

One-stop shop for athletes back on track

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Scott Cousens, a mining industry businessman and the driving force behind the Centre for Sports Excellence in Burnaby, Jeff Vinnick-The Globe and Mail
JEFF VINNICK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The MultiSport Centre of Excellence, a \$54-million project in suburban Vancouver that has been shelved for the past two years, is back on track with construction scheduled to begin in the next two months.

In an exclusive interview this week, mining executive Scott Cousens, chairman of the MCE Foundation, confirmed new money has been raised and he expects doors to open in early 2012. The MCE is also expected to add former Canucks captain Trevor Linden, and Right to Play president Johann Olav Koss to an athletes' advisory council that already includes former NBA MVP Steve Nash.

The MCE is a proposed 146,000-square-foot facility on a six-acre site in Burnaby, which would house sports training, medicine and science practitioners, and be a one-stop shop for athletes. Its potential to be a global leader in athlete development and care is so vast that renowned Vancouver physiotherapist Rick Celebrini has rebuffed opportunities to move.

Celebrini was being courted by the NBA's New York Knicks, but now says he will remain in the Lower Mainland because he wants to operate in the MCE. His mentor, part-time Vancouver resident Alex McKechnie, the Los Angeles Lakers' director of athletic performance, and Dr. Jack Taunton, chief medical officer of the 2010 Olympics, will also set up shop in the MCE.

"I can't see anything that would excite me as much as this," said Celebrini, who has treated stars such as hockey's Marian Gaborik and football's Matt Hasselback.

Cousens, 46, is a partner at mining firm Hunter Dickinson Inc., and has laid low since 2005 when the project was first announced. In August, 2008, during the global financial crisis, Cousens's lenders balked, and forced a construction stoppage after just five months and with the building just 15-per-cent complete. But his dream never died.

"I hate unrealized potential: in people, in businesses, in communities," he said. "It just bugs me."

Until six months ago, Cousens was the sole financier and his \$23-million contribution represents a "substantial" portion of his net worth. It is believed to be the largest gift yet to the Canadian sports system, but **he says wife Monica and sons Niall and Caleb deserve most of the credit because he is "spending their inheritance."**

In the past six months, a quiet fundraising campaign has produced \$3-million in capital commitments, and another \$15-million which is expected to be secured in the coming weeks.

With roughly \$40-million raised, Cousens said he is hoping to pay in cash, and not have to go back to the banks for loans. The cheaper cost of construction these days has also brought an \$11-million savings from when the project was first announced.

Once complete, an athlete with a knee injury, for example, will be able to sit down in the same room with a physician, surgeon, MRI technician, physiotherapist, sports psychologist, nutritionist and coach - all of them sharing their input.

"None of them ever work collaboratively like that - they work independently, and it's the athlete who suffers," Cousens said. "Whether you're a bobsledder or a volleyball player, we're going to have the tools and the team to help you do what you do better."

The centre will also include master coaches in residence, 120 beds for overnight stays, and training facilities (indoor and outdoor). The businesses operating in the centre, many of them clinics, will pay rent, and those monies will be redirected to the MCE Foundation, a registered charity that owns the land and is building the facility. The foundation will remit a minimum of \$1.9-million annually to the Canadian sports system in a financing model Cousens hopes will take some pressure off governments.

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