



Strathroy & Area Seniors Centre Discussion Paper



1/ Overview of Facility

The Strathroy & Area Seniors Centre (SASC) facility is located in the heart of Strathroy on Frank Street – one of the principal downtown streets. The building is ideally situated next to the Sydenham River and directly linked to Alexandra Park via a pedestrian footbridge that connects to the SASC parking area. The bridge is the primary pedestrian access to the parkland and its associated recreational activities (Lions Pool, Play Structure, Royals Field, Sleepy Hollow Railway, Rotary Memorial Trail) from the downtown core. This association contributes to the building's enormous potential as a community destination.



Historic Images, Museum Collection

The original building was constructed in 1902 by the Citizen's Water, Gas and Electric Co. to accommodate the Strathroy Water Works & Pumping Station. In the mid 20th Century, the structure was converted to accommodate the Strathroy Public Utilities commission. Over the years, the assemblage of office space, pumping sheds, and garages were amalgamated and adapted to provide for the expanding needs of the PUC. In 2000, the building was converted once again to accommodate the newly formed SASC, with the architect carefully incorporating elements of the building's historic past into its current function.



Floor Plan, Murphy Architects, 2000

The SASC is managed by a board of governors, which oversees the operation of the facility. The Municipality retains ownership of the building, and provides an annual capital contribution towards required maintenance and improvement projects. The SASC building features a large hall/games room with kitchen and designated dining area, a lounge, workroom, billiard room, library, office space, reception area, board room and workshop among other amenities (see floor plan above and elevation drawing, appendix). In this space, the SASC hosts a variety of activities for members, including a exercise programs, square dancing, tai chi, wood turning and carving, bridge, dart tournaments, and many other activities for seniors 50 years and older. The SASC generates revenue to cover its operating expenses through program fees, facility rentals for private occasions, community events, and group meetings, as well as ongoing fundraising activities coordinated by the board and volunteers.

2/ **Current Challenges**

At a recent meeting of the SASC board, members discussed the current financial and social challenges facing the Centre, and the need to make changes to ensure its long term viability. Items identified for consideration include the need to diversify programming to appeal to a broader audience, board succession planning, integration of alternative uses and user groups, and a renewed focus on membership development to decrease reliance on fundraising initiatives that drain resources. Like many similar operations, the SASC is also struggling with the perception associated with the label of 'senior', and points to the use of this term as one of the main contributors to its declining membership. With the changing attitudes toward aging brought on by the 'Boomer Generation', the SASC recognizes the need to diversify its program offerings and potentially undertake a revision of its brand in order to expand its member demographic and appeal to a broader segment of the community.

3/ **Opportunities & Potential Uses**

Based on the amenities described above and the advantage of its central location, municipal staff have given consideration to a number of other potential complimentary uses to contribute to the revitalization of the SASC. In preliminary conversations with the SASC coordinator, there was a general expression of interest in pursuing the integration of alternative user groups and functions.

One such consideration is the integration of the Strathroy & District Chamber of Commerce office and its visitor services operations. The Chamber currently operates a visitor/tourism centre out of a mobile trailer situated in Alexandra Park next to the successful new play structure development. The municipality currently provides parkland property for this office and contributes to utility costs. The Chamber of Commerce has benefited from the excellent visibility associated with this location fronting onto a major north-south arterial roadway that connects with Highway 402. However, the

relocation of visitor services to the SASC would direct visitors to the downtown core in close proximity to shopping, dining and accommodations, offering greater potential to extend their length of stay and retain tourism spending. The SASC would also provide an improved first impression to the community as a welcome centre, while making available a valuable parcel of parkland for potential future development (ie. discussions surrounding a community splashpad and washroom area). The amenities offered by the SASC could also enhance the operation of the Chamber of Commerce, providing a professional office and meeting space as well as a conference hall and kitchen amenities for special events. The duties of the Chamber staff associated with the operation of the Business Improvement Association (BIA), including regular BIA board meetings, could also function out of this centralized downtown location.

Another consideration proposed by municipal staff is the accommodation of the Art Group and its associated activities at the SASC. The Art Group currently operates out of the lower floor of the Strathroy-Caradoc municipal offices (Town Hall) and contributes to the operation the Strathroy Library art gallery (next to Town Hall). In the Town Hall basement space, the Art Group operates a studio for member artists, offers workshops and classes for members of the community, hosts special events and group meetings, and displays the work of member artists during open gallery hours two days per week. As the community continues to grow, the municipality will undoubtedly require the use of this space for expanding municipal services and other related functions. In anticipation of this need, staff proposed investigating the possibility of relocating the Art Group and its activities to the SASC to diversify the activity of the SASC and provide greater exposure for the Art Group. The SASC workshop space (see floor plan above) currently provides a separate “storefront” style entrance and parking lot fronting on the south side of the building, providing excellent exposure and access for an artist gallery operation. This workshop area has also been identified as somewhat underutilized by the SASC membership and its current layout and design is perfectly suited for use as an artist studio space.

The proposed multi-use centre – including the operation of the Chamber of Commerce, BIA, Art Group and senior’s activities – has the potential to draw significant traffic to the SASC facility for a variety of uses, thereby providing mutual benefit for all parties involved. This proposal also allows for greater flexibility in the future development of municipal parkland and building space, while consolidating operating expenses.

4/ **Future Considerations**

In addition to the implications noted above, this merger could create opportunities for future developments at the Town Hall and Strathroy Library & Museum facilities. Recent developments with the County of Middlesex have identified the need for office space to accommodate the services associated with the GAIN Centre, including referral, licensing and employment services. The relocation of the Art Group could create available office space for this purpose in the lower level of Town Hall, thereby centralizing government services and generating modest operating revenue through a rental agreement. The relocation of the Art Group and the development of a gallery space at the SASC could also provide room

for expansion at the Strathroy Library and Museum site. By relocating the gallery and making available the Art Gallery space in this facility (34 Frank Street), opportunities to enhance services and expand library and museum operations become feasible. Over the past several years, the intensity and diversity of patronage to the library and museum has greatly increased. In order to respond to the needs and interests of the community, both museum and library staff have given consideration to future expansion of services and the impact this may have on the facility. Potential changes include a dedicated area for children's programming to satisfy the changing demographic of library users, as well as the expansion of museum gallery display space to enhance the visitor experience and showcase a greater portion of the museum's significant collection for visitors. The availability of the Art Gallery space would be integral to the adaptive reuse of this building to accommodate these and other future priorities.

Finally, the recently completed Downtown Master Plan identifies the area of the SASC parking lot and the pedestrian bridge as a key component of downtown revitalization, as follows:



The Frank Street pedestrian bridge not only provides pedestrian access to the Sydenham River and Alexandra Park, it also provides an opportunity to create a point of visual interest within the Downtown. Currently, the location and visual environment of the bridge is understated and should be clearly identified and landscaped as a feature in the Downtown. To signal the presence of the bridge and to promote its use and appearance, the Master Plan proposes the following design elements:

- *A treed and landscaped pedestrian walkway with a distinctive paving surface to be located as a continuation of the Frank Street sidewalk from North Street to the pedestrian bridge.*
- *The walkway will separate the drive aisle of the parking lot from the parking spaces and help to define its edge while enhancing its appearance.*
- *A parkette should be established at the Downtown end of the pedestrian bridge to act as a gateway and celebration of the River.*
- *Consideration should be given over time to the reconstruction of the pedestrian bridge to enhance its visual presence.*
- *Signage at Front Street should be introduced to indicate the presence of the pedestrian bridge and trail system at the end of Frank Street.*

The landscaping and roadway improvements mentioned above, combined with the addition of complimentary uses, have the potential to contribute to the revitalization of the SASC as a vibrant destination point for residents and visitors to the community.

Appendix/ **Elevation Drawing, Murphy Architects**

