.

After months of research and consultation, Robert Ritz is placing his research on the future of the Grand Trunk site into the hands of the people of Stratford. As a lifelong Stratford resident and an architect with decades of experience in planning, heritage conservation and community development, he has prepared these materials simply to contribute his knowledge and ideas to an important public conversation.

These proposals are offered as a resource for citizens, community organizations and future decision-makers to consider as they see fit.

Robert Ritz will receive no financial or professional benefit from the base building or site plan concepts themselves, either now or in the future, and neither he nor his architectural practice will seek that work. Given the scale of the project relative to the firm's size, R. Ritz Architect Inc. may be asked to design one of the individual tenant spaces within the building; any such work would be pursued only through a transparent, fair, and equitable process open to other qualified firms, not awarded as a result of this proposal. Robert Ritz may, however, use this work as a portfolio piece to promote his practice for other similar work elsewhere.

This is a contribution to the community — not a commercial opportunity — with the hope that it will help Stratford make informed decisions about one of the city's most significant heritage assets.

Figures were prepared by R. Ritz Architect Inc., using the City's \$654-per-square-foot development rate — the rate implied by the City's own partial New Build proposal of 100,000 square feet for \$65.4 million — for the finished spaces, including the shell. Because portions of that shell are the existing building rather than new construction, those portions — along with the parking garage — were instead budgeted using an independent Letter of Cost Opinion from a construction cost estimator with over 20 years of experience with Canada's largest construction manager/general contractor, who has no vested interest in the project. That opinion is a Class D estimate — the same class of estimate the City's own \$654-per-square-foot figure is based on. A detailed facility-by-facility cost breakdown is available. It is provided as public information about the Grand Trunk renewal, available at our website www.gtrshops.ca. We encourage the City to publish its own complete, all-phases figures so the community can compare full numbers side by side.