

Toronto's Festival Strategy

Date: February 10, 2026

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Economic Development and Culture

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The *Toronto's Festival Strategy (2026-2031)* aims to ensure that Torontonians can access free, inclusive and diverse cultural experiences in their neighbourhoods and that Toronto's festival sector is better supported as they continue to strengthen community belonging, enliven main streets, and contribute to the city's global competitiveness. Toronto hosts approximately 300 festivals and they are a critical cultural and economic force that contributes to the vibrancy of the city. It is estimated that as a sector, festivals and events generate more than \$1 billion in GDP across Canada.¹ Toronto's Festival Strategy builds on the strengths of the festival sector while addressing key challenges experienced in recent years and proposing opportunities for adaptation, resiliency and growth.

The Festival Strategy will advance *Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto*, which made immediate investments into festivals and identified them as a vital way that Torontonians experience culture. This strategy builds on a strong foundation, informed by additional engagement and research by OCAD University's Cultural Policy Hub (Attachment 2) to address key challenges facing Toronto's festival sector. This report outlines the need for this strategy, the role of the City in supporting festivals, the engagement and research undertaken as well as the vision, priorities, notable actions and next steps.

The Festival Strategy, included as Attachment 1, provides 17 actions grouped into four strategic priorities: Sector Development; Sector Sustainability and Resilience; Improving Processes; and Awareness and Impact. Each action has associated performance measures to help ensure success in achieving the strategy's vision. Toronto's Festival Strategy will serve as an important framework to guide the City's actions in supporting the festival sector over the next 5 years, ensuring that Torontonians can continue to

¹ FAME-FEEM Canada. (2024). Responding to the crisis in the festivals and events sector while stimulating tourism. A brief to the Ministry of Finance as part of the pre-budget consultations for the next federal budget, p. 6.
https://fame-feem.ca/application/files/8317/2928/4552/brief_prebudg_consult_FAME_august2024_EN.pdf

access meaningful local cultural experiences and contributing to the city's global competitiveness in attracting visitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. City Council adopt Toronto's Festival Strategy, as outlined in Attachment 1 to the report (February 10, 2026) from the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture.
2. City Council direct the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to formally establish the Special Events Stabilization Initiative as a funding program as outlined in Attachment 1 to the report (February 10, 2026) from the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture.
3. City Council authorize the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to review the Cultural Festival Funding Program and Special Events Stabilization Initiative and streamline programs as deemed necessary, with funding allocation to be subject to the necessary budget processes and in accordance with the City of Toronto's Community Grants Policy.
4. City Council authorize the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to negotiate, enter into and execute funding agreements with eligible applicants funded through the Special Events Stabilization Initiative, with funding recipients and grant amounts to be determined annually by the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture within the budget allocation for the program, and on such terms satisfactory to the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture and in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor.
5. City Council authorize the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to negotiate, enter into, and amend any agreements, on terms satisfactory to the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture and in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor, necessary to support the implementation of actions related to Sector Development and Sector Sustainability and Resilience priorities as detailed in Attachment 1 to the report (February 10, 2026) from the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, within the resources included in the operating or capital budget.
6. City Council advocate for additional funding from the Government of Canada and Government of Ontario that supports a longer-term sustainable funding model for festivals.
7. City Council direct the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, in collaboration with the Chief Technology Officer, Technology Services to implement Release Two of the centralized digital permitting solution by December 31, 2026.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

While aspects of this work will proceed with existing resources, new and future investments will be required to achieve the vision and outcomes of the Festival Strategy. Any future budget implications associated with carrying out the actions outlined in this 5-year strategy will be submitted for consideration as part of future budget processes.

As part of the 2025 Operating Budget, City Council approved an additional \$613,375 for the Cultural Festival Funding Program (CFFP). This represented an increase of 32% from the 2024 program budget of \$1,935,000. The increased investment was part of the implementation of Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto. In addition to increased funding for CFFP, City Council approved more than \$1.35 million to renew the Special Events Stabilization Initiative (SESI) to support local event organizers in managing increased production costs.

As part of the 2026 Operating Budget, both the CFFP and SESI will receive inflationary increases. These enhancements are subject to approval through the 2026 Budget Process.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on July 23 and 24, 2025, City Council directed the City Manager and General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to develop long-term bidding and hosting principles and strategies for Mega Events that reflects the lessons learned from FIFA Men's World Cup.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.AU9.9>

At its meeting on May 21 and 22, 2025, City Council directed the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture to develop a set of criteria for managing festivals and events on private property.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.TE22.19>

At its meeting on May 21 and 22, 2025, City Council requested the federal and provincial governments to allocate additional funding for the creation of new funding programs for enhanced festival safety and security, similar to the federal government's Canada Community Security Program and the provincial government's Ontario Anti-Hate Security and Prevention Grant.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.MM30.9>

At its meeting on April 23 and 24, 2025, City Council requested the City to seek a partnership with the federal and provincial governments in supporting Toronto festivals in summer 2026, in view of Toronto's World Cup hosting obligations and other market conditions, such as costs escalations, labour scarcity and demands upon City of

Toronto essential services, to ensure the sustainability of Toronto festivals and special events.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.CC29.1>

At its meeting on November 13 and 14, 2024, City Council adopted Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto (2025-2035), which set a 10-year vision for Toronto as a city for culture and creativity. One of the actions adopted is to support cultural producers leading events, festivals, and public programming through streamlined and improved processes. It included enhanced investments to support festivals and special events with additional funding and staff. The plan underscored festivals as a key element of 'culture' in Toronto.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EC16.1>

At its meeting on November 13 and 14, 2024, City Council adopted Sidewalks to Skylines: An Action Plan for Toronto's Economy (2025-2035), which provides a roadmap for Toronto to enhance its economy focusing on livability, inclusivity and prosperity in the next ten years. One of the objectives was to enhance Toronto's capacity to host and incubate events on city streets by streamlining the permitting processes, improving coordination and strengthening funding supports. It also committed to the development a major event bidding and hosting strategy in collaboration with various partners by Q4 2027.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EC16.2>

At its meeting on June 26 and 27, 2024, City Council requested the Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer and the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to streamline financial support for major attractions in the City and report back in the forthcoming report on the Strategic Support for Festivals and Special Events in Toronto to the Economic and Community Development Committee.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM19.24>

At its meeting of November 9, 2021, City Council approved the establishment of the Cultural Festivals Funding Program to support and increase the accountability and transparency of City funding to cultural festivals.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2021.EC25.2>

At its meeting of June 7, 2016, City Council approved the "City of Toronto Bidding and Hosting Strategy for Significant Special Events" to guide future bidding and hosting of Global Community Events.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2016.ED12.4>

COMMENTS

Context and Strategic Alignment

As a diverse and multicultural city, Toronto has long been home to a vibrant festival and event landscape. Annually, Toronto hosts close to 300 festivals and hundreds of special events that play a critical role in forming and strengthening the cultural and social fabric of the city. These festivals and overall special events strengthen community bonds,

bolster a sense of belonging and act as a catalyst to celebrate and showcase the diversity of culture in Toronto amongst residents and visitors in addition to acting as important drivers of neighbourhood branding and local economic development.

The City works with many types of festivals and events. When discussing special events more broadly in the context of Toronto, for the purposes of the Strategy, they are understood as free to the public or offered at a nominal fee (less than \$5 per person), take place in the public realm, have general appeal and a public profile. A sub-category of special event, a festival is defined as a concentrated collection of activities with a common theme, presented over a minimum of a one-day period and no longer than one month.

While the Festival Strategy targets ‘festivals’, many of the proposed actions have the potential to benefit cultural organizations and event organizers more broadly. For example, organizers of paid, ticketed festivals may benefit from a Festival Association, road race organizers may benefit from a centralized digital permitting solution, resident associations organizing a local fun fair on private property might benefit from a Good Neighbour Guide to inform best practices, planning and more.

In 2024, City Council adopted [Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto \(2025-2035\)](#) which outlines a vision for culture in Toronto, where everyone can discover, create, and experience culture. The plan highlighted that festivals are a vital way that Torontonians experience culture. It also committed supports to cultural producers leading events, festivals, and public programming through streamlined and improved processes and additional funding to support festivals and special events.

Public consultation for Culture Connects found that attending festivals and cultural events ranked in the top five ways that Torontonians experience culture, with 37% of respondents specifically identifying festivals as key to discovering cultures and neighbourhoods across the city.² This aligns with national findings that show that Canadians largely see cultural festivals as the top activity that defines culture for them.³ Additionally, another public survey with 233 Torontonians conducted between October 27 and November 23, 2025, revealed that 94% agreed or strongly agreed that festivals and events contribute positively to the vibrancy and social connectedness of the city, with 78% reporting attendance at 3 or more festivals a year.

Festivals also generate a meaningful economic impact for businesses and artisans while increasing the vibrancy of neighbourhoods which supports the goals outlined in [Sidewalks to Skylines: An Action Plan for Toronto's Economy](#). In fact, Festivals and Major Events Canada (FAME), a coalition of over 500 organizers of events of all sizes, estimates that the festivals and events sector generate more than \$1 billion in GDP across Canada. It also notes that participation in festivals and events have a “multiplier

² Summary of Feedback from Community Engagement on the Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector, p. 26. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2024/ec/bgrd/backgroundfile-249443.pdf>

³ LaPlaca Cohen, Nanos Research. (2018). Culture Track Canada. Business / Arts, p. 11. <https://www.businessandarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CT-Canada-Report.pdf>

effect” on tourism wherever those events are held, with an estimated \$0.25 spent on accommodations and \$0.33 spent on dining for every dollar spent by a visitor.⁴

The City's Supports for Festivals

The City supports festivals and special events across the city in many ways, as a funder, programmer, producer, space manager, regulator, and advisor. Within the Economic Development and Culture Division, a dedicated Event Support Unit acts as a navigator and liaison, providing guidance to festival and event organizers. This unit generally interacts with festivals and special events seeking support or those that may require guidance on how to navigate City policies and procedures. Many other City Divisions, Agencies, and Corporations also support festivals by providing services, permits, and guidance and recommendations to ensure public safety.

Additionally, the City provides in-kind support and two major funding streams for festivals:

- *The Cultural Festival Funding Program* provides financial support to recurring cultural festivals that occur in the public realm whose programming facilitates community-building, focuses on engaging with the people of Toronto, serves Toronto residents across the city, and promotes opportunities for emerging artists, Indigenous artists, and artists from other groups. A significant programming component must be free to the public or offered at a nominal fee (less than \$5.00 per person). The program provides three streams of funding for eligible festivals: Multi-Year Operating, Annual Operating, and Project funding.
- *The Special Events Stabilization Initiative* is a funding program that provides financial relief to local special event organizers who have been impacted by rising costs, especially those related to health, safety and security of the public and event attendees. These costs include public safety measures such as security, crowd management, insurance and health and safety efforts. This initiative was launched in 2024 as a one-time fund to support and stabilize festivals. In the 2026 budget, the initiative will be made permanent.

In 2024, 125 festivals received funding through CFFP and SESI with 27 festivals receiving funding through both programs. Of the 125 festivals that received funding, 115 reported a total of 19.44 million visits in 2024, with an average of 145,084 visits per festival and a median of 38,218 visits. Some examples of festivals that received funding are Pride Toronto, Caribbean Carnival, Do West Fest, JerkFest, Franco-Fête de Toronto, and Taste of Lawrence.

The City has proactively increased its investments in festivals. The Cultural Festival and Funding Program increased funds by 26% from 2024 to 2025 and the Special Events Stabilization Initiative was extended from its initial one-year pilot timeline. These investments often make the City an anchor funder for local events, providing up to 45%

⁴ FAME-FEEM Canada. (2024). Responding to the crisis in the festivals and events sector while stimulating tourism. A brief to the Ministry of Finance as part of the pre-budget consultations for the next federal budget, p. 6.

https://fame-feem.ca/application/files/8317/2928/4552/brief_prebudg_consult_FAME_august2024_EN.pdf

of public sector funding received by SESI recipients, and a key contributor to bringing culture for all with 60% of City-funded festivals occurring outside the downtown core.

Developing the Festival Strategy

The Festival Strategy was developed through a comprehensive process that included research and community engagement. In July and August 2025, the City engaged the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University to conduct research and consultations with festival organizers and attendees to better understand the opportunities and challenges facing the festival and event sector in Toronto to inform the development of a festival strategy.

The research included a review of academic literature, analysis of statistical and cultural data and a jurisdictional scan. Semi-structured interviews were held with festival producers and organizers from seven festivals. An onsite survey was also conducted with festival attendees at seven festivals ranging in size, location and type during summer 2025. A total of 257 complete survey responses were received. The City undertook additional research, which included questions about festivals embedded in another public survey, an analysis of funding and of trends in the cost of City fees and permits and further engagements with festival organizers.

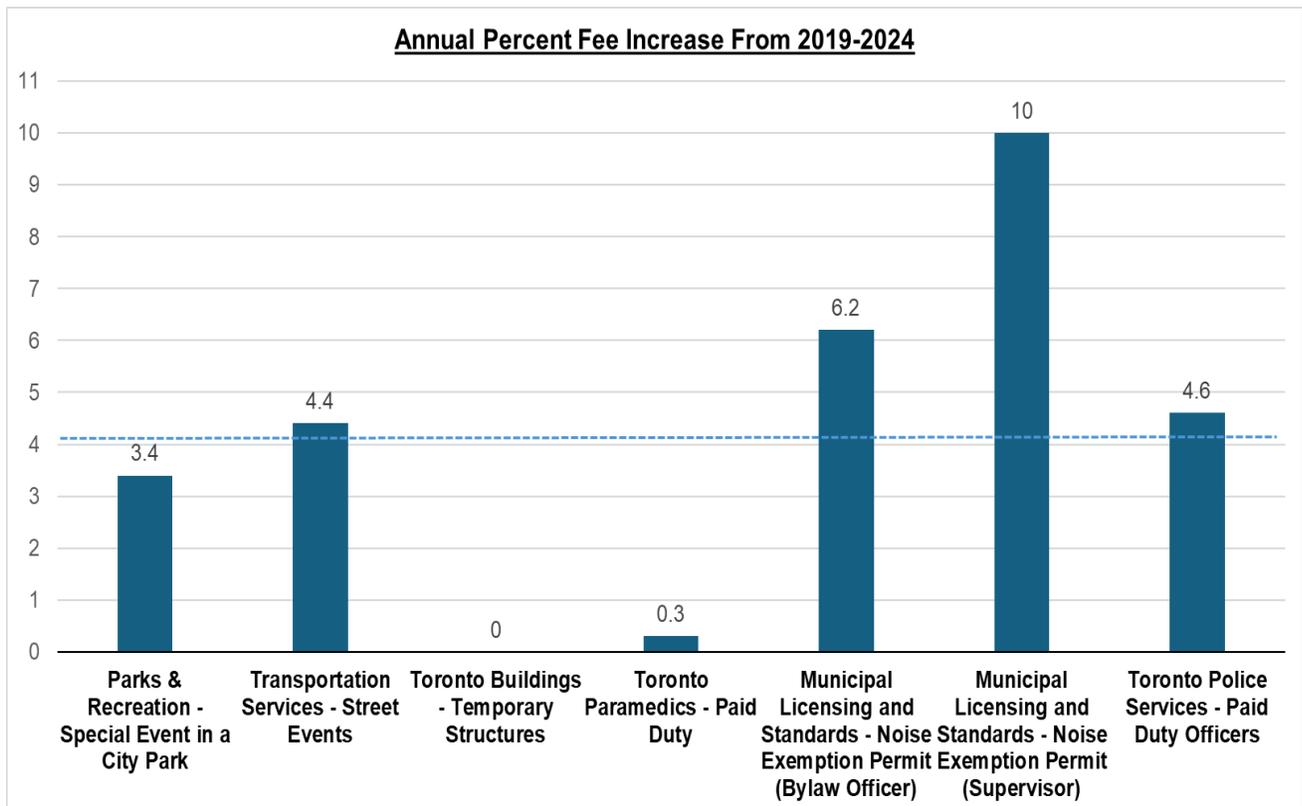
Key Findings from Research and Engagement

- **Most cities developed individualized funding models for festivals** that included a mix of financial, in-kind and additional resources. The goals of these funding models aligned with municipal priorities, for example, downtown revitalization or visitor attraction. Other levels of government were also found to be key sources of funding for festivals.
- **Most pressing challenges expressed by festival organizers** were rising production costs, especially for public safety, staffing shortages and unpredictable audience attendance patterns. Revenue challenges were also noted as having increased due to lower festival attendee spending and unreliable sponsorships and grants - both private and public. Finally, extensive and uncoordinated permitting processes were highlighted as barriers.
- **Among the best services enhancements that the City could provide festival organizers**, marketing supports, a centralized permitting solution and subsidies for permit costs were identified. Festival organizers also expressed the need for consistent and reliable sector-wide data.
- **The most common barriers to attending festivals were** personal scheduling conflicts (33%), a lack of awareness of festivals (28%) and high ticket prices and costs (24%), as revealed by a survey with 257 festivals attendees.
- **The top reasons festival attendees go to festivals in Toronto**, also revealed by the survey with festival attendees, are “interest in theme, culture, or focus of the festival” (64%), “attending with friends and family” (49%), and “looking for something to do” (46%). Free or low-cost programming was identified as playing a role in reducing barriers for equity-deserving groups and older adults.

Additionally, a review of the City's fees and permits found that changes to fees are aligned with cost-of-living increases. The average annual increase over the past five

years has been 4.1%, slightly above the average annual rate of inflation over the same period. Toronto Police Services Paid Duty Officer (PDO) rates saw a significant increase in 2023, which placed immediate cost pressures on festival organizers. However, when the PDO increases between 2019-2024 were averaged over the period, the annual increase was 4.6%. Further analysis will be conducted through the implementation of the Strategy to understand the impact of any changes to City fees and permits in 2025.

Fees for Noise Exemption Permits and sound monitoring staff were stable and unchanged from 2019 through to 2024. After a bylaw review, changes were implemented in August 2024 resulting in an increase in the per hour charge for sound monitoring of 31% for a bylaw officer, and a 50% for a supervisor. When the sound monitoring increases between 2019-2024 were averaged over the period, the annual increase was 6.2% and 10% respectively. Non-profits are exempt from application fees for sound monitoring, which includes most public realm festivals and events.



An analysis of public funding, in turn, found that City funding as a share of overall public funding for festivals has increased by 4% since 2019 and remains the most accessible and consistent source of public funding for festivals of all sizes. Federal funding, despite being the largest share of public funding, is gradually decreasing. Provincial funding has risen, yet is less accessible to many smaller organizations.

Toronto's Festival Strategy

The vision of the Festival Strategy sees Toronto as a destination where people enjoy a range of thriving festivals that bring life, prosperity, and joy to neighbourhoods and communities across the city.

The festival attendee survey, interviews with festival organizers and research led to the identification of four priority areas and objectives:

- Sector Development - with the objective to: address the festival sector's broad spectrum of professional capacity and take action to enhance that capacity sector-wide.
- Sector Sustainability and Resilience - with the objective to: recognize pressures of rising costs, diminishing revenues, and infrastructure and space needs, and ensure optimal use of available resources.
- Improving Processes - with the objective to: make it easier to navigate City processes and reinforce the City's commitment to removing barriers.
- Awareness and Impact - with the objective to: champion festivals as valuable contributors to the visitor economy and drivers of local neighbourhood vibrancy and advance both City and interest-holder objectives through stronger connection and partnership.

Each priority area has actions to achieve the stated objectives listed above. The City will also develop work plans that outline the steps required to achieve these actions.

Some notable actions from the Festival Strategy include:

- Streamline grant programs and develop sustainable and longer-term funding approach to support efficiency, impact, and responsiveness.
- Support the creation of a Festival Association to strengthen communication between the City and sector representatives while providing unified representation and opportunities for resource pooling, sponsorship, marketing support, and advocacy.
- Develop and implement consistent definitions and classifications for festivals to inform municipal service delivery and build greater trust and transparency between the festival sector and the City.
- Further develop the centralized digital permitting solution, reducing the administrative burden for festivals. The solution will allow festival organizers to apply for relevant permits, with options for accessibility.
- Develop and collect robust research and data on the value, impact, and health of the festivals sector in Toronto in alignment with the implementation of Culture Connects to make data available to the sector and support funding and sponsorship efforts.

Building Guidelines for Special Events on Private Property (TE22.19)

Toronto's festivals and events can generate impacts on surrounding communities, especially where they occur near residential areas - these include access challenges for residents. The City has existing mechanisms to manage these impacts when festivals and events occur in the public realm. However, when festivals and events take place on private property some of the exemptions and permissions may not apply. This can limit the City's ability to manage the impacts of these events. While some City-provided

exemptions and permissions may be required, the City primarily relies on festival and event organizers on private property to negotiate spill-over impacts with adjacent residents' groups and voluntarily secure permissions and exemptions to mitigate community impact.

In an effort to address these issues, the Economic Development and Culture Division is currently working on guidelines to support events on private property. The goal of the guidelines will be to mitigate negative impacts on surrounding communities, and balance Toronto's cultural and economic vitality by supporting property owners, residents, and event organizers. Such guidelines will both address the growing prevalence of large events on private property, such as at the Downsview Lands or the Distillery District, as well as provide guidance for festivals to increasingly use private venues, reducing demands on the public realm and City services, while mitigating impacts on surrounding residents.

Further consultation and engagement are required to establish the guidelines and to ensure the needs of communities and event organizers are balanced with the City's jurisdiction and authorities. Over the next two months, the City will engage both internal and external interest-holders in the process to develop the guidelines and will report on them through the annual progress report of Culture Connects – An Action Plan for Toronto's Culture Sector scheduled for May 2026.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework

The Economic Development and Culture Division will monitor the progress of the implementation of the Festival Strategy in Toronto and the impact of the actions described in this strategy through the success measures and key performance indicators outlined in Attachment 1. The key performance indicators will ensure meaningful progress for both residents and the festival sector while also gathering feedback on emerging challenges and opportunities. It is expected that--through the monitoring, evaluation and learning framework-- this will result in continuous improvement through the implementation of the strategy, optimizing impact for Toronto.

Year One Actions for the Strategy (2026)

The Strategy identifies actions that the City will implement in 2026. Some of the 2026 actions are:

- Implementation of Release One and Release Two of the [permitting solution](#) on toronto.ca by December 31, 2026. Release One, in February 2026, focused on navigation of existing City permits and processes based on key festival/event criteria. Release Two will enhance initiation, communication and oversight across the permitting process.
- Supporting the formation of the Festival Association, expected to launch in Q3 2026, with the City providing oversight between the festival organizers working with Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA).
- Completion of a funding landscape review, with a focus on available funding and in-kind supports for festivals and the identification of opportunities for change. (Responds to MM19.24).

- Request that the provincial and federal governments dedicate funding programs or enhanced contributions potentially through existing cultural or tourism grant mechanisms with special considerations for the anticipated impacts of the FIFA Men's World Cup in Toronto in June 2026.
- Development and collection of sector- and location-specific research and data on the value, impact, and health of festivals in Toronto to support for data-driven decision-making and support organizers' ability to secure funding and sponsorships.
- Visitor Economy integration, with a focus on developing a framework for integrating tourism considerations into event planning and on aligning promotional initiatives to include and consider festivals as adjacent attractions to neighbourhoods, parks and existing permanent attractions (e.g. ROM, CN Tower, Toronto Zoo, etc.).
- Create a Good Neighbour Guide, which will include information and best practices to mitigate negative and amplify positive public realm impacts of festivals.
- Develop and communicate consistent definitions and classifications for festivals to ensure alignment in how terms such as "significant" and "major" are applied and to inform and clarify any policy applied to specific groupings of festivals and events.

Next Steps

The progress on the implementation of the Festival Strategy will be shared through the annual progress reports of Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto. The Festival Strategy outlines the immediate actions that will be addressed in 2026. The City will commence work on the remaining actions based on an annual assessment of priorities and needs.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Toronto's Festival Strategy

Attachment 2: Towards a "Festival City" Report on Festival Strategy Development for the City of Toronto