

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR CITY OF COURTENAY STRATEGIC CULTURAL PLAN

### History of theatre-City partnership

The Sid Williams Civic Theatre, a community cultural asset owned by the City of Courtenay, has been serving the Comox Valley as a performing arts venue **since 1971**. Activities in the theatre **between 1971 and 1991** were conducted primarily by volunteer-driven organizations. The initial conversion of the theatre from a defunct movie theatre to a performing arts space was completed through a huge effort by many volunteers and donors led by Sid Williams (later to become the theatre's namesake). In addition to 400+ local "seat plaque" donors, funding for the 1971 effort also came from the City and the Province (as a BC Centennial project).

The area's performing arts scene was growing and by 1991, higher usage of the theatre and several safety incidents made it clear to the City that professional staffing was needed going forward. **Professional management and technical personnel were engaged in 1992** through the **Courtenay Recreation Association** and overseen by the City's Community Services department.

Between **1992 and 1996**, Sid Management worked with the **Comox Valley Cultural Centre Society** to develop a plan to build a large-scale cultural facility in the Comox Valley including spaces for the museum, art gallery and theatre. This project was ultimately not successful for a variety of reasons, and both the theatre and the City of Courtenay (and other cultural partners) turned their focus to providing services and programming within existing facilities. **Between 1998 and 2000** a distinct cultural district was evolving downtown with several key facilities and organizations located in the downtown core.

At the end of **1998**, the theatre was closed for urgent renovations, including an earthquake safety upgrade. This **2.5 million dollar renovation project**, funded by the City of Courtenay, strengthened the roof and walls of the theatre for earthquake safety; it also included the expansion of the auditorium by adding a balcony, the expansion of the lobby by enclosing an outdoor mezzanine, and the expansion and modernization of dressing rooms.

While the theatre was closed for renovations, Courtenay Council appointed a 9 member **Theatre Advisory Committee (TAC)**, which would work with City Staff (Director of Community Services) to provide periodic input on the renovation process and to research an optimal operating model for the theatre upon re-opening. The TAC conducted detailed research and interviews into the operating models of 20 theatre facilities in BC in communities of similar size to the Comox Valley.

The model that stood out as most successful and sustainable was one in which a non-profit/charitable organization (with an appropriate mandate) operated the theatre under a management agreement with a municipality, supported by municipal funding.

Key advantages of this model were:

- Artistic independence and operational flexibility,
- Ability to use volunteers in many areas of artistic operations,
- Governance by a volunteer board of directors,
- Ability to fundraise for programming support and theatre improvements,
- Ability to leverage municipal investment with funding from other levels of government.

Upon recommendation of the TAC, **the Sid Williams Theatre Society was formed in May 2000**, with Courtenay City Council appointing the first Board of Directors. The mandate at that time was very similar to today, balancing four key areas of focus:

- Artistic, outreach and educational programming,
- Accessible community theatre facility and services,
- Attracting travelling headline performers to benefit regional audiences and tourism,
- Improving the facility (and equipment) on an ongoing basis.

The resources available at the time of the **1999-2000 renovation** were focused on public safety and amenities, and **did not include improvement of the stage or technical facilities** at the theatre, which became a planning and fundraising priority for the SWTS in conjunction with the City.

Since the **theatre's reopening in 2000**, under management agreements with the City of Courtenay, the SWTS has completed well over a million dollars' worth of improvements to the theatre and its specialized equipment using ticket surcharges, donations, fundraising and grants from the Vancouver Foundation, Community Foundation, Island Coastal Economic Trust and the Provincial and Federal Government, and other contributors. The City of Courtenay has maintained the building and carried out infrastructure improvements.

The SWTS has participated in cultural planning activities with the City of Courtenay and Comox Valley Regional District in 2011 (Jennifer Wilson Report), 2017 (GDH Solutions Report), 2018-19 (Patricia Huntsman Report) and 2023-24 (Nordicity Strategic Cultural Plan). The Sid Board also conducts regular strategic planning for both operating goals and facility need within the scope of the Society.

Theatre operations have also grown from a staff of 6 in the 1990's to a staff of 15 and 150+ volunteers presently. The dollar volume of operations has grown from under a half million dollars annually to 1.5 million. Combined front door (public) and stage door (performers) visits, the theatre hosts 50,000+ users annually and is one of the busiest professional theatre venues on Vancouver Island.

The Sid's most important partnership is with the City of Courtenay, which provides both operational funding and capital investment, which enables the SWTS to attract and **leverage funding from other sources** including external contributors that bring money into the community. Sustained advocacy by the SWTS Board has resulted in modest **funding support for the theatre from the Town of Comox and the Comox Valley Regional District**. The **SWTS currently earns over 60% of its operating revenue**, with 40% coming from grants from all sources.

The theatre is at a critical point in its evolution where the SWTS is pushed to the maximum of its current capacity to respond to user and facility needs. We are looking forward to the City's imminent **Strategic Cultural Plan** and its recommendations for operational/programming support and future capital projects, including a possible expansion of the theatre to create more rehearsal and performance space to respond to community growth.

### Report prepared by SWTS Management

MORE INFO: <https://www.sidwilliamstheatre.com/about/history/>

### Key Milestones for Partnership SWTS and City of Courtenay

**1971** – Bickle Movie Theatre converted to performing arts use. Community volunteers and donors. City of Courtenay ownership. Part of BC Centennial Projects.

**1992** – Professional staff (Mgmt/Tech) hired for theatre. Courtenay Recreation Association / City Community Services dept oversight.

**1992-1995** – Sid personnel involved with CV Cultural Centre Society Efforts.

**1998** – Theatre closed for urgent renos including earthquake safety, balcony added, lobby enlarged, new dressing rooms.

**1999** – City Council forms Theatre Advisory Committee (TAC). TAC researches operating models for theatres in BC (similar sized communities).

**2000** – Theatre reopens after 2.5 million dollar renovation. TAC recommendations approved by Courtenay Council: New entity formed: Sid Williams Theatre Society, partnership agreement with the City renewing every 5 years.

**2002** – SWTS receives full charitable status, enabling donor-based fundraising.

**2011** – Jennifer Wilson Cultural Planning Report to C.V. Regional District.

**2017** – GDH Solutions Cultural/Recreation Planning Report to C.V. Regional District.

**2019** – Patricia Huntsman Cultural Plan for City of Courtenay.

**2020-2021** – *Planning and implementation disrupted by COVID-19 pandemic.*

**2022** – SWTS makes recommendations to City for revamped Management Agreement.

**2024** – Nordicity Strategic Cultural Plan for City of Courtenay.

Additional historical information about the theatre available at:

<https://www.sidwilliamstheatre.com/about/history/>