



## Ad-Hoc Grand Trunk Renewal Committee

<b>Working Group:</b>	Staff Report
<b>Report Date:</b>	June 9, 2025

### Purpose

This report summarizes the Committee's feedback on the three GTR superstructure development scenarios presented by SVEC Group on May 20. Discussion took place following the meeting via an online document.

This information-only summary will guide the Committee's discussion on June 16 toward selecting their preferred scenario. Afterward, SVEC Group will explore detailed costing and adjustments during Phase 2 of their evaluation. A final decision on what happens to the structure will not be made on June 16.

Appendix: [Analysis of feedback received](#)

### Requested Input from the Committee

The Committee is asked to review this summary before the June 16 meeting.

- Which single scenario does the Committee support advancing as the preferred direction for Phase 2 testing and costing?

### Feedback: Executive Summary

The Ad Hoc Committee gave broad, strategic feedback on the future development of the Grand Trunk site, highlighting several critical considerations. Top among these is the need to make a firm and informed decision about the fate of the superstructure.

Committee members stressed the importance of fiscal responsibility, in up-front investments and long-term operating costs. They value integrating affordable, high-quality amenities that benefit the community. Clear delineation of operational roles and cost-sharing responsibilities for the shared facility is essential. The committee underscored the need to include revenue-generating elements. This includes balancing market-rate housing with affordable and accessible housing, while maintaining greenspace and ensuring the development aligns with the city's social and environmental goals.

Members are concerned about future risks, like the lack of binding commitments that ensure current decisions are upheld by future councils. There was notable concern about the conflicting findings across consultant reports and a need for a consolidated, consistent summary of technical and environmental studies to support decision-making. Public engagement on the site's interim use could raise unrealistic expectations. The potential for over-reliance on nonprofit partners at the expense of revenue generation was also noted. Affordable and accessible housing targets need definition through engagement with not-for-profit builders.

Despite risks, several opportunities were identified. These included exploring public fundraising models, securing grants, expanding winter tourism, and incorporating innovative uses such as an AI learning centre or cultural attractions. The idea of a "big draw" remains important, though undefined, and may be key to economic return and vibrancy.

Opinions on the superstructure's future remain divided. Some support full demolition for flexibility, while others advocate for partial preservation due to its unique architectural character. The heritage value of the site, some highlighted, could be preserved through design rather than structural retention.

Committee members stressed the need for strategically using the site during the interim and for continued engagement, including with Indigenous communities. Questions remain about the project's overall funding model, the role of private developers, and how this site fits within Stratford's broader planning framework. Clarity on these issues will be essential for meaningful progress.

## **Highlights of feedback, by category**

### **Decision-making**

- Clarify the future of the superstructure (partial retention, full demolition, or adaptive reuse). *See also [Heritage, below](#).*
- Ensure fiscal responsibility when considering long-term operations and capital investments.
- Prioritize affordable, quality amenities and community benefits.
- Clearly define who's responsible for operating and sustaining shared spaces.
- Ensure outcomes align with the city's social and environmental responsibilities.

### **Development considerations**

- Balance affordable and revenue-generating housing.
- Optimize land use and maintain meaningful green space.
- Position the site to serve as a central hub that complements downtown.

- Identify a “big draw” element to attract residents and tourists.
- Preserve flexibility to act on current “knowns” while deferring parts pending future data.

### **Risks identified**

- Future councils may not uphold commitments—explore contractual safeguards.
- Overemphasis on nonprofit use could undercut financial sustainability.
- Mixed confidence in current consultant findings; would like an analysis of all technical studies and recommendations.
- Lack of clarity on affordable housing targets, costs, and non-profit builder partnerships.
- Public engagement within the superstructure may raise false expectations.

### **Opportunities noted**

- Explore public/private fundraising models and government grants.
- Consider bold additions like a casino or an AI-focused learning centre.
- Increase winter tourism through targeted amenities or programming.

### **Heritage and structure**

- Opinions split on whether to retain or demolish the superstructure.
- Some see partial retention as awkward; others value its unique aesthetic.
- Heritage can be honoured through design rather than preserving the structure itself.

### **Interim use and engagement**

- Use the site for select events where suitable; avoid programming for its own sake.
- Ensure any short-term activity doesn’t confuse long-term intentions.
- Prioritize clear, ongoing engagement—especially with Indigenous communities.

### **Outstanding questions**

- What is the current development budget and projected funding sources?
- What share of costs will be the City’s vs. private developers?
- Can site layout be aligned with broader city master plans and growth strategies?

### **Next Steps**

The Ad Hoc Committee will discuss the scenarios at their June 16 meeting and choose one scenario for SVEC Group to explore detailed costing information. SVEC Group will share its Phase 2 evaluation findings with the Committee later this summer.

### **Analysis of all Committee feedback**

#### **1. What factors or trade-offs are most important to consider in scenario planning?**

- Decide the fate of the superstructure (see also [question 4 below](#)).
  - How might bylaws be impacted depending on whether the whole structure is demolished vs. all or partly kept?
- Fiscal responsibility in decisions and long-term commitments
  - Improvements to the city's quality of life/amenities are affordable
  - Clear responsibility for operations, expenses, and potential losses, once any shared spaces are open
    - Need a better understanding of what those future operational costs will be compared with the overall development investment.
  - Economic benefits of improvements are valued higher than pure costs
  - Development costs are optimized for the return on investments made
  - Generate return on investment/costs now, as it will take time for the economy to rebound, including using housing solutions that attract more workers to the city
- Optimized community spaces (both shared facilities and greenspace)
  - Addresses community needs by integrating amenities that are also solutions (e.g., vulnerable housing, recreation, learning/library)
  - Stratford's environmental and social obligations are met
  - Balance affordable/accessible housing while still allowing for revenue-generating housing as well
- Optimized overall land use
  - Land is not "overdeveloped," and green space for recreation is given its due (not just non-use landscaping)
  - Take advantage of the central location in the city to leverage transit/active transportation hubs and meet the growth of the city for decades to come.
  - The final scheme should have a "big draw" to get crowds to the city core (residents and tourists). Don't lose an element of fun in the outcomes.
  - Quantifying an acceptable ratio of public-use spaces (parks, shared facilities, amenities) in the new neighbourhood to private, revenue-generating amenities is divisive due to cost vs. principles.

- What can we responsibly start work on now, using confirmed info on hand, which preserves areas where work can start when more is known, even if there is a broad time gap between these two points?

## 2. Are there any additional opportunities or risks that should be taken into account?

### POTENTIAL RISKS

- Decision-making process
  - Don't rush decisions without due consideration
  - Avoid thinking that "easy" and "cheap" are the best solutions for the project.
  - Risk that the future Council will not meet commitments made now. There's no mechanism of reassurance/enforcement. Could there be contracts, etc., to mitigate this risk? Approving plans and bylaws doesn't guarantee this.
  - Decision making, actions won't respect partnership (such as with the YMCA), autonomy, as organizations.
  - Ongoing risk that decisions to build and/or renovate routinely exceed budget, and/or have unforeseen problems, despite careful and informed decision-making. What's the strategy for this likelihood?
  - Overemphasis on non-profit occupancy of the site vs. revenue-generating occupation
- Optic that there are contradicting findings across various consultant reports. Clarify what's universally accepted as sound in the superstructure, vs. unsalvageable.
  - Need a summary of all the various environmental, consulting and engineering studies completed since the beginning of the acquisition (in one document/place).
  - Findings/presentations are analyzed for consistency, and from that, generate confirmed universal recommendations.
  - Opinion on SVEC's findings is divided (very supportive/neutral/critical)
- The "big draw attraction" (mentioned above) hasn't been defined as a core element of the final plan. This puts it at risk of being overlooked as an eventual revenue stream.
- Housing affordability is at risk since we've not engaged with a not-for-profit builder to get specifics for the balance of affordable/accessible units vs. market-rate units.
  - What do those numbers/prospective rent rates look like?
  - How do we define affordable and/or accessible units?

- A risk is that continuing to show the public the site/superstructure doesn't manage expectations if the structure is ultimately demolished.
  - It may be a "novelty" to see inside, but it may not attract people to return to the site.
  - No guarantee that a seasonal activity program will improve public opinion or be a cost-effective crowd draw.

#### POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES

- Conduct professional fundraising to help offset investment, like the initiative to raise money for the Tom Patterson Theatre.
- What are potential federal/provincial funding streams, or other grant sources?
- Offer more winter activities to boost Stratford's tourism. Perhaps a casino that generates revenue for the city (could this be the "big draw"?).
- Could AI be of more use in the project's operations?
  - Create a center of learning for smart (digital/AI) entrepreneurship, high school training

### **3. How well does this work reflect the vision and guiding principles the Committee helped shape? Are there ways the connection could be made clearer for the Council and the public?**

- Project vision is not linked to milestone timing/caps, which will hinder efficient progress.
- Overemphasis on parking counters accepted environmental key principle
- Unclear how work on the GTR site fits into the overall city Master Planning and growth

### **4. The idea of reusing the Grand Trunk superstructure as outdoor public space is a new one. How well do you think this concept supports the idea of preserving the historical value of the building? Are there features or uses that could help strengthen the connection to heritage and community value?**

Generally, opinion on whether to retain part or all of the structure vs. demolishing it for the benefit of a "clean start" is divided. It's unclear if the past choice to retain as much as possible is still valid, given SVEC's evaluation.

## HISTORIC VALUE

- Need to balance cost vs. benefits of keeping part of the structure or demolishing it all to start fresh with the best room for options, and find different ways to honour heritage. We can honour heritage with clever materials, passionate design and expressive architecture elements that are thematic, meaningful, deliberate, but modern—and still have impact.
- Acknowledge that nostalgia is not a sentiment to make fiscally responsible decisions on.
- An actual relic locomotive on site may be excessive and doesn't speak to the future of Canadian transportation.
- Demolishing the structure makes Stratford seem bland, like every other generic Ontario city.
- "The impressive and cathedral-like expanse of the interior space is stunning, and what distinguishes this building today."

## STRATEGIC LOCATION

- Consideration should be given to whether this site should ultimately be an extension of the downtown. Or do we want it to be only a transition point between the downtown core and the surrounding neighbourhoods?
  - Perhaps removing all or most of the structure will improve movement from other city areas to the core, through the whole site.

## STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Retaining only one-third of the structure will overall "look ridiculous."
- The choice to have an open roof vs. using technology to cover the final structure in a new roof is still unresolved for some.
  - Can't cranes access the structure before the roof is reconstructed?
  - Haven't other railway structure roofs been modernly restored?
  - Suggestion made that the roof should be made into/from Sunpanels

## STRUCTURE-USE IDEAS

- If the ground floor of whatever structure is retained becomes partially covered parking, perhaps the mezzanine could be restored for use as retail and/or gathering space?

- If the structure stays up but changes to open air + parking, might it not be another idea to route the road through it instead of taking away from other developable land?
- An open-air theatre or outdoor venue for gatherings, but revenue-generating for the city
- Markets, a skating rink, public art, cultural use, and more parking are supported ideas.
- City's municipal affairs (offices, Chamber, etc.) should relocate to a new, purpose-built building on the site. Then, the current city hall building is converted to a combined market/maker/retail space with social or recreation space.

**5. What rationale do you have which reflects your support or opposition to the direction being proposed for interim use of the Grand Trunk site, particularly the summer programming idea(s).**

- Comments reflect the similar points in [Question 2 above](#) about managing public expectations on the structure's future.
- Support for using the current grounds for an event when it's a good fit, but doesn't have sufficient space to happen elsewhere in the city. In other words, some wiggle room to take advantage of the space rather than losing a good event opportunity if the location works.
- The Activations budget may be better used in determining longer-term use of grounds instead of activities covering only 1-2 summer seasons.
  - Mixed opinions about the costs and benefits of a summer program for the sake of resident entertainment, without clearly defined engagement outcomes.
  - Support for developing a good strategy and implementation plan first for using the grounds effectively for public benefit over the next 1-3 years.

**ENGAGEMENT**

- Community engagement continues to be critical and is widely supported by committee members.
  - Opinion is divided on whether funds are better spent on studies and getting the Master Plan right, rather than further interim activities on site.
  - Straightforward information flow to the public using outreach should be favoured to show progress, vs. miscellaneous site activities in terms of funds invested.



- More engagement with Indigenous people in Huron-Perth, and include an element in the design/final site that honours their local story.

## **6. What concerns or considerations do you think the Committee should address before these activities proceed?**

- Need a better understanding of the city's portion of development cost against the contribution of private, for-profit developers who will take on other aspects of the final Plan.
- The committee and the city need to be nimble and adapt to get things accomplished when it comes to making use of the site until true construction begins.

## **7. What questions come to mind that you think should be explored in proceeding to finalize a plan reflecting recommendations the Council consider in how to proceed with renewing these vital lands, including the shops building?**

- Where are all the various revenue streams predicted to come from to cover all the development aspects?
- What's the current development budget, reflecting those predicted revenue streams?
- Suggestion to meet for brainstorming on this topic

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## **Miscellaneous:**

- Reduce the focus of the current development project to what's needed between now and 5-10 years to better get to work being done.
- Desire for the working groups to gather and just talk it out. Less document production and paperwork to sift through.
- Not clear internally (across Committee) how much consultation has been done with the stakeholders...or this isn't seen as transparent
  - Unclear how much consultation has happened with other cities that undertook similar development projects, and what are their lessons learned?