

## Conference centre gets big award for service

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The Daily News

*Friday, October 23, 2009*

The Vancouver Island Conference Centre has outshone its competitors, including the Vancouver Convention Centre, winning an award for outstanding customer service despite too few rooms to operate at full capacity.

Denise Tacon, VICC general manager, accepted the Silver Service Award from Meeting Professionals International, an industry association that covers 64 countries and has 23,000 members, including 180 in B.C.

The award followed kudos given to VICC from Debi Lilly, event planner for U.S. media mogul Oprah Winfrey.

It's a resounding endorsement for how Nanaimo's \$75-million conference centre is being run, despite its greatest challenge: a shortage of hotel beds in the downtown core that prevents it from operating to full potential.

While the award probably won't be enough to change that situation, it is welcomed by Tacon.

During an educational seminar on being the best in the meeting industry in May, Lilly repeatedly cited the Nanaimo conference centre. She focused on the importance of managing every detail, down to the décor, special lighting and technology that makes an event shine.

Lilly's praise helped VICC beat out all other B.C. facilities for exemplary service, including the flagship Vancouver Conference Centre.

"I'm elated, absolutely elated," Tacon said. "It's basically further emphasizing we are going in the right direction."

Solving the bigger problem of room availability remains a challenge. It recently cost VICC the B.C. Teachers Federation booking, pushing losses to \$865,000. The facility operates with an annual \$500,000 taxpayer subsidy, which proponents have always said diversifies the economy while boosting the community's profile.

Delegate days, the yardstick the industry uses to measure conference centres, are at "about 15,000" this year, about 2,000 fewer than expected.

"We equate that to about a \$4-million economic impact. Next year, we're looking at 17,000 (delegate days), which is \$5.2 million, so we're growing and that's optimistic and promising."

The city is now seeking candidates to build the 170-room hotel slated for construction on the Gordon Street lot.

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