

Report Memo

Date: September 2011

Re: *Focus Group Research – Key Findings*

Background

Thinkwell Research was engaged to conduct focus groups with Nova Scotians to gain a better understanding of public perceptions of the new convention centre in Halifax, and what is important to Nova Scotians as it relates to this project.

A total of three (3) focus groups sessions were conducted, as follows:

Group	Location	Date (2011)	Age group
1	Halifax	August 24	35-50
2	Halifax	August 24	50+
3	Valley (Wolfville)	August 25	35+

The three groups began with a general discussion about economic development, with an emphasis on awareness of recent economic development initiatives. This was followed by an exercise (and then group discussion) about perceptions of the new convention centre. Following this, participants were asked to review and respond to a series of statements about the project.

Copies of the complete discussion guides and recruiting questionnaire have been included as attachments to this report.

Key findings

The key findings from the focus group sessions have been outlined below.

1. Most participants do not yet have a strong understanding of the details of the new convention centre project.

In each of our three sessions, the new convention centre was identified (unprompted) as a recent economic development initiative by our participants. Furthermore, when asked directly about the project, most participants indicated that they are aware of the project. At the same time, our participants did not demonstrate a deep understanding of some of the details about the project.

2. Attracting new events and visitors to Nova Scotia were cited most often as positive impacts related to the new convention centre development.

The most common perceived benefits of the project were attracting new (and maybe bigger) events and conventions to Halifax, followed closely by a related theme - raising Halifax's profile to attract new visitors to the province. Boosting tourism in general was also a common response.

Responses that reflected a broader theme of economic development - namely job creation and economic spinoffs - made up the next most common category of response.

3. The cost of the new centre - and the lack of a perceived need for the investment - were mentioned most often as potential negatives of the new development.

The list of negative perceptions was topped by a concern about the potential cost of the project to taxpayers. In the discussion that followed, it was clear that cost concerns are not only limited to the current level of government investment, but they also reflect a fear that these costs will increase over time.

Cost concerns were followed closely by questions about whether a new convention centre is necessary. This reflected a range of opinions, including a belief that the current centre is sufficient.

Another frequently mentioned "con" - among Halifax participants - was a concern that the new centre would increase traffic congestion and reduce the availability of parking in downtown Halifax.

4. Participants were sceptical of the potential benefits, seeking further validation and tangibles.

Participants were reluctant to express support for the project in the absence of more detailed information about the economic and tax revenue projections associated with the project. A number of participants indicated that their perception of the project would become more positive if they could be reassured that these projections were well-founded.

5. Statements highlighting a direct personal benefit elicited a more positive response from participants.

A number of statements generated enough of a positive reaction and discussion to stand apart from the rest.

In no particular order, these statements were:

[Halifax] The new convention centre is an investment in the Nova Scotia economy. In just 10 years, it will generate \$85 million in provincial tax revenues that can be reinvested in the things that matter to Nova Scotians; health, education, social services.

[Valley] Building a new convention centre is an important way to help grow the Nova Scotia economy. It will create thousands of jobs, attract new visitors, and in 10 years, generate \$85 million in provincial tax revenues that will be reinvested in the things that matter to Nova Scotians – health, education and social services.

The new convention centre is part of a \$500 million development that will include a hotel, retail space and financial centre that will attract new companies to Halifax and revitalize the downtown core.

This is the most significant investment in our tourism industry in decades. Convention Centre delegates typically extend their visit and will spend more money in hotels, B&Bs, restaurants and small businesses throughout Nova Scotia.

The new facility will create a central gathering place for Halifax and Nova Scotia. A place that will host cultural events, local showcases, festivals and celebrations, fundraising events and much more for our community.

At a broad level, these statements make Nova Scotians active participants in/beneficiaries of the development, as opposed to spectators. Each of the statements speak to some kind of direct personal benefit more so than the other statements we reviewed.

6. There is low awareness of a private sector investor involvement in the project.

The fact that a private sector partner is making a significant investment in the new convention centre project is not widely known. This results in a perception that the entire cost and the risk of the project is being borne entirely by taxpayers.

7. Participants agreed with the two negative statements about the project, but dissenting views were expressed.

While the two negative statements about the project resonated with participants, there was a feeling expressed by some that the statements were too simplistic or not realistic. These statements were:

Governments should not be spending \$160 million on a convention centre in downtown Halifax while cutting funding to health care and education.

If Nova Scotia needs a new convention centre then it should be paid for by private companies, not with taxpayers money.