



Casa Loma – Public Consultation on Future Uses for Casa Loma

Grace Church on the Hill
300 Lonsdale Road, Toronto
Thursday, May 10, 2012
7:00 – 9:30 pm

SUMMARY

Over 40 people participated in the Future Uses of Casa Loma Public Meeting, held on May 10th, 2012. The participants represented a diverse range of interests, including: Toronto residents, Casa Loma Members, Hospitality Industry Professionals, Real Estate Professionals, Casa Loma Stakeholders (Garden Club Members, The Queen's Own Rifles Members and Pegasus Hospitality Group Members) and Casa Loma Staff.

The purpose of the consultation was to introduce the public to the process underway to determine the future uses and/or ownership for Casa Loma and to seek public feedback on the process underway and potential directions being considered. Discussion questions included:

- 1. What are your priorities for the future of Casa Loma? (think about use, ownership, governance and other priorities)*
- 2. How do you think the City should assess options for the future of Casa Loma? (for instance, what are the most important factors, criteria and considerations?)*
- 3. Do you have any other advice for the Casa Loma team as they move forward with their work?*

Please see Attachment A for the meeting agenda and Attachment B for the participant list. Attachment C includes feedback received following the meeting and prior to the submission deadline of Friday, May 18th for having comments included in this summary report. Seven submissions were received via email. Of the seven submissions, three included extensive additional detail beyond what is captured in the summary; their full text is provided in Attachment C. The overview presentation reviewing the history and relevant background information to inform the discussion is available at:

http://casaloma.org/media_room.news_article.gk?catalog_item_id=20324&category=/news.

This report was written by Bianca Wylie, a member of the Swerhun facilitation team. It is a summary of feedback from table worksheets, online feedback and discussion at the meeting – it is not intended to serve as a verbatim transcript. Before finalizing this report, the facilitation team distributed a copy in draft for participant review and incorporated the feedback received.



Key Themes in the Feedback Received

Priorities for the Future of Casa Loma

1. **Maintain public access:** Several participants shared their belief that public access to Casa Loma is a top priority. As a key heritage property and Canada's only castle, it is important that it is available to be experienced by all.
2. **Recognize that Casa Loma is more than just the main house:** Participants felt strongly that any analysis for the future of Casa Loma consider the very different elements of the site differently (including the main house, the stables, the gardens, the park, the hunting lodge, and the potting shed). Several participants said that it was difficult to provide the City with feedback and advice regarding the future of the different elements of the site without first having information that helps them understand their current state and use (e.g. does the \$20 million required in capital repairs apply to the main house only, and if not, how much of it applies to other parts of the site?), their potential future use, how the use relates to adjacent properties, and other factors.
3. **Maintain public ownership:** Several participants felt strongly that ownership of the castle should remain with the City of Toronto. Others suggested that since it is a national asset, that ownership should fall with the provincial or federal governments. Some felt involving the province or the federal government was an opportunity while others felt it might be counter-productive and might take too long to get to agreement. It was also questioned as to whether there was any additional money at other levels of government or if the financial constraints would be the same. One participant said that regardless of whether one likes or dislikes how Casa Loma has been run to date, maintaining local control over the property ensures continued local influence on the outcomes.

The potential for private ownership was raised, with one participant noting that private ownership may not be out of the question on part of the site, but any decision about this would require a detailed analysis of each component of the Casa Loma site (as described in point 2 above) and discussion with the community about the conditions under which private ownership might make sense.

4. **Bring in specialized management:** Participants shared a desire to have a specialized management team at Casa Loma, with the tourism, business, event management, programming and other expertise necessary to make the site a "go-to" location in the city. Participants felt the management should have broad programming and business experience, and should have creativity and passion as key values in their approach to designing, expanding and developing the operations plan and business opportunities.

Key Criteria to Consider

When assessing options for the future of Casa Loma, the following criteria should be considered:

1. **Whether the option maintains public use.** Casa Loma was described by many as an iconic building, a Canadian national treasure and the "People's Castle" – with a strong feeling that the castle must remain accessible to the public in any future use scenarios. It was also noted that future plans should strike a



balance between additional tourism and additional usage by Torontonians. It is also important to keep Casa Loma accessible, in terms of admissions rate, so that school children can continue to attend class trips.

2. **Whether the option respects the historical value of the property and builds on and supports its hallmark heritage features.** There were multiple suggestions around the expansion and development of how to showcase the castle and its grounds – participants felt that the heritage content experience had much room for improvement. Taking care of a historical building is key and funds should be for restoration, not redesign.
3. **Whether the options allows for broader use of the site.** Several participants felt that the use of Casa Loma could and should increase significantly. A wide range of additional uses was suggested, including but not limited to: five-star dining, high tea, brunch, art and exhibition space, galleries, media centre, history classes, a casino, jazz nights and dancing. Beyond the activities in Casa Loma, other ideas were proposed such as hospitality and/or dining venues in the lodge, or more expansive programming for the gardens and grounds. The general feeling was that Casa Loma should be the “go-to” place for events in Toronto.
4. **Whether the option helps expand and diversify revenue sources.** There was consensus that growth should be a guiding goal in the development of future use and programming. Given the awareness that maintenance costs will be a permanent fixture of the property, thought needs to be given to expanding and diversifying revenue in as many directions as possible. The balance on growth, however, is to create adequate growth to enable vibrant use but not to put revenue ahead of all other considerations.
5. **Whether the option requires use of one part of the property or all of the Casa Loma pieces.** It was suggested that options for future use should involve and acknowledge each pieces of the property, as well as the property as a whole. Some felt strongly that the pieces should not be broken up and that the future of the property should be thought of as a whole.
6. **Whether the option will enhance use of the existing assets at the site.** For example, it was noted that the gardens appear to be under-visited/underused and in need of more attention. Future options for Casa Loma should include identification of opportunities for the property to shine. Ideas included multiple restaurants and event usage in the main house or using the Hunting Lodge as a hospitality and accommodations venue to supplement wedding events.
7. **Whether the option allows for use of the site throughout all times of day and all seasons.** Thinking about how the property is used and unused, from an events perspective, is an important criterion. The evening occupancy rate was highlighted as a key indicator of underuse and opportunity for expansion. Examples such as the ROM and the CNE were cited as venues that pursued both seasonal and year-round opportunities.

Other Advice

1. **More information is required before participants can provide a meaningful opinion regarding the future of Casa Loma.** There were participants who said that having access to additional information about the



grounds and the state of repair would enable them to provide more informed feedback to the City. For example, more information was requested regarding where the \$20 million dollar backlog in capital repairs needed to be spent, and an interest in seeing the City commit to having a fair, unbiased valuation report produced regarding Casa Loma. Attendees were interested to learn more about ways to increase the amount of involvement and participation of the public in the consultation process regarding the future of the site, including providing more time for feedback. Some attendees felt that low attendance at the meeting was reflective of the low-profile of the property and its use. Another suggestion was to create a way for the public to have ongoing input into ideas for Casa Loma, as stated in one participant's workbook: "Community Engagement is key".

2. **Participants voiced the need for creativity and passion to inform the future use opportunities for Casa Loma.** Some participants felt that the city was not promoting Casa Loma adequately as a key tourist destination and felt it was lacking equitable profile to other high-draw attractions in the city. Beyond increased tourism communications, there was a call for increased marketing of the space as an event venue. As a participant noted, some people are likely unaware that the venue can be rented for special events. Creating a more customer-focused environment is also desired. It was suggested that there be more opportunities within the membership model, including different tiers, as a way to generate revenue from individual patrons. Another suggestion is to explore sponsorship models with corporate sponsors, as done by other cultural entities. It was also suggested that operations should be looked at more closely with Spadina museum – when busloads of tourists go to Casa Loma they don't go to Spadina and they could co-promote.
3. **It would be helpful to see related examples.** Participants suggested that the project team look at related management case studies of heritage properties for guidance, specifically: the Newport Preservation Society, the Vanderbilt home "Biltmore" in North Carolina, the various Hudson River Valley mansions in New York, and Edith Wharton's home "The Mount" in western Massachusetts. Brisbane's Treasury Casino and Casino Varkert in Budapest were raised as two examples of combined heritage/casino development.
4. **Implement future changes in stages or phases.** Participants felt that the decision on future uses should be phased and done in stages of development rather than trying to resolve the shortfall with one key decision. It was also stressed that regardless of the outcome, there should be an open process to lease to a competent operator, should the decision be made to take the process outside of city management. Some felt that the new approach to future uses should be more like tweaking options than revolutionizing the whole undertaking.
5. **Two specific suggestions were provided in regards to a more heritage-driven experience for visitors.** One was to have Casa Loma staff dress in era-appropriate garb. Another was to ensure that tours were guided rather than audio based – the example of Rideau Hall was cited. The sense from these participants was that having a historical element pervade all pieces of operations could be an interesting approach. To this end, Queen's Own Rifles could be given some profile in tourism element. Finally, it was suggested that an acknowledgement to the Kiwanis Club be installed in the building in order to pay homage to their work over the years in managing Casa Loma.



Next Steps

Mike Williams (Chair of the Casa Loma Corporation and the General Manager of Economic Development & Culture at the City of Toronto) let participants know that the most likely next step is that the consultant team (HLT Advisory) would provide the Casa Loma Corporation Board with a report that identifies options for the future use of Casa Loma, including how those options have included consideration of the feedback received from stakeholders and the public. The Casa Loma Corporation Board would then recommend one of those options to Toronto City Council for consideration. At this point it is envisioned that, pending support from Council, the Casa Loma Corporation would then initiate a proposal call that requests submissions from the private and non-profit sectors to submit their ideas regarding the future of Casa Loma.

Eva Pyatt wrapped up the meeting by thanking all participants for coming, and noted the rich and comprehensive nature of the session.

Note that at the meeting it was announced that the report on the future of Casa Loma would be submitted to the City's Executive Committee in June and City Council in July, however this schedule has now been delayed until September. Watch the Casa Loma website for any updates to this timeline.