

Follow-up on MM42.61: Suitability of the Standard Theatre as a Live Music Venue

Date: July 13, 2026

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Economic Development and Culture

Wards: 11, University - Rosedale

SUMMARY

The property at 285 Spadina Avenue is the site of the former Standard Theatre, which opened in 1921 as a venue for the live performance of Yiddish theatre. Over the years, the theatre has changed names and owners and now sits vacant on the second and third floor of the property. Currently, the site contains leased retail on the ground floor.

The purpose of this report is to respond to City Council's adoption of Member Motion 2026.MM42.61, which requested Economic Development and Culture (EDC) to assess the suitability of the Standard Theatre for adaptation as a live music venue. Preliminary review undertaken by EDC in consultation with City Planning and Toronto Building indicates that a live music venue (referred to as an entertainment place of assembly for zoning purposes) would be a permitted use on the property and could support City objectives related to cultural space preservation and expansion. However, further investigation into the extent of restoration work required must be initiated by the property owner and proceeding with the creation of a live music venue is dependent on interest from the property owner and potential tenants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager of Economic Development and Culture recommends that:

1. City Council receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no immediate financial impacts resulting from the adoption of the recommendation contained within this report. Any future year financial impacts will be identified and brought forward through a future budget cycle.

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 June 24 and 25, 2026, City Council requested the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to report back to City Council, no later than July 29 to 31, 2026, with recommendations on the suitability of the vacant theatre at 285 Spadina Avenue, formerly known as the Standard Theatre, for adaptation as a live music venue.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2026.MM42.61>

At its meeting on November 13 and 14, 2025, City Council adopted and directed the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to implement the actions in Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto (2025-2035). One of the objectives within the Action Plan (Objective 1.1) targets the development of new spaces and places for culture throughout the city, including live music venues.

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

At its meeting on December 13, 14, and 15, 2023, City Council adopted the definition of an "Entertainment Place of Assembly" and introduced this new municipal licence classification for theatres and live music performance venues, through amendments to Chapter 545 as part of the Night Economy Review.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.EC8.13>

At its meeting on February 13, 2007, the Toronto and East York Community Council stated its intention to designate the property at 285 Spadina Avenue as a Heritage Property under the Ontario Heritage Act. This intention to designate resulted in the enactment of By-law No. 386-2007, which designates the property and certain features as being of cultural heritage value or interest.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2007.TE3.13>

COMMENTS

Background

The Standard Theatre, located at 285 Spadina Avenue, opened in 1921 as a venue for live Yiddish theatre performances. Over time, the theatre transitioned from a live performance venue to a cinema, operating under various names including The Strand, and later, The Victory. The theatre space operated as a cinema until the early 2000s and has been vacant since.

In 2007, City Council adopted item TE3.13, designating the property under Part IV of the *Ontario Heritage Act*, recognizing the site's historical and cultural significance.

Recently, the loss of cultural venues, including live music venues, has been identified as an ongoing challenge within Toronto's cultural sector. In response, the City has implemented a variety of support initiatives.

In June 2026, City Council directed Economic Development and Culture to assess the suitability of the Standard Theatre for adaptation as a live music venue. This report provides some background on challenges and City supports for these types of venues, as well as a preliminary review of planning, licensing, building, and heritage considerations associated with the possible adaptation of the Standard Theatre, informed by consultation with City Planning and Toronto Building.

Live Music Venue Closures

While live music is thriving in arenas and stadiums, Toronto's grassroots venue ecosystem continues to be fragile. Only approximately 5% of Toronto's grassroots live music venues own the building in which they are situated. As tenants, they face challenges related to rising land values and rents, and competition from other uses including residential redevelopment. Many grassroots live music venues rely on alcohol sales for a significant portion of revenue. With changes in alcohol consumption, especially among younger audiences, some live music activity is shifting toward newer models and spaces.

Some data points illustrate overall challenging trends. For example, 75% of respondents to a Wavelength / University of Toronto School of Cities survey considered local music venues as endangered or threatened. Between 2014 and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Toronto lost approximately 30 grassroots music venues to closure, largely due to an acceleration of the macroeconomic pressures described above. The first year of the pandemic saw the closure of approximately 12 more venues, with several more closing subsequently. Since 2022, closures have largely been balanced by the opening of new venues, including corporately owned venues like History, grassroots venues such as Ground Control and My House, and alternative spaces hosting some live music like Standard Time and Sellers & Newel.

City of Toronto Support for Live Music Venues

In response to the trends described above, the City has implemented several live music support initiatives. These include:

- Agent of Change (2018): When proposed new residential developments are in close proximity to legacy music venues, applicants must agree to provide a warning advisory on every offer of purchase and sale for residential units in the new building.
- Noise By-law (2019): The City's Noise By-law was updated to balance community sensitivity to noise with support for live music. Changes included the introduction of measurable decibel limits – a benefit to venues seeking to comply with standards – and a change in the “point of reception” (ie, where a measurement may take place) to the location where a complaint originates, rather than at the lot line of the venue as was stipulated pre-2019.
- The Live Music Venue stream of the Creative Co-location Facilities Tax Subclass (2020): This stream provides a 50% reduction in municipal property tax for every

eligible live music venue in Toronto, even if it is a tenant. In the case of tenancy, the reduction in tax is provided to the property owner, who must then pass 100% of the reduction on to the tenant. The program was introduced in 2020 as a COVID relief measure and was later made permanent – 48 venues were included in 2020 and over 70 will be included in 2026.

- Amplified Music on Patios (AMP) (2021): The AMP program allows amplified music on outdoor CafeTO patios, creating opportunities for venues to hire musicians to perform outdoors during the summer months.
- Music on private patios (2023): A Zoning By-law change now permits live music performances on “private” (ie. not curbside / sidewalk) patios in bars and restaurants.
- Zoning and licensing review (2024): Completed as part of the Night Economy Review, the zoning and licensing review involved extensive consultation with multiple stakeholders. Resulting changes benefiting music venues include opportunity for nightclubs to be located outside the downtown core; more flexibility for venue owners in the allocation of space inside their venues; and the introduction of a new licence category (Entertainment Place of Assembly) that accurately describes and enables live music venues.

Ownership and Current Use of the Standard Theatre Building

The property at 285 Spadina Avenue is currently a three-story mixed-use building with retail uses at grade. The ground floor contains commercial tenants including a Rexall. The former theatre occupies portions of the second and third floors.

Through a commercial property database, staff have confirmed that the property is owned by an Ontario numbered corporation. Staff have been unable to establish contact with the owner(s) to assess plans for the building, interest in finding a live music operator as a tenant, or intention/willingness to undertake renovations of the existing theatre space.

The condition of the former theatre space is currently unknown. The last permits issued by the City associated with the theatre space were in 1978. At that time, the theatre was renovated and the overall audience capacity was reduced. The space operated for some time as a cinema but has remained vacant since the cinema's closure.

Some media coverage in 2015 reported that a tenant entered into a 20-year lease with the building's new owner with the intention of renovating the upper floors as a food and entertainment venue that maintained the theatre space. The tenant was quoted in media as planning to undertake a \$10 million renovation. However, the new venue was never opened, and legal filings indicate an attempt to end the lease.

Considerations for Restoration of a Music Venue

The property is subject to City-wide Zoning By-law 569-2013 and is located in the Commercial Residential (CR) Zone category. The By-law defines an entertainment place of assembly use as "premises used to provide entertainment, such as a theatre, cinema, opera, concert hall or ballet. An adult entertainment use, an eating establishment, a cabaret, or a nightclub is not an entertainment place of assembly".

Therefore, a live music venue is a permitted use on the lot, subject to any applicable conditions and performance standards.

The site is designated Mixed Use Areas 3 in the [Downtown Plan](#). To ensure that live music venues can continue to function without noise-related impact on new residential development, policy 12.11.1 requires that new live music venues located within Mixed Use Areas 3, be designed and constructed to minimize noise from the premises and provide acoustic attenuation measures that would protect residential uses.

Operation of a live music venue would require the owner or operator to obtain an Entertainment Place of Assembly licence from Municipal Licensing and Standards. No minimum parking requirements apply under the current zoning framework. However, operational considerations such as loading, performer access, and transportation management may need to be addressed as part of any future proposals.

The property owner would also be responsible for undertaking a feasibility assessment of the building's condition and assessment in advance of a building permit application to the City. Any material alteration to the building will require the property owner to submit a building permit application with supporting plans to fully assess compliance with the Ontario Building Code, including requirements for structural sufficiency, fire and life-safety, and accessibility. The cost for an interior alterations permit is \$12.45 per square meter for an Assembly Occupancy use.

The property is designated under Part IV of the *Ontario Heritage Act* through By-law No. 386-2007. The designation includes several identified interior heritage attributes, including the auditorium and stage, side walls featuring Classical decorative elements, and the recessed ceiling. Any changes to the site to accommodate a music venue may require a Heritage Permit through City Planning. Future proposals would need to be evaluated by Heritage Planning staff to assess the impact of any required modifications on the heritage values and attributes of the designated heritage building.

The City's 10-year Culture Plan, [Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto \(2025-2035\)](#), includes a target of one million square feet of new cultural space across the city. Should the property owner restore the former Standard Theatre to an operating live music venue, this could help advance the efforts to meet this target.

Staff were unable to contact the property owner to assess interest in the adaptation of the theatre space to a live music venue during the preparation of this report. Additionally, there is not sufficient information to fully assess the condition of the building, nor the capital investment required for restoration. As noted, a new tenant in 2015 stated their intention to undertake a \$10 million renovation for a space that would include an entertainment venue. However, without more specific information about a scope of work, it is premature for City staff to provide a current estimate of possible capital or renovation costs, even as a range.

While this report assesses the technical feasibility of adapting the theatre space to a live music venue, the outcome is contingent on interest from the existing property owner and music industry stakeholders.

Conclusion

The former Standard Theatre represents a historically significant cultural asset and is situated in a location where a live music venue would be a permitted use. The restoration as a live music venue could support broader City objectives related to the preservation and expansion of cultural space.

However, despite recent attempts, City staff have not yet been able to establish contact with the building owner, nor to assess the current condition of the theatre space. Without this assessment, the extent of any required building upgrades and associated permits is currently unknown, and it is premature to provide an estimate of the required capital investment. Establishing direct engagement with the property owner will be required to better understand their interest and the feasibility of restoring the Standard Theatre as a live music venue.

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SIGNATURE

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