

Culture Special Events Program Review 2023-24

Executive Summary

The City of Burnaby has developed, produced and delivered a suite of large-scale cultural special events over several decades that has evolved into a Special Events Program (the Program) led by the Culture Division. These events consistently receive strong attendance numbers, excellent feedback from participants and contribute to increased pride and visibility for Burnaby as a livable, diverse community. Returning from the pandemic, the public demand for cultural special events continues to be strong. A high-level review of the Program has been completed to better understand how to respond to increasing cost pressures while maintaining high quality events. Recommendations resulting from the review are for short-term adjustments as well as strategic directions to inform ongoing planning and sustainable resourcing.

Based on this review, the Culture Division is proposing the following focus areas for the Program:

1. Adjustments in 2024 to support stability after several years of major change, including:
 - a. Balancing costs and staff capacity while continuing to deliver exceptional programming;
 - b. Initiating a new event at Deer Lake Park, replacing the Burnaby Blues & Roots Festival; and
 - c. Working towards stable, multi-year funding commitments.
2. Development of an evaluation framework to support efficient planning and continuous improvement;
3. Identification of event site infrastructure and servicing enhancements to increase the efficiency of event production, beginning with the Central Park Master Plan;
4. Support for community event organizers; and
5. Areas requiring additional study.

The actions arising from this review will support sustainable and consistent delivery of special events by the City of Burnaby, as well as stronger support for community special event organizers. The Program will continue to evolve in response to regular evaluation and the Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan process planned for 2025.

Special Events Review Scope

This review is focused on large-scale special events delivered by the Culture Division in the Parks, Recreation and Culture Department. These programs are listed in the following table along with a high-level profile of attendance, expenses and revenues in 2023.

Festival	2023 Attendance	Total Expense	% of Expense on Artists & Cultural Expression	Grants & Sponsorship
Burnaby Blooms	7,500	\$261,728.39	39%	\$32,141
National Indigenous Peoples' Day	3,000	\$46,753.99	50%	\$0
Canada Day StreetFest on Central	40,000	\$555,841.46	17%	\$55,000
Sounds like Summer and Summer Stages	13,778	\$240,484.22	41%	\$20,000
Classical Weekend	Symphony: 17,000 Opera: 8,500	\$375,967.38	31%	\$43,700
Burnaby Pride	4,815	\$75,569.08	35%	\$0
Blues & Roots	7,582	\$685,765.97	27%	\$113,100
Central Spark	25,000	\$207,916.69	9%	\$15,000

These events are produced by the Special Events and Festivals team within the Culture Division, and program costs are budgeted on an annual basis from Gaming revenues.

Also included in the review is the Burnaby Village Museum Haunted Village which is produced by the Cultural Heritage Unit with funding included in the base budget. This is the only event included in the review that has a ticketed admission format. In 2023 the event expenses total \$210,000. 17,500 tickets were sold for a total of \$140,000 in revenue.

Methodology

This initiative focused on existing documentation and learning and observations of staff. Audiences and other external stakeholders have not been engaged at this time.

Methodology included:

- Review of expenses and revenues, attendance, demographics (focused on 2023 as the first “normal” year post pandemic);
- Review of historical materials including Council decisions, organizer debriefs and on-site attendee surveys; and
- Explored the impact of recent adjustments to focus on free, large scale, broadly accessible events to residents and visitors, in particular, changes to Canada Day, Halloween and Burnaby Blues and Roots.

Findings – Strengths of the Special Events Program

The Program is well supported by Burnaby residents, as evidenced by attendance of over 140,000 in 2023. On-site event surveys are highly positive, with many attendees stating they will return because they appreciate the outdoor venues, free admission, and the variety of cultural experiences. Many also state feeling increased pride in the City as a result of their attendance. The Program benefits from the support and participation of more than 70 non-profit and community organizations. The consistency of the Program including high production quality is the result of a skilled and experienced team of regular and auxiliary Culture staff supplemented by inter-departmental teams and committed volunteers.

Findings – Areas of Focus

While the Program has significant areas of strength, some opportunities for short- and long-term changes were identified to enhance sustainability over time.

1. Adjustments to Special Events Program 2024 – Focusing on Stabilization

Burnaby Blooms

Burnaby Blooms is the kickoff to the City's special event programming each year. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the festival has experimented with locations across the City and tested new concepts for programming around the theme of sustainability and ecological health. In 2024, the event will be re-organized to contain costs and manage the capacity of the event team. Programming will center at Deer Lake Park, with additional activations at the BC Parkway. This format will result in reduced expenses of \$75,000.

Summer Stages, Summer Cinema, and Sounds Like Summer

Summer Stages, Summer Cinema and Sounds Like Summer together comprise the free summer community events series, focused on bringing special event activations into neighbourhoods. This series expanded during the pandemic because of the flexibility of these programs and the focus at the neighbourhood level was aligned with health orders and the needs of residents. In 2024, the Culture Division recommends that the series be re-organized to reduce the number of performances within each element. If approved, Summer Stages and Sounds Like Summer will go down to three days per week instead of four, and Summer Cinema will go down to four dates in August instead of six. The event costs will be reduced by \$20,000.

New Deer Lake Music Event

Every summer, Deer Lake is the home of a trio of music events, Symphony in the Park, Opera in the Park (together also known as the Classical Weekend) in July and the Burnaby Blues & Roots Festival in August. In 2023, City Council removed the admission fee from the Burnaby Blues & Roots Festival, and despite a last-minute change in headliner, the festival achieved record attendance of over 7,500. To capture the flexibility and broad appeal of a free event, the Culture Division is recommending that the Burnaby Blues & Roots brand be retired in 2024 and a new event with the same high production value and audience experience will take its place on August 10 in Deer Lake Park. The new event will program diverse genres of music and an adjusted site

layout will allow increased audience capacity, ensuring broad access for Burnaby residents and visitors. These adjustments will also allow costs to be managed within a reduced budget that reflects the removal of admission revenues. If approved, more details about the new event will be launched in May.

Haunted Village at the Burnaby Village Museum (BVM)

Fall programming at the BVM has been in flux, responding to the pandemic, the broad popularity of the site for residents and visitors, and the expansion of Halloween activities across Burnaby. Eerie Illusions in 2021 and 2022 marked a significant change for BVM Halloween programming, with funding from Gaming revenues. In 2023, these resources were reduced and re-allocated to Central Spark, and Cultural Heritage staff re-imagined the Haunted Village program. The program was popular and over 17,500 tickets were sold for a total of \$140,000 in revenue. However, entertainment, contracted services, and crowd management expenses totaled \$210,000, exceeding revenues by \$70,000. In 2024, program expenses will be reduced to align with the pre-pandemic Haunted Village, and to stay within a conservative revenue projection.

Funding

The changes noted for the 2024 Special Events Program are intended to support stronger planning and resource management. However, these benefits are somewhat limited by the historical process of budgeting for Special Events Program on an annual basis through one-time funds. Looking ahead to future budget years, the program would benefit from a stable funding commitment to manage year-round planning and continuous improvement more effectively.

The event program has a strong track record of attracting grants and sponsorships. This will continue to be a focus of the team in collaboration with Marketing & Communications, noting that the attractiveness of programming to funders is highest when it is new (i.e. at the time of initiation of free admission, or major expansion to an event).

2. Initiating a Program Evaluation Framework

The events program will benefit from an evaluation framework that identifies the expected outcomes of special events and supports consistent measurement of results. A draft vision and objectives have been prepared as a starting point for discussion with staff, Council and other stakeholders. The Program Evaluation Framework is intended to align with the Burnaby Strategic Plan, in particular the goal to Create Vibrant Communities.

Draft Vision

Burnaby consistently delivers accessible, safe and diverse special events that:

- *reflect community's cultural aspirations;*
- *contribute to vibrant parks, streets and neighbourhoods; and*

- *create memorable experiences for residents and visitors.*

Draft Objectives

- *Special events allow residents to participate in shared cultural experiences, improving community cohesion.*
- *Residents and visitors have access to diverse, high quality artistic and cultural performance and other forms of expression.*
- *Equity deserving artists have support to create new work, perform, develop audiences and build awareness of their work in Burnaby.*
- *Host nation artists and forms of cultural expression are visible and supported.*
- *Public spaces are welcoming, safe and activated for all ages and demographics.*

These objectives provide some guide-posts for decision making and have been applied in reviewing opportunities for change to the 2024 event portfolio. They will be adjusted in response to feedback from Council, event participants, and other stakeholders. Measures are also being prepared that will support staff in evaluating whether the program is achieving intended results. This work will be foundational to more comprehensive planning and evaluation that will take place through the Parks, Recreation, and Culture Master Plan process beginning in 2025.

A critical component of this review and future evaluation efforts is the ability to survey event participants. In 2023 Surveys were conducted at StreetFest, Burnaby Blues & Roots Festival, and Heritage Christmas for a total cost of \$22,750. Surveys are planned in 2024 for the Burnaby Blooms, Classical Weekend and Central Spark.

3. Event Site Infrastructure and Servicing Enhancements

The Program uses three sites for most of its' event programming—Central Park, Civic Square, and Deer Lake Park. These spaces were not designed to support the full scope of events currently being programmed, and event production requires bringing in additional equipment to ensure events are safe, accessible and positive experiences for attendees. Investing strategically in infrastructure improvements, including power and water service and fencing, landscaping and lighting, will enhance these venues and support more efficient event production by the City and third-party users. Phase 1 of the Central Park Master Plan, initiating in 2024, will be a first opportunity to look at these investments with one of the premier event spaces in Burnaby.

4. Support Community Event Organizers

Burnaby has developed a strong portfolio of large-scale public events, many of which are directly programmed by City staff with significant community involvement. Community-led events are also very important, as they are diverse, often reflective of individual cultural communities, and can leverage support beyond City funding (cash and in-kind). However, resources are often constrained for these organizations, and the

City has the opportunity to do more to remove barriers and continue to build the strength of community event organizers.

Initial work to enhance capacity for external event production has begun:

Festivals Burnaby Grant Program: Revisions to Festivals Burnaby were approved by Council in December of 2023 with implementation beginning in 2024. The changes position this program to be better able to support community-led events that address the City’s strategic and cultural priorities. Adjudication will follow a consistent and transparent process leading to funding recommendations to the Executive Committee and Council. Organizers will be able to access resources to support them in developing successful funding applications. It is expected that these process improvements will result in a clearer link between Festivals Burnaby investments and exciting community-delivered events, that will lead to confidence in increasing investments in the future.

Community Special Event Process Review: Late in 2023, the Culture Division initiated a project with colleagues from Recreation and other departments involved in booking, permitting, and on-site support for community organized special events. The purpose of the review is to identify process and structure improvements as well as resource needs to ensure that community organizers have easy access to information, a smooth and experience working with City staff to plan their events, and appropriate on-site support where required. Results of this review will begin implementation mid-2024.

Areas Requiring Additional Study

In addition to the more specific actions outlined above, there are several areas of study that the Culture Division will be reviewing in the coming months and years.

Quantifying the Input of Other Departments to Special Events

Successful event production relies heavily on investments from other areas outside of the Culture Division. RCMP, Fire, Parks, Engineering and Bylaw make significant contributions. Additional work is required to accurately account for these contributions as part of the City’s overall investments in Special Events.

Supporting a growing City with new event spaces

As Burnaby plans for accelerated growth within the OCP and development funding program, cultural spaces that can support a diverse and vibrant community must be a priority. Given the success Burnaby experiences now with large scale Special Events and the strong attendance and participation of residents, additional purpose-built event spaces are likely to be required.

Building Burnaby's Cultural Industries

Special events provide one small window into the potential for cultural investment to create additional economic spinoffs, as they create opportunities for viable employment and audience and product development for local artists, create activation and vibrancy throughout the city, and leverage positive outcomes for other participating and complementary businesses. Critical work is ahead to better understand the value of Burnaby's cultural economy and strategies for the City to influence positive growth in visitor attraction, building the night-time economy, and other critical economic outcomes.

Conclusion

Burnaby's Special Events Program offers diverse and meaningful cultural experiences for residents and visitors. Actions taken in response to this review will ensure the program is sustainable and continues to be relevant, producing events that are a source of community pride and belonging for many years into the future.