

Heritage Leaders Launch Coalition Against Demolition

A renewed activist spirit is blowing through the heritage movement! In October, the leaders of 25 heritage organizations from across the country met at a special Built Heritage Leadership Forum which preceded the Heritage Canada Foundation conference in Ottawa. More than a networking session, the forum focused on advocacy, activism and coalition building. It laid the groundwork for powerful collective action by the heritage sector, and imbued the conference that followed with an action-oriented attitude.

And conference delegates were certainly in the mood for action: only weeks before the conference, the Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund (CHPIF) was wound up early as part of a series of budget cuts targeting “wasteful” programs. Like the U.S. rehabilitation tax credit on which it was modelled, CHPIF successfully demonstrated the impact a modest federal incentive could have in stimulating private investment in historic places. The recent and untimely end of the program was the hot topic among leaders in the heritage sector, and HCF’s conference became the perfect opportunity to talk it out.

Forum participants brainstormed approaches to this and other core issues facing the heritage sector. But first they heard about successful advocacy strategies being deployed in other fields. Cynthia Callard, executive director of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, told delegates that “a successful strategy focuses as much on getting people to agree on the need for a solution as it does on the solution itself.” Suzanne King, former national journalist and broadcaster specializing in arts and culture, urged heritage leaders to focus on one or two “asks” and to craft a simple, clear message that will resonate with elected officials and the media. Christina Cameron, speaking on behalf of Alan Latourelle, CEO of the Parks Canada Agency, stressed how the success of Parks Canada’s Historic Places Initiative and the Canadian environmental movement has been based on a collaborative approach among all levels of government, as well as among conservation professionals and individual Canadians. For the heritage conservation message to be heard by elected officials, strong government support must be accompanied by a committed network of NGOs and grassroots-level volunteers who are making the case for heritage.

Two recurring themes were the power of a clear message, and the need for a broadly based coalition working together. Participants rallied around the message “Landmarks, not Landfill” as a solid starting point for a national advocacy campaign. They also expressed interest in being part of a “Coalition Against Demolition” and provided valuable feedback about the kind of communication tools and templates that would help them in their own advocacy efforts on the ground.

The activist mood continued throughout the conference. At the annual general meeting, issues discussed in the forum working sessions culminated in resolutions passed by the members in attendance, including a resolution calling on the government to introduce financial incentives for rehabilitation (see HCF website for text of the resolutions).

Collective action continued after the conference with the launch of a national electronic petition. Forum participants were key players in distributing an HCF petition calling on elected officials to help “Landmarks, Not Landfill” by supporting new financial incentives for rehabilitation. The petition allows Canadians to express their support for historic places with a simple click of the mouse.

If you haven’t already done so, please go to www.heritagecanada.org and add your voice to the “Landmarks, not Landfill” campaign. Stay tuned to HCF as we continue to build a powerful voice for the heritage sector.
