

Emerging Entertainment Areas Outside of the Downtown Core

Date: September 3, 2021

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: Interim General Manager, Economic Development and Culture

Wards: All

SUMMARY

As one of the world's most diverse cities, Toronto enjoys an incredible range of cultural activity, attracting and driving business, drawing tourism, and generating a vibrant night economy. Much of this activity has historically been centred in the downtown core; but increasingly, cultural entrepreneurs and artistic communities have been evolving in Scarborough, North York, Etobicoke and other areas within the former City of Toronto but outside the downtown core. This report outlines strategic actions to stimulate cultural activity outside downtown, in emerging entertainment areas where opportunity exists to enhance economic activity and livability through encouraging music and other forms of culture.

For many years, Toronto's performing arts, cultural, and live entertainment communities have been facing increasing structural challenges. Rising commercial land values, rents, and property taxes along with the pressures of development have shuttered many bricks-and-mortar music venues, especially in the downtown core. Local artists have found it increasingly difficult to afford to remain in one of North America's most expensive cities. At the same time, as in many cities, there are relatively few venues or culturally vibrant areas outside the downtown core that consistently draw locals and visitors for live performances. The hiatus enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic presents the City with an opportunity to reimagine what Toronto's performing arts and music scene might be and to proactively support the growth of cultural activity in Scarborough, North York, Etobicoke and other communities in the former City of Toronto but outside the downtown core.

This report identifies actions underway, led by the Economic Development and Culture Division, to encourage cultural activity in emerging entertainment areas outside Toronto's downtown. For example, as a next step Toronto Building in consultation with Toronto Fire Services will be engaging the services of a third-party Building Code consultant with expertise in fire protection to review requirements pertaining to temporary and flexible entertainment venues. This work will help identify specific challenges in the Code and acceptable generic alternatives that event organizers can

use to more easily meet Code requirements. The objective of this work is to balance the City's objectives of public safety with supporting and expanding opportunities for cultural event spaces in Toronto.

The actions described in this report align with specific recommendations in the "Building Back Stronger: Report of the City of Toronto Economic and Culture Recovery Advisory Group." The Building Back Stronger report's Recommendation 16 addresses the need for government to advance opportunities for cultural engagement in all parts of the city, year round, while Recommendation 18 calls for the City to preserve existing and create new, affordable spaces for culture across the city.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Interim General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, recommends that:

1. The Economic and Community Development Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications arising from the actions contained in this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

In July 2019, City Council directed the General Manager of Economic Development to work with the Chief Planner and Executive Director of City Planning to identify emerging entertainment areas outside the downtown core that can support entertainment uses at night and the future growth of nightlife in Toronto and report back on potential opportunities and approaches in 2020.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.EC6.8>

The action items within this report are aligned with "Create the Night" recommendations found in the Toronto Nightlife Action Plan provided as an attachment to City Council. The Nightlife Action Plan recommends that in developing new approaches to enhancing nighttime activities, the City identify and support emerging entertainment areas outside the downtown core that can support nightlife uses.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.EC6.8>

Insight and detailed information on Toronto's DIY organizations are sourced from the "DIY Events in Toronto: Understanding Challenges to Access and Space" report.

COMMENTS

City Council's planning policies define the "downtown core" as bounded generally by Bathurst Street on the west, the Canadian Pacific Railway rail corridor on the north, the Don Valley Parkway on the east, and Lake Ontario on the south. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, cultural activity had been increasing in former City of Toronto neighbourhoods outside this core, as well as in Scarborough, North York, and Etobicoke. Demographic diversity and lower rents in many of these areas has generated a rich variety of music, other performing arts, and community activity made by and for locals, as costs and development have continued to create pressures on cultural infrastructure downtown.

This report outlines how the City will support the growth of nighttime economic activity and cultural vibrancy in Scarborough, North York, Etobicoke and the former City of Toronto outside the downtown core through a series of linked steps:

1. Assist cultural producers in organizing events and developing cultural hubs outside the downtown core by communicating existing opportunities in areas already zoned to allow this activity and identifying further areas appropriately zoned for developing clusters of nighttime economic activity, in consultation with City Councillors and relevant City divisions.
 - a. Continue preliminary work on the "emerging entertainment areas" that EDC initially proposed and that City Planning provided comments on with regard to zoning and Official Plan conformity.
2. Create a centralized resource guide for DIY (do-it-yourself) event organizers working in alternative, "pop-up" spaces by identifying relevant information currently found on a variety of pages across the City's website and presenting it clearly and accessibly in one place.
3. Work with Toronto Building, in consultation with Toronto Fire Services and Economic Development and Culture, to facilitate the safe design and use of dual-use and temporary-use venues, in support of the City's Nightlife Action Plan.

Each step is further explained below. Together, these steps should help Toronto retain artists and other creative young people, spur city-wide vibrancy enhancing quality of life and driving economic opportunity, and broaden the focus of Toronto's cultural scene beyond downtown into areas of tremendous potential.

1. Identification and Assessment of Spaces Outside the Downtown Core for Cultural Clusters, Pop-up Events, and Nightlife Activities

For much of Toronto's arts community, access to safe, affordable space has been a key issue, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In Toronto's downtown, rising land values and the pressures of gentrification have resulted in a net loss of approximately 35 live

music venues since 2015. Data presented in 2020's "Re:Venues: A Case and Path Forward for Toronto's Music Venues" report shows that each bricks-and-mortar venue that closes in Toronto costs an average of 10 full-time equivalent jobs, \$575,000 in annual GDP contributions, and \$148,000 in provincial and federal taxes.

Venue owners have few viable local options to re-establish these venues. Encouraging cultural activity outside the downtown core would provide alternatives for displaced downtown venues to re-locate, helping to maintain associated jobs, economic activity, and cultural vibrancy for Toronto.

Lack of appropriate event space has long been an issue for the city's DIY (do-it-yourself) arts communities. DIY event organizers neither own nor have regular access to physical space for events, instead creating performances in temporary locations. DIY performances (which can include visual arts, film screenings, theatre, food events, and night markets, in addition to music) have taken place outside the downtown core, including Scarborough, Etobicoke, and North York, in a wide range of so-called non-traditional or "alternative" spaces including empty storefronts, sports facilities, community centres, halls, and outdoor locations. DIY organizations and the events they curate are vital to the arts community, often providing opportunities for artists and programmers from diverse cultural communities working in non-mainstream genres.

The City of Toronto's Music Office has consulted extensively with DIY event organizers about their needs and opportunities. Event organizers have identified many areas within the city that they feel hold potential for holding pop-up events; these areas are characterized by a matrix of criteria including existing cultural infrastructure, access to public transit, appropriate distance from residential communities, public safety, general aesthetic, and a sense of newness or discovery.

EDC has worked with City Planning to identify the areas suggested by DIY event organizers in which zoning already permits entertainment uses. These areas of overlap currently include (but may not be limited to) the following:

Toronto / East York

- Dupont Street (Ossington Ave to Kendal Ave)
- Davenport Rd and Symington Ave
- St Clair Ave W (Bathurst to Keele)
- Oakwood Ave and Vaughan Rd
- Upper Beaches - Gerrard and Woodbine
- Queen St E and Sherbourne St
- Eglinton Ave W (Allen Rd to Dufferin)
- O'Connor Dr (St Clair Ave E to Victoria Park Ave)

Etobicoke / York

- Lake Shore Blvd W (Long Branch/New Toronto/Mimico)
- The Queensway (Mimico Creek Valley to Kipling Ave)
- Etobicoke Centre (Bloor Street West and Islington Avenue)
- Thistletown (Albion Road and Islington Avenue)

North York

- North York Centre (Yonge Street between Sheppard and Finch Ave)
- Downsview Park
- Avenue Road (Between Lawrence Ave and Wilson Rd)
- Yonge St (between Broadway Ave and Joicey Blvd)

Scarborough

- Kingston Rd/Victoria Park
- Kingston Rd/Midland (Cliffside)
- Kingston Rd (between McCowan and Markham Rd)
- Eglinton Ave E (between Kennedy and Markham Rd)
- Scarborough Centre (Scarborough Town Centre area)

The Music Office will communicate to bricks-and-mortar event operators and DIY event organizers that the above areas within the City of Toronto are zoned to permit economic and cultural activity for entertainment uses (long-term or pop-up). EDC will also continue to work with other divisions, including City Planning, to identify more areas outside the downtown core that are already appropriately zoned for entertainment uses and that will also match criteria used by venue operators and DIY event organizers in determining optimal locations to locate venues or events.

The most iconic and authentic cultural clusters – in Toronto and in other cities – are those that have developed organically through involvement and investment from local arts and business communities. Proactively communicating local opportunities directly to stakeholders in Toronto should help encourage the growth of cultural clusters outside the downtown core that include music venues, small theatres, comedy clubs, recording studios, street markets, and pop-up events. In turn, these clusters will attract and retain creative young people, stimulating hyperlocal economic benefit in the process.

2. Centralized Resource Guide

DIY music and arts activity continues to grow in Toronto and is becoming an important part of the city's cultural landscape alongside the already established performance economy in traditional bricks-and-mortar venues. DIY pop-up events often combine music and other art forms, presented in non-traditional spaces for diverse communities. The City can support this activity by increasing access to space, streamlining processes, shortening timelines, and fostering better relationships between DIY event organizers and regulators.

The Music Office has consulted with a wide range of DIY event organizers between 2018 and 2021, as follows:

- Summer 2018: 31 interviews with DIY event organizers conducted by an Urban Fellow working in the Music Office in writing the DIY Events in Toronto report.
- Dec 2019: Group consultation with 8 leading DIY event organizers, to identify optimal locations and building specifics for DIY activity and existing obstacles to organizing events.

- Nov 2019 – Jan 2020: Consultation with 30 DIY event organizers to identify individual City-owned properties that might be considered for interim below-market-rate tenancy and further refine understanding of issues with permitting and approvals.
- Spring – Summer 2021: Further consultation with DIY event organizers on suggestions to facilitate more nighttime cultural activity.

During these consultations, DIY event organizers consistently cited challenges in navigating the City's multiple regulations, permitting requirements, and timelines in organizing events in alternative spaces. They report that the City lacks clear, centralized information on which divisions must be consulted and what permits acquired in planning an event, and that often, the stated City permit-issuing processes are confusing and timelines longer than the DIY business model can accommodate. As a result, event organizers can become discouraged with official processes and proceed without the required permits and regulatory scrutiny. Unpermitted activity can create safety risks for performers and audiences, and potential liability risks for event organizers and property owners.

EDC staff in the Music Office are frequently asked to advise DIY stakeholders looking for information, guidance, and advice on planning and presenting pop-up events. As a result, the Music Office has developed strong relationships with other divisions whose purview includes licensing, permitting, and the regulatory framework in general.

The Music Office will create a central source of information for DIY event organizers. This information will be featured on the City's Music page (www.toronto.ca/music), and potentially also on other pages on the City's website. This resource guide would exist as a living document, updated regularly to reflect any future changes in regulations or permissions pertaining to pop-up events on any scale. The guide would bring together relevant information currently found on a variety of pages across the City's website and present this information in plain language, with links to more detailed information and application forms elsewhere where appropriate.

3. Exploring Opportunities for Alternative Compliance

Temporary and pop-up event organizers have identified challenges in navigating the permit process and meeting Ontario Building Code requirements. The Code does allow for the use of "alternative solutions" as a way for a permit applicant to propose a different solution to a Building Code requirement while still meeting the objectives of the Code. Toronto Building has a process whereby applicants may use this compliance path: The applicant proposes an alternative solution for review and the Division then makes a determination as to whether the proposal meets the objectives set out in the Ontario Building Code and is comparable to the prescriptive requirements.

For event organizers, developing a site-specific alternative compliance option can be time consuming, costly and challenging. However, the development by Toronto Building of a generic alternative solution for temporary and pop-up event spaces across the City could reduce costs and simplify the permit process for both applicants and building officials. A generic option for compliance eliminates the need for organizers and

business owners to hire a designer to develop an alternative solution and pay an additional fee for review. This approach would facilitate and expedite the permit process, while also balancing the City's role in ensuring public health and safety in these spaces.

In order to support the City's Nightlife Action Plan, Toronto Building, in partnership with Toronto Fire Services, will be undertaking work with a third-party Code consultant to assist with identifying the applicable Code requirements for dual-use and temporary-use venues and how they can be achieved through alternative approaches. The results of this work would then be shared in partnership with ECDC and incorporated into the strategy to support emerging entertainment venues.

CONCLUSION

Together, the action items outlined in this report provide a connected, sequential framework to support increased nighttime economic activity and cultural vibrancy in Scarborough, North York, Etobicoke and areas outside the downtown core but within the former City of Toronto. Expanding this activity outside the core will create broader employment and economic benefits for residents across Toronto, while enhancing the quality of life for those seeking greater local cultural and community vibrancy options as Toronto builds back stronger after the pandemic.

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SIGNATURE

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