

Metro cities eye for music school

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■ **Stonewalled by Riverview conditions, conservatory 'blown away' by initial reception from Dieppe, meets with Moncton reps this week**

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TEXT & TRANSCRIPT STAFF

Riverview council says it still wants a music conservatory/business complex built in the town, but it is lagging badly in what is now a contest for the project and the main reason is the way council does business, says the granddaughters of the 'Man Who Built Riverview'.

Asked if she thought her hometown would have become the province's largest 'bedroom community' had the late, legendary home builder Byron Dobson become entangled in civic politics in the 1960s and '70s, Melody Dobson replied that "Actually, he ran into a lot of problems too, and so did my father (Philip)."

"He wanted to be the first to build condominiums in the Moncton area and he got huge opposition from council."

"In the end, they got built in Moncton instead and the developer who built them got an innovation award."
In the view of this third-generation builder, the travails of the Dobson clan with the town's elected council seem to fit a pattern governed by a tendency to resist almost any

Riverview says it is not yet out of the running

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development — commercial or residential — that displeases even the tiniest group of single family homeowners.

The \$2-million project she and husband Juergen Weiland proposed in Riverview is a prime example.

Last month Riverview Town Council voted in favour of an application from Weiland to 'spot rezone' a Dobson family-owned property on the northeast corner of Findlay Boulevard and Whitepine Road.

The lot borders the town's almost-empty 'Findlay Park' industrial development from R-1 Residential (single family dwellings only) to Central Commercial.

The couple proposed that Weiland would manage a three-building complex which would include the Chocolate River Conservatory of Music, operated by Dobson whose background is music instruction. The two companion buildings would house various businesses and the lease money would finance Chocolate River.

However, council attached 19 restrictions to its approval, many of them submitted by the owners of the six houses located on the neighbouring Wedgewood Avenue Extension — the only housing in the area.

"They include a ban on an array of businesses, including a liquor store, pool hall, tattoo parlour, licensed restaurant, grocery store, hotel and even a youth centre."

Dobson and Weiland said they couldn't find a bank to finance a project with so many constraints placed on ways to get a return on the investment.

Although Dobson and Weiland said they would still try to work with the town's staff and council to make the project happen, they also said they would look further

afield. Since then have met several times with city officials in Dieppe.

"The couple has yet to meet formally with Moncton officials — a meeting is scheduled for this Tuesday — but so far they are 'bowled over'" by the Dieppe proposal, says Dobson.

Dobson said officials with the Dieppe Economic Development Corporation offered several locations, both in its proposed downtown near the border with Moncton and its proposed uptown, near the Dieppe Industrial Park and the airport.

Both are still in the planning stages in the rapidly growing city but some construction has already started, for example the \$35-million Champlain Business Campus in the uptown. Dobson said she can't discuss details until Dieppe City Council has seen the proposal later this month, but she and Weiland are developing one based on the downtown location.

However, she said at least in terms of the restrictions they got in Dieppe, "We were bowled over with their attitude: warm, welcoming and full of vision and enthusiasm for their new city and our project."

Michel Melanson, general manager of the Dieppe Economic Development Corporation, is equally circumspect pending presentation to council but agreed the proposal got a good reception in Dieppe, and explained why.

"They're a perfect fit for our vision of downtown Dieppe," said Melanson. "What they want is exactly what we want for the downtown — a place for our citizens to meet and greet and work and play."

"Hopefully council will see their proposal at the end of April and then we can share it with the public."

Dobson could say even less about Moncton pending next

week's meeting, but at least some council members are already thinking about the proposal.

Council will have to see what comes out of that meeting led by Deputy City Manager Don MacLellan, but "this council has typically been receptive to this type of proposal," says Ward 2 Coun. Doug Robertson, a member of council's cultural affairs committee.

"We have to look at each of them on their own merits but, clearly, if an opportunity is there and it makes sense, we're interested."

"My immediate reaction to this one is that it would be awfully nice to have it in our downtown close to other cultural facilities such as the Capitol Theatre, the Atlantic Ballet Theatre, the Aberdeen centre and art park, Theatre l'Acadouette, the downtown gallery and the smaller performance venues that are now emerging as our downtown arts cluster."

Dobson says she and her husband would still seek clarification from council on some of the restrictions for their Findlay site, but currently, "We're not actually discussing anything with council because they refuse to talk to us personally."

"We asked to meet with council to discuss further action in camera (a closed meeting) but were told in no uncertain terms that they are not allowed to meet with developers at all, just town staff."

"We don't want to say anything against them, but we're having a terrible time trying to deal with middlemen in this; it's very difficult to get open communication between the sides."

"The development people in Dieppe told us that's not the way they do business; their councillors sit down with developers all the time — there are no 'secret arrangements,' just talk."

Brenda Orchard, Riverview's economic development officer,

could not be immediately reached for comment Thursday but elected officials seem to be on a different page from the Chocolate River developers.

Clarence Sweetland, one of two men running for mayor of the town next month, acknowledged the town has been slow on commercial development but "it's a no-brainer. We simply have to have it because the taxes we raise on residential development barely cover the services for those same areas."

As for the Chocolate River proposal, however, Sweetland said despite the breakdown last month "the good news is negotiations are still ongoing and the indications are that they will come to an agreement. This is not a dead issue, far from it."

Sweetland said the restrictions placed on the development are there to protect the entire area in case the property ever changes hands.

Charles Broderick, who has been interim mayor since Bruce Fitch went into provincial politics last year and is running for council again, also was under the impression that talks are continuing.

Broderick said it's "regrettable" if they are not, "if thought things were moving along fairly well, though I don't have all the details."

Broderick defended the restrictions placed on the development as logical. "Grocery stores" doesn't mean a corner store, but it does mean a big box supermarket. That, or a hotel, wouldn't be allowed because parking is inadequate and things like a liquor store or a youth centre were deemed inappropriate for the area.

"All we were trying to do was strike a compromise between the developers and the neighbours and, based on reports from staff, we thought we had that. We're quite surprised by the way things turned out."