

Customer Service Strategy for Special Events-related Services and Permitting Processes

Date:	July 26, 2010
To:	Executive Committee
From:	Deputy City Manager – Cluster A
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report recommends the development of a Customer Service Strategy for special events-related services offered by the City of Toronto, specifically support services, permitting applications and approvals. The Customer Service Strategy includes three key initiatives:

1. A corporate-wide review of special events-related permitting rules and requirements, to identify appropriate service standards.
2. A business case for the implementation of an online *EventPal* platform to streamline access to special events-related City services and permitting processes.
3. A corporate policy for special events fees.

Follow-up recommendations and an implementation plan for each initiative will come before Executive Committee during the next term of Council.

The Customer Service Strategy will ensure that the City continues to support special events by building an application process that is customer-oriented and simple to navigate, having policies and procedures in place that are transparent and consistent, and by providing a consistent fee policy to support event organizers and advance the City's strategic goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Deputy City Manager, Cluster A, recommends that:

1. Staff develop a business case for an online *EventPal* platform to streamline access to special events-related City services and permitting processes; and
2. Staff report back to Executive Committee during the next term of Council on:
 - a. The results of a corporate-wide review of special events-related permitting rules and requirements, to identify appropriate service standards; and
 - b. A corporate policy for special events fees.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The recommendations will have no financial impact beyond what has already been approved in the current year's budget.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer have reviewed this report and agree with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

In June 2003, Council adopted the *Tourism Development Action Plan - A Five-Year Tourism Development Action Plan for the City of Toronto*. The Plan articulated the importance of festivals and events to the economy of Toronto and recommended that an event enhancement strategy be developed as a part of a broader plan strengthen and revitalize Toronto's tourism industry.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2003/agendas/council/cc030624/edp5rpt/cl003.pdf>

In July 2005, Council adopted the *Event Enhancement Strategy*. This report recommended that the City review and enhance options to support new and growing festivals and events, including the waiving of permit fees in lieu of funding.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2005/agendas/council/cc050719/edp7rpt/cl002.pdf>

In January 2006, the Economic Development and Parks Committee received an update on the implementation of the Event Enhancement Strategy.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2006/agendas/committees/edp/edp060116/it010.pdf>

In June 2008, Council endorsed the *Premier Ranked Tourist Destination Project Research Summary and Recommendations* as a guide for strengthening Toronto's tourism sector. This report details the importance of attracting and supporting special events to renew and develop the tourism experience.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2008/ed/bgrd/backgroundfile-12816.pdf>

In May 2010, a motion was passed in Executive Committee requesting the City Manager to report to the Executive Committee on a proposed customer service strategy that addresses permitting requirements, fees, inter-divisional coordination, and supports for applicants in organizing community events, and that the report examine the possibility of establishing a one-window event office.

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2010/ex/decisions/2010-05-17-ex44-ds.htm>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Every year, hundreds of special events take place in Toronto streets, public facilities and parks. These include numerous large-scale fundraising events, consumer events, sporting events, and arts and cultural festivals organized by private organizations and Business Improvement Areas (BIAs). These events are held in addition to the many community events that take place in local neighbourhoods.

These events advance a number of City goals and make an important contribution to the quality of life in Toronto. They are an important part of the success of Toronto's tourism industry, bringing thousands of visitors to our City each year. They create economic opportunity, highlight Toronto's cultural diversity, and provide opportunities to build social cohesion and inclusion across communities.

Council has acknowledged the contribution that special events make to city life in a number of ways. First, it has established three Community Partnership and Investment Program funding programs to provide financial support:

- The Commercial Research Grants Program funds Business Improvement Areas and business associations to help them develop new street festivals and events;
- The Community Festivals Program funds not-for-profit community-based and business organizations staging small and medium scale festivals that are accessible to the general public and improve the quality of life of the community; and
- Toronto Arts Council provides funding to community arts festivals so that they can retain professional, Toronto-based artists and artistic directors to enhance the festival.

The City also provides a number of support services to festivals and special events organizers. Toronto Special Events works with divisions and staff involved in event-related service delivery across the City of Toronto. The Event Support Unit of Toronto Special Events provides advice and consultation to event organizers and aids them in navigating the approvals process.

A number of additional supports have been implemented since the adoption of the Event Enhancement Strategy:

- Permit application processes have been streamlined and event planning support strengthened with the creation of an interdivisional Event Support Team;
- A City-supported festival and event network has been created for event organizers to promote cooperation, joint marketing initiatives, common research methodologies, and dissemination of information on financial assistance;
- An online Toronto event calendar has been created that provides up-to-date listings of festivals and events up to a year in advance; and
- A Special Events Planning Guide has been developed and posted on the City's website which details permitting and event planning requirements in a user-friendly format.

COMMENTS

With any special event held in the City of Toronto, there are usually multiple approvals that must be secured by event organizers. These may be for the use of a public park or facility, for the sale of food and/or merchandise, for waste management, a road closure or for a variety of other purposes. At present, there are at least 16 different City divisions, agencies, boards and commissions responsible for issuing special events-related forms, permits and licenses. The issuance of permits and licenses can be a relatively routine process or have more complex requirements. Depending on the scale and type of event, these approvals can take up to two months to secure and cost organizers hundreds or thousands of dollars each.

Unfortunately, the burden of these requirements can occasionally negatively impact the organization of community special events, particularly those being held for the first time. This may be because event organizers are unclear, unwilling or unable to meet permitting requirements. In some cases the costs of securing the necessary permits become prohibitive for smaller event organizers and negate the value of any grants received.

In the following sections, this report provides information about three Customer Service Strategy initiatives intended to address these challenges, and advance the City's support for special events.

Review of special events permitting rules and requirements

The first key initiative of the Customer Service Strategy will be a review of City of Toronto rules and requirements for special events permitting approvals. An inter-divisional working group will be established for the purposes of guiding the review and producing recommendations.

The review will focus on permitting rules and requirements in terms of both consistency and effectiveness. At present, the criteria, documentation, processing times and costs for permit approvals vary considerably across divisions. Occasionally, standard have been 'grandfathered' for long-running events, while a different set exist for new events. While

variations may be necessary across different service areas, the review will identify opportunities to implement and strengthen corporate-wide service standards and to ensure that the application process is fair and predictable for all special events organizers.

The review will be completed during the first phase of the Customer Service Strategy. Recommendations that emerge from the review will be considered for short-, mid- and longer-term implementation, depending on required approvals, complexity and cost. Staff will report back to Executive Committee early in the next term of Council with recommendations for improving special events permitting rules and requirements.

***EventPal* for special events-related City services and permitting processes**

The second key initiative of the Customer Service Strategy will identify ways to further streamline the event permit application process and to improve the way information and support services are provided to event organizers. A technology-enabled *EventPal* will consolidate all special events-related services offered by the City into “one service window” accessible online. Once fully implemented, *EventPal* will create an applicant-focused permitting system that reduces the time and effort required of event organizers, collect pertinent event information for the purposes of scheduling and service improvement and lead to potential administrative cost reduction and improved cost recovery. *EventPal* will create a consistent service experience for event organizers, no matter what permit approvals they require.

EventPal will also support the Parks, Forestry and Recreation division in responding to a Council directive to develop a single portal for arts programming in City parks and to address associated barriers.

In the initial phase, *EventPal* will be implemented as a digital, front-facing *information service* for event-related city services and documents. Similar to the *BizPal* service currently offered through Enterprise Toronto for early-stage business development, the online information service will provide a single repository of all information regarding City services required by event organizers.

In a subsequent phase, *EventPal* will evolve to include an *account management* function. This transactional service will allow event organizers to submit permit applications to multiple divisions through a single user interface. A tracking number will be assigned to an applicant’s file, allowing organizers to retrieve information on their file and anticipate approval schedules. For events that are held on a regular basis, a tracking number would also create the opportunity for documents to be saved and “renewed,” rather than resubmitted each time the event is held. This function may also allow for payment and permit issuance to occur through a single point-of-contact.

A longer term objective for *EventPal* is the development of *standardized protocol and service integration* for special events services. The use of common forms and documentation for all permit requirements, managed through a single point-of-contact, will ease the reporting burden on event organizers. Common data management

architecture will also allow for opportunities to integrate with other service functions, such as GIS mapping.

The business case for *EventPal* will be completed during the first phase of the Customer Service Strategy. Staff will report back to Executive Committee early in the next term of Council with a detailed project overview and implementation plan for *EventPal*.

Fee policy for special events

The third key initiative of the Customer Service Strategy is the development of corporate policy that will guide fees for special events organizers. Staff will work with the appropriate divisions to develop a policy for fees charged to special event organizers for various services and permit approvals. This policy will be designed to allow the City to support those festivals and special events that advance its strategic goals, while addressing the multiple challenges currently encountered when charging fees.

Event organizers frequently make requests to City divisions and ABCs for in-kind support, but because there is currently no corporate policy in place, a number of problems arise when divisions decide to waive or reduce fees. First, many divisions do not have codified standards with respect to fee waivers and, as a result, decision-making may appear to be ad hoc or inconsistent both to Council and to the public, including organizers of special events. Second, waiving fees places divisions in direct conflict with Council directive to achieve greater cost recovery for services provided. It may significantly impact both their ability to reach revenue targets, and their ability to keep expenditures within approved budgets. Finally, fee waivers generally do not involve accounting mechanisms, and consequently do not leave an appropriate accountability or audit trail.

The policy will ensure that the City of Toronto can offer appropriate support to eligible special events and advance its strategic objectives in both a consistent and equitable fashion.

The policy will be developed for completion in the second phase of the Customer Service Strategy. Staff will report back to Executive Committee during the next term of Council with recommendations for approval and implementation of the policy.

Implementation of the Customer Service Strategy

Staff will report back to Executive Committee early in the next term of Council with a more specific process and timeline for implementation of the overall special events Customer Service Strategy.

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SIGNATURE

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