

Former Crystal Garden will shine

Conference Centre general manager feels it will be a new marketing tool

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Victoria Conference Centre general manager Jocelyn Jenkyns surveys the interior of the gutted Crystal Garden, seeing not the dust but rather a new marketing tool that will lure delegates to the city's expanded facility.

"It's such a special building and there's a great story behind it," she said. "Clients are kind of blown away by it."

The Crystal Garden's \$8-million renovation and expansion project is slated to wrap up in September, boosting the Victoria Conference Centre's space to 73,000 square feet from about 50,000 square feet, including outdoor vinyl tents. More space allows it to chase larger conventions of about 900 to 1,200 delegates, Jenkyns said.

Today, the average group size is about 600. "What we want to do is push that," Jenkyns said. "Our objective now is to get those big ones."

Jenkyns, 44, joined the centre in 2002 as director of marketing and event sales and served as acting general manager when the previous manager left in June 2006. The city of Victoria has now appointed her as general manager.

Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe said, "She has really stepped up to the plate and we are very pleased with what she has done."

The city has been reviewing the governance structure for the centre and now feels that a new system is not necessary, although measures to ensure accountability and transparency could be introduced, he said. An advisory committee with tourism-industry members had been struck because industry stakeholders had felt left out of the loop and had wanted more accountability.

But Jenkyns has largely resolved those concerns, Lowe said. He praised her efforts at improving relations with the industry.

The Conference Centre and Tourism Victoria are co-operating on a joint marketing plan and will team up in certain locations, such as San Francisco and Toronto, Jenkyns said.

Adding the Crystal Garden space will solve the long-standing problem of lack of space for the Victoria Conference Centre, which opened in the late 1980s. The city of Victoria is leasing the building from the Provincial Capital Commission, which had previously leased it

for the failed B.C. Experience tourist attraction.

Dating back to 1925, the Crystal Garden's history includes housing a swimming pool and an exotic animal display. A mannequin of a woman dressed in an old-fashioned bathing costume standing on a diving board is staying in the building, Jenkyns said. The original pool is covered, but its tiles remain.

Banquet space for about 900, room for receptions, elegant staircases and more will be part of the renovated building, Jenkyns said. "What is does is give us our second hall."

A new heating and ventilation system is being installed to try to cope with what can be sizzling temperatures in the building. Jenkyns is prepared to work with the building's quirks. "Part of what we are going to be going through is growing with the building."

Construction is underway on the new three-storey, 3,000-square-foot "servery" where meals will be assembled on the east side of the building. The project is funded by the city of Victoria, the Victoria Conference Centre, and the federal government.

Victoria will show off the revamped Crystal Garden Nov. 1 to 5 for the International Congress and Convention Association. And a public opening will happen as well, Jenkyns said. "Everybody feels they have a part in [the Crystal Garden]."

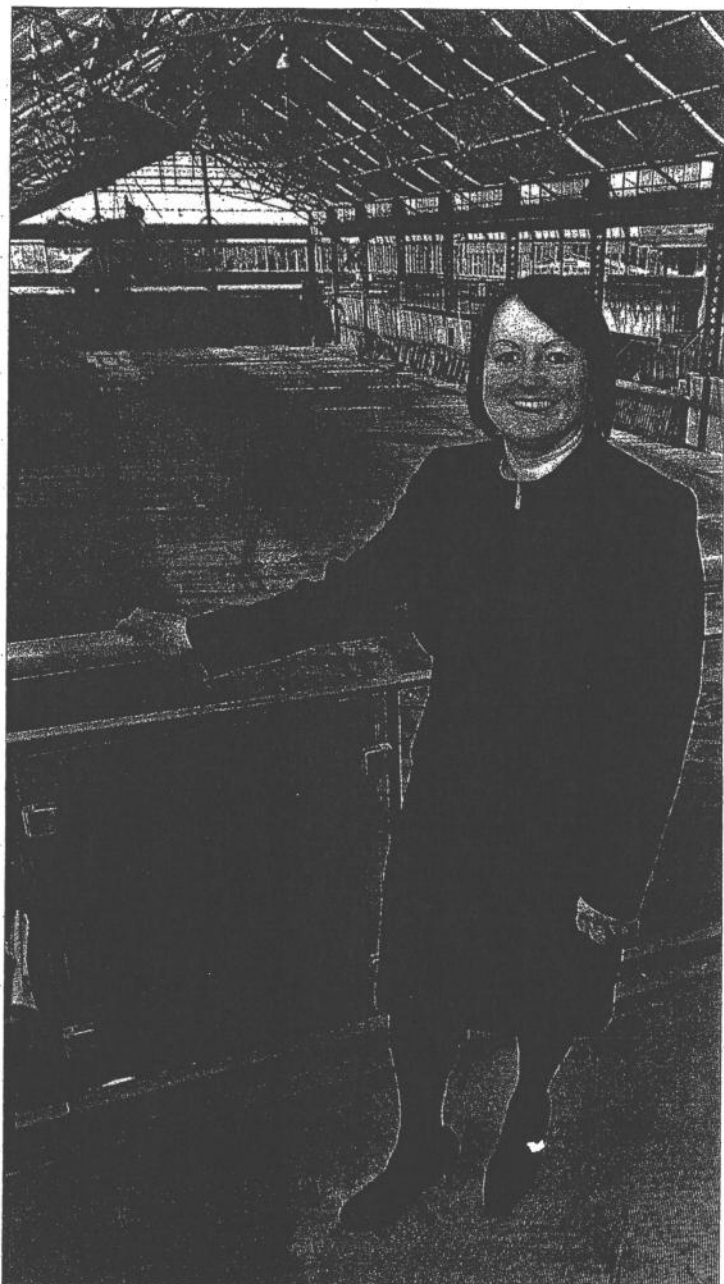
"For almost 20 years, [the conference centre] has been more or less status quo," Jenkyns said. In the past several years, the centre has been going after larger events, aiming to keep delegates in town as long as possible.

Although the centre can accommodate groups of up to 1,200, that's pushing the centre's capacity and it's tough on staff, she said. "Now that we have a second hall, meeting planners don't have to be convinced that their plan is going to work, they know it is going to work."

Last year, the centre reached a record 136,908 delegate days. Jenkyns doesn't expect to beat that number this year, but anticipates surpassing 2006's tally of 117,621 delegate days.

Half the business comes from Canada, about 33 per cent from international clients — which includes some business from head offices in the U.S. — and 17 per cent is solely from the U.S.

The troubled U.S. economy will likely keep that market



ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

Jocelyn Jenkyns says clients are 'blown away' by the special building.

pretty much static for now, she said.

Today's competitive conference industry is marked by which destination can offer something new. "Part of it is just getting out and marketing

the fact that we have [the Crystal Garden]."

The expansion of the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre, bringing it to 473,523 square feet, may create opportunities for Victoria because the

larger centre is looking at groups of 7,000 and more, Jenkyns said. Plans are also to contact groups which had grown too big for the local centre, and encouraging them to return. cjwilson@tc.canwest.com