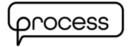# City of Toronto

Cultural Festival Grants Program Engagement Summary

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To: City of Toronto

From: PROCESS

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Overview

About the Cultural Festivals Grant Program

The City of Toronto is developing a new Cultural Festivals Grant Program. Cultural festivals are integral for Toronto's many diverse cultural communities. The proposed program is intended to be a transparent and accessible funding resource for a diversity of Torontonians interested in organizing cultural festivals. It is intended to support cultural festivals and advance the City's goals in access, equity and inclusion, including reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, as well as service innovation, excellence, economic recovery and resilience.

To ensure the program is a success, the City of Toronto is working with Jenny Ginder, Ginder Consulting and PROCESS to support its development. Specifically, through engagement with the cultural festival sector and extensive background research, the objectives of the work are as follows:

- Define clear objectives for the new Cultural Festivals Grant Program.
- Develop program guidelines including eligibility and assessment criteria.
- Determine performance measures for impact.

Engagement Process

In June 2021, the City of Toronto distributed an online survey, hosted two focus groups and an open house. The specific objectives of the engagements were to:

- Share information about the Cultural Festival Grant Program project and process.
- Collect feedback (baseline data, experiences, and perspectives) from a range of festival organizations.
- Continue to maintain and build new relationships within the nonprofit festivals sector.

Overview of Methods

- **The online survey** was distributed to collect initial baseline data about the different cultural festivals within the city. It was distributed prior to the focus groups and open house to better understand the festival providers and their initial responses before deeper dive discussions.
- **The focus groups** allowed for deeper dive discussions with targeted groups of those who have been funded by the City of Toronto as well as BIAs and other smaller festivals who have not received City funding for festivals.
- **The open house** was an opportunity for a diversity of festival producers to come and learn about the project and process, share their feedback and learn from one another. We also provided space for deep dive discussions through breakout rooms.

Who engaged

Group	Description and Outreach	# of People
Online Survey	An online survey was sent to a wide range of festival organizers and BIAs of varying sizes (small, medium and large) and experience levels (emerging to established). Some of the festival organizers have received City of Toronto funding and in-kind support while others have never received City support.	58
Focus Group 1	10 festivals were invited to attend the first focus group, which was intended for festivals that are somewhat more established in the City of Toronto and have received funding from the City (either through the Cultural Festival Recovery Program or through other funding).	4
Focus Group 2	Business Improvement Area (BIA) representatives and 'Taste of' festivals were invited to the second focus group to better understand their role in cultural festival production and supports.	3
Open House	Those who received the online survey were also invited to the Open House.	35

Note: Many of the survey respondents attended the focus groups and open house.

What We Heard

Overarching Questions

Through the survey, focus groups and open house, we asked participants about the following:

- **Information about their festivals**, including their organizational structures, staffing, funding, and their target audiences and locations;
- **What defines success**, including how they measure impact;
- **Experiences and Opportunities** for the following factors:
  - Funding
  - Digital Elements
  - Equity and Inclusion
  - Accessibility
  - Location
- **Recommendations to the City** for the festival funding program and other ways the City can improve support for festival producers and organizers.

Key Messages

Overarching messages are included below.

Success of Cultural Festivals is defined by many factors

Participants indicated they measure the success of their festivals in both quantitative and qualitative ways, expanding the definition beyond only the number of attendees to also incorporate the "vibe", "joy" and "the businesses, vendors and audiences satisfied with the event." Specifically, the following indicators of success were mentioned:

- Number of attendees and especially an appeal to a wide range of audiences
- Media coverage
- Economic impact (including supports for local businesses and vendor sales);
- Feedback on audience experiences and desire to come back(through on-site and post-event surveys)
- Artist involvement and enjoyment
- Opportunities for community building and involvement
- Innovative and authentic programming
- "Inclusive opportunities for cultural exchange in the City"

While some of these measures of success are difficult to quantify, they are seen as very important. Participants indicate they often collect data via on-site and online post-event surveys and through other data collection methods.

Current Funding landscape: Opportunities and Barriers

Participants shared some key barriers and opportunities with funding needs and supports:

- **Operational, venue and production costs:** Throughout the consultations, the major costs and funding supports needed related to operational costs, such as staffing and administration, the cost of venue rentals and production expenses.
- **Long-term stability is a challenge:** Many of the festivals indicated that without multi year funding, it is hard to build a sustainable festival structure and commit funding for improvements.
- **Artist and performer supports and payment:** All participants indicated that paying artists, especially local artists, is a priority. Most participants pay artists and performers but some indicated that the cost can be prohibited and supports would be welcomed.
- **Corporate sponsorship:** Some indicated they rely heavily on in-kind sponsorship from neighbouring businesses and corporations, which are heavily based on relationships. For instance, one festival provider indicated they have never paid for venue space. However this model has its own challenges in terms of stability. Most identified that corporate funding has become difficult to maintain and is increasingly onerous. For instance, many marketing and promotional opportunities have moved to a 'tit for tat' model where there are high expectations from sponsors.
- **Social Enterprise Models:** One participant indicated that they are trying to move away from reliance on funding by selling merchandise to generate revenue, such as tote bags, masks and headwraps.
- **Funding and In-Kind Supports from the City:** Details about the experiences and recommendations to the City are included below.

Recommendations for the funding and application process

The application process should be streamlined, efficient and transparent

Based on participant experiences of the funding application processes with the City and other levels of government, participants indicated that a **streamlined, efficient and transparent process** should be prioritized.

They provided a number of recommendations for the City including:

- **Clearly articulate eligibility, application process, and timelines**. This could include a City-led workshop to support applicants and explain requirements.
- **Include a designated online portal for applications**. Participants indicated they are comfortable with a fully online application, with opportunities to save drafts as they go. The online portal could include opportunities for streamlined permit requests.

- **Communicate with unsuccessful applicants.** Many festival producers shared they often receive no notification or feedback if applications are unsuccessful. They recommend providing feedback to rejected applications to allow for festival organizers to learn for subsequent funding cycles.
- **Provide support throughout the process.** Many suggested that the City should provide opportunities for relationship-building, where they can reach out to a City liaison throughout the application process. For instance, some participants indicated that the cultural hotspot program supports applications throughout the process, which is seen as successful.
- **Include an efficient and simplified reporting structure.** Participants understand the importance of reporting processes. However, many identified that most reporting processes are too onerous and require resources that most smaller festivals do not have. There was overall agreement that an efficient reporting structure is important for evaluation and reflection for the organization and that consideration for simplified reporting should be given.

The Cultural Festivals Program should help provide stability for festivals.

Participants shared that planning a program with no certainty on what their budget will be is a major challenge. They indicated a number of ways the City's program could offer more stability for their planning:

- **Establish two or more funding intakes per year** to ensure festival producers have enough time to organize, given that many festivals occur throughout the year or at different times of the year so have different schedules for grant writing.
- **Share grant application results** at least 16 weeks prior to the events to ensure they have opportunities to plan the events and apply for permits etc.
- **Provide opportunities for multi-year and operational funding**. Participants indicated this would help enable festival organizers to build stability, plan ahead and know what is viable.

Expand eligibility for festivals

Participants suggested that one-day and low-cost events should be eligible for the grant to enable them to sustain themselves and to grow. This is especially important for smaller-scale and emerging events and festivals.

Transparent and Equitable In-Kind Support Process

While some participants have accessed in-kind support (12, 24%), 49 (59%) of respondents have not received in-kind support. Those who have, indicated they have received park permits, water, porta potties, garbage and recycling bins, street closures, personnel and barricades. Most indicated they are not required to report to the City after receiving in-kind support.

Through conversations, participants who understand how to navigate the City structure, including existing relationships with City Councillors are typically the ones able to access in-support resources. More equitable and transparent approaches are needed.

Digital elements will be an important part of festivals moving forward

Many participants indicated they have included digital elements into their festivals since COVID-19 and intend to keep some portions of online engagement or create a fully hybrid model. Of the survey respondents, 21 (43%) shared that their festivals went fully digital in the past two years, and an additional 16 (33%) have incorporated digital elements in their programming. 34 (69%) of survey respondents are interested in exploring digital opportunities and 6 (12%) are open to it. Some festival producers identified that their festivals easily adapted to digital, such as those who are showcasing artists or selling artwork. However, other festivals, such as food and art festivals, struggled to translate online.

Some specific feedback included:
- Digital elements were identified as both an accessibility barrier and opportunity depending on who the audience member is.
- Some identified successes in expanding online. This included enhanced ticket sales, expanded audiences and artists from around Canada and the world.
- Others used digital elements to keep their brand and name alive but wish to return to in-person as soon as possible.
- Some indicated that digital opportunities may require specific funding allocation.
- One participant identified the need for the City to support and address digital safety and data privacy.

Equity and Inclusion is an important consideration for many

There were two different ways that equity and inclusion was interpreted by festival producers. First, many identified barriers and opportunities to integrate equity and inclusion into their festivals. Second, many discussed barriers for certain festivals to access funding and support based on equitable processes.

Addressing Equity and Inclusion within festivals
- Most participants indicated they have included specific actions to address equity, inclusion and safety at festivals. These following actions were identified throughout engagement:

- - Mentorship opportunities, free exhibition space (often specifically for priority groups), commissioning artists who identify with priority groups, providing low-cost or free entry and on-site accommodations, diverse and inclusive programming (including ASL/live captions), opportunities for community capacity building, partnering with not-for-profits that serve priority groups, prioritizing intersectional perspectives.
- Many participants shared a general willingness to learn more about equity and inclusion opportunities but are unsure of where to start and don't have the time or budget to address systemic barriers. Some mentioned that they want to establish better relationships with Indigenous artists and organizations but are also unaware of the proper protocols to build these relationships.

Recommendations for the City

- Host cultural competency, anti-racism and anti-oppression workshops (especially for settler-led organizations partnering with Indigenous-led organizations).
- Allocate funding for programming by Indigenous artists/performers as well as for Indigenous-led festivals.

Addressing equitable access to funding and supports

Through the consultations, it became clear that the festival producers more familiar and comfortable navigating City structures are able to advocate for themselves. This includes outreach to City Councillors and different departments for in-kind support. There was discussion that this grants program could create equitable opportunities for funding and support.

Accessibility opportunities

While many festival providers are aware of accessibility barriers (42% or 50 survey respondents indicated they are), 48% indicated they are unaware of barriers.

Addressing accessibility concerns:

Barriers identified include:
- Lack of accessible design (for office buildings, festival locations such as narrow sidewalks), language barriers, accommodations for service animals, lack of closed captioning or audio descriptions, scent-free or alcohol free accommodations.

Specific actions identified include:
- Adaptable programming with accommodations, 1-on-1 support to artists with accessibility requirements, ASL supports, holding events in accessible venues with accessible washrooms, AODA-compliance, maintaining digital elements post-pandemic to expand reach.

Recommendations for the City

- Provide funding to support accessibility, since many initiatives (such as ASL and live interpretation) are costly.
- Provide City-led workshop on all the dimensions of accessibility so that festival organizers feel more equipped to incorporate accessibility into their events.

Location – Extending beyond the downtown core

Based on the online survey, 72% (38) respondents indicated their festivals take place downtown, while 15% (8) happen citywide. When asked about opportunities to expand festivals outside the downtown core, the following feedback was shared:

- Barriers to hosting festivals outside of the downtown core include accessibility by transit, less recognizable sites, the location of target audience and community, potential for lower turnout, and higher dependence on parking.
- Some participants indicated that they have moved their festivals from downtown locations to Scarborough or Etobicoke due to affordability and larger venue spaces. While this has been successful for some, others indicated lower audience turnout largely due to being locally rooted for many years in one location. They recommended possibilities of hosting pop-up or satellite events with local partners outside the downtown core.

Recommendation to the City

- There is interest in a venue list that outlines the advantages and disadvantages of potential venues within and outside the downtown core.

Other Comments and Recommendations

Opportunity for collaborations and a broader Festival Network

In the open house, there was overarching agreement that opportunities for festivals to share resources, knowledge and promotions would be extremely useful. Recommendations to the City include:

- Establish a festival network, where the City could act as a convenor of festival sot encourage collaboration and exchange.
- Develop centralized marketing and promotional materials from the City (such as a pamphlet on what festivals are ongoing).
- Communicate with the festivals about opportunities and other initiatives. For instance, some participants indicated they were unaware of an annual festival organizers' roundtable that occurred prior to the pandemic. Similarly, some festivals are concerned about COVID guidelines and would appreciate clear communication when new protocols and guidelines are released.

Next Steps: Engagement Moving Forward

Cultural Festivals Grant Program: In addition to reviewing all the detailed feedback received through the online survey, focus groups and the open house, the City is also conducting internal consultations with City staff and background research including a review of other municipal festival programs. The Cultural Festivals Grant Program will be released in the Fall or Winter 2021. An email notification will be shared with opportunities to provide comments and ask questions. The Goal is to have the Grant Program up and running by 2022.

Citywide Festival Strategy: The City is also in the early stages of starting a broader Citywide Festival Strategy. The feedback received through these consultations will help inform the initial background research. The City will reach back out as the process progresses to share more opportunities for engagement.