



April 30, 2025

Toronto and East York Community Council
Toronto City Hall

Subject: Comments for 2025 TE22.19
2024 Distillery Winter Village, Post Event Review

Dear Members of Toronto and East York Community Council,

The Distillery Historic District was founded in 2003 and has become Toronto's arts, entertainment and foodie destination. During its growth, the Distillery has acted as the incubator for several small businesses that have since become renowned destinations in Toronto, with some brands growing across Canada. These include Balzac's Coffee, SOMA Chocolate, Deciem (The Ordinary) and the Mill Street Brewery. The Distillery operates year-round with 85 tenants, including eight art galleries, two breweries, two distillers, nine restaurants and bars, a French language college, dozens of small locally owned retailers and multiple cafes and shops. The Distillery is a proudly Canadian, privately owned and operated site that has led the charge for over 20 years to revitalize Toronto's east end. We were here when no one else wanted to even visit the area, and we took the risk of developing the area, which I can proudly say has been a success. I can say that with certainty because we are routinely asked by governmental and tourism leaders from around the world to provide tours and insight into what is deemed an example of a world-class mixed-use space with both residential and commercial viability. Part of this success is because The Distillery has continuously/repeatedly reinvested in itself, building neighbourhoods and spaces where the public and locals can enjoy the historic site as one. I might add that the programming provided, for free, includes live music, buskers, art installations, entrepreneurial pop-ups, and areas where you can simply sit and relax on pedestrian-only streets where the largest collection of Victorian industrial architecture in North America surrounds you.

As you may know, our most famous annual event is The Distillery Winter Village, a Christmas Market that started in 2010 and has, over the years, become the unofficial start of the Holiday Season in Toronto and possibly across the country. This festival saw over 1 million visitors in 2024, and each year showcases the City of Toronto to the world, as evidenced by over 2.3 billion media impressions across 35 countries and is consistently ranked amongst the best on the planet. The Distillery Winter Village has become an annual tradition for many families, including my own. It wouldn't be the holidays without a visit to the iconic 50' Christmas Tree on

Trinity St., and where else would you listen to carolers while enjoying a steaming bowl of poutine or a cup of hot mulled wine on one of the patios. The sights, sounds, and smells of The Distillery Winter Village are engrained in the public consciousness of living in Toronto during the holiday season. With this success comes some challenges. The traffic in the areas surrounding the Distillery District during peak times can be very busy. As noted in the report from Transportation Service, this is especially true during the after-work rush hour. We acknowledge that residents are subjected to added traffic delays during our peak hours. Still, The Distillery has taken action by working with both a local residents association and the local councillor's office, along with city staff and a professional traffic management consultant, to identify specific challenges and provide solutions. This past year, we met multiple times with locals to distill the areas of concern, for which we then identified solutions which were then implemented.

Some of these include:

- Additional paid duty police to control both vehicle and pedestrian traffic flow for the safety of all, plus the improvement of traffic flow;
- We added a new parking lot to our area at 200 Queens Quay for the general public with 240 spots;
- We increased the frequency of changing the music playlist to avoid a repetitive soundtrack;
- We increased communication through an FAQ to outline the use of access cards for residents;
- Distillery has created UBER Eats specific parking spots;
- Reinstated access to UBER delivery and rideshare for the convenience of residents;
- Street permit parkers have indoor parking reserved for the whole period instead of the limited "first come, first served" on-street parking they usually have;
- We added décor to make the barricades look more pleasant;
- We would regularly tidy up the surrounding streets;
- We added more security and added paid duty police, including on Christmas Day when closed at the request of residents;
- We provided a free underground parking area during peak periods for exclusive residents' use to support the work of PSWs, tradespeople, and personal visitors to The Distillery's residence;
- We put in place better signage to manage the pedestrian walkways;
- We worked with the TTC, GO Transit and Bikeshare to encourage the use of public transit rather than driving to the Distillery area;
- We also used social media influencers to encourage attending the DWV via public transit, including a collaborative post with the TTC showing Santa and his elves getting off the streetcar at the Cherry Street loop;
- Residents will continue to be offered free access to the DWV at all times (including ticketed times) and up to three free visitor passes daily and
- Within four days of being notified, we hired a contractor to repair and improve the sidewalk to improve access for a resident in a wheelchair.

Our efforts in collaboration with city staff, residents, and the local councillor's office have been acknowledged for genuine care and effort, and we have received letters of praise for our actions from residents.

We take the residents' and visitors' health and safety to The Distillery very seriously. Our consistent actions to respond to complaints in real-time and to be proactive in updating signage and communication have been praised by many. We simply ask for a balanced understanding of the impacts of this festival as related to this report. As the report's recommendations state, we have already addressed all the areas we are able to control. We will continue to work with stakeholders to improve the traffic flow and accessibility for residents to their homes.

The Distillery Winter Village is essential to the success and growth of the east end, by which residential unit values have increased, creating wealth and economic strength for the local economy. The financial success of businesses in The Distillery relies entirely on The Distillery Winter Village and its high volume of foot traffic. On average, over 36% of annual revenue for a small business in The Distillery is earned during this festival period. The extended length of the festival into the first few days of January, which has been mentioned as a problem, is significantly reduced relative to the peak periods of traffic flow. There is a 48% reduction in attendance from January 1-5 vs. the festival's average week indicating that this extended period is not a significantly negative impact on traffic as is being suggested. Staying open during this period provides revenue to our small business owners at a time that would otherwise typically decrease significantly. Revenue data gathered showed a reduction in revenue of over 50% compared to the rest of January. Without this extended festival period, that financial strain on all businesses in The Distillery would devastate these local businesses and the surrounding economy. The Distillery Winter Village also hires over 600 staff for almost two months, including many youths and many through partnerships with workplace agencies supporting newcomers to the country and those in programs to develop workplace skills to support their opportunities for future employment. We also provide daily staff meals as part of their employment, ensuring our people are well cared for. The Distillery Winter Village also works with local not-for-profit charities, including the Anishnawbe Health Foundation, Soulpepper Theatre and Toronto Star Santa Claus Fund, to donate significant funds to support the local community.

The long-lasting impacts of the Covid closures are still being felt in the city, which has been exacerbated by long-term construction projects around the Distillery, including the Ontario Line, the lane closure on the Gardener Expressway and the condo towers on Parliament, all of which has resulted in the decline of visitors to the Distillery. This, coupled with a sluggish economy and now the looming threat of tariffs and a global recession, has resulted in a precarious business environment where every owner worries about making payroll. This festival is the one business opportunity to buck this trend and provide hope for financial stability. In a 2023 report by the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport TRIEM model, The Distillery Winter Village was shown to contribute over \$250M in economic impact to the province of Ontario, contributing over \$58M in tax revenue to the municipal, provincial and federal governments. Not to mention that the DWV did not receive any financial assistance from any government. The City of Toronto has lost many culturally rich festivals, including Taste of the Danforth, reductions in the Toronto Jazz Festival, the financial struggles of Pride, the Caribbean Carnival and the Santa Claus parade. Each has had to rely on public pleas for funding and governmental assistance to survive.

The Distillery Winter Village is a truly self-reliant festival and through tough times The Distillery Historic District has managed to create a successful festival that is viewed the world over as a highlight of visiting and living in Toronto. Let's support festivals like these and encourage entrepreneurs who take risks to build cities and communities by supporting local businesses

that employ our people and showcase this wonderful country, city, and The Distillery Winter Village.

I thank the city staff and the councillor's office for all their assistance and support and ask all of you to recognize and support our continued efforts to showcase our wonderful city to the world.

Thank you.

Rik Ocvirk

Director, Experiences & Events

The Distillery Historic District

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