

The Nova Centre under construction.



Since the 2013 election, some details of the redesign of the Convention Centre have become public. It turns out that between moving the underground components above ground, and rearranging the location of the towers on the site, the Convention Centre no longer meets the Request for Proposals (RFP) criteria for size of the facility. The ballroom of the existing Convention Centre is 20,000 square feet, the RFP calls for 35,000, and the revised plans are for 30,000. The exhibition hall of the existing Convention Centre is 40,000 square feet, the RFP calls for 52,000, and the latest plans are for 25,000. Given that the original rationale for a new convention centre was the need for a larger space so as to be able to attract larger events, these numbers are stunning. The failure to meet the requirements of the RFP offers the government an off-ramp, but there is little indication that it will be taken.

One result of the whole debate was some inspired journalism. Tim Bousquet wrote well and regularly in *The Coast* about the cozy relationship between the local business elite and government. The *Chronicle Herald* columns were generally full of uncritical boosterism (by writers such as Roger Taylor and Marilla Stevenson) but it did publish one fine piece by local University of King's College academic and Cape Breton native Laura Penny. She contrasted government support for the Centre with its lack of support for the universities, a much better investment:

“When the NDP were elected, I was glad. I hoped for the same thing I ask my students for: ‘Please, guys, make new mistakes.’ But the NDP’s endorsement of the Convention Centre proposal is an all-too-familiar mistake. Nova Scotians have already seen the Very Special Episode where we buy the Big New Thing that saves the Economy. Repeatedly. I’m not against development. I’m against politics-as-usual passing for development. The idea that one big capital project will save us is old. [...] We need to work on our R&D skills, not our ‘coffee or tea?’ skills. But this will never happen. Our ostensible leaders, in business and politics, do not see our universities and community colleges as assets we should develop. They’re just big tax sucks that need to be cut. [...] We can live off tips from people who come from places that still have industries. [...] And if factors such as fuel prices, or a strong Canadian dollar, adversely affect tourism, I guess we can sell plush lobsters and souvenir sou’westers to each other.”¹⁵

At the moment there is a lawsuit with respect to the Nova Centre, brought by the Thiel group of companies focusing on a decision of our government to try to enable a fast-tracking of the project. The Thiels are rival developers of downtown land. Their point is interesting. They are questioning an order of the Minister of Municipal Affairs to, “exempt the development of the Nova Centre ... from complying with the requirements,” of existing HRM by-laws that would otherwise apply. The Nova Centre is missing revised design drawings, an encroachment license, and street closure authorization, which means it could not have obtained building or other needed permits.¹⁶ It is far from clear that the sections of the *HRM Charter*, which the Minister relied on to issue his orders, can actually apply. The initial court decision has been to uphold the legality of the Minister’s order, but the Thiel company is appealing.¹⁷ They object to the implication that the Minister can sidestep all usual orderly development processes at will.

