

February 23, 2021

An Open letter to our Arts and Cultural Community

The City of Barrie is in receipt of concerns brought forward by our arts and culture community regarding the level of support provided by the City for you, your organizations you represent, and the venues that you utilize to showcase your work. We recognize that you have been working tirelessly to bring creative opportunities for our residents and we acknowledge that the arts and culture community are an integral part of the fabric that makes Barrie a desired destination and a vibrant and complete community. This letter is intended to demonstrate support and commitment to the arts and culture community and provide clarity that the City, and staff who lead the Departments related to culture, are focused on supporting the sector, embracing change and creating healthy and vibrant communities, in part, through art and culture.

The exiting of the Georgian College Theatre lease was a recommendation submitted to Council in response to the Theatre space becoming unsafe for use and requiring significant investment in a fiscally challenging year, coupled with ongoing uncertainty created by the COVID related gathering restrictions. We recognize this is a significant loss to our community. There is no simple answer and tough decisions were needed. We believe that this decision will allow all parties to refocus energy and resources as we support the need for a proper theatre that will be built with the future needs embedded in its design.

Staff are committed to working with the arts and culture community in the interim to leverage existing spaces and facilities to provide performance space. Until staff had Council direction with respect to budget and the future of the Fisher project, outreach to artistic and cultural groups on the options that might be available to help support user groups was not practical. Staff have begun this process to allow for interim solutions to be developed and full engagement with the groups will take place.

With the exit from the lease at Georgian College, Council has authorized an increase to the 2021 Cultural Grant Program of \$50,000 to support the arts and culture community and has also created a Theatre Reserve of \$2.5 million to ensure the continued financial support for a theatre project. Work on the Fisher Auditorium project has not halted completely. Work is being completed in 2021 to prepare the site for the future construction. The design work has been delayed, to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the performance art culture and its re-invention of presentations. This recommendation to tear down and start fresh came out of a direct recommendation of the arts and culture community in 2019 after their input was received in a design charrette that was further validated by the project architects.

The late 2019 changes to the department structures within the City of Barrie were done, in part, to ensure arts and culture were sustainable and the elements that comprise the portfolio were best aligned with the City's overall corporate resources and expertise to deliver those services, on balance with the fiscal and resource demands that the City faces to deliver more than 64 services to the community. The re-organization aligned the main responsibilities and technical/operational staff between two existing strong departments. The Recreation Department (rebranded – the Recreation and Culture Department) who are responsible for the cultural venues and special events that support delivering the arts and culture program to the broader community. The Business Development team (rebranded – the Economic and Creative Development Department) are responsible for development of the arts and culture sector through education and resource tools, administering the Public Art program, grant programming, and leading the Fisher Auditorium project. Both departments are committed to supporting the arts and culture community and with two Directors, and their staff, the overall intent is to give the arts and culture community more access to resources and a stronger voice within the City of Barrie.

The departments immediately began working on utilizing the knowledge of the technical/operational staff with their strong relationships with the arts and culture community that were transferred to the two departments, to strengthen the staff teams, to develop workplans to engage the groups, and to understand the needs from the community to increase the opportunities to support arts and culture in Barrie. We knew this work was a priority and would take some time.

With the impact of COVID 19, some of this operational work was suspended. Department transition work such as website pages and job title updates within the City of Barrie were paused to focus on the immediate action needed to respond to the pandemic. There has been a tremendous amount of work done, keeping the City operating and functioning in response to changing health protocols and within the resources and regulations at the Municipal level. We will return operational transition work as we move out of the pandemic. Until then, the teams in both departments continue to work on core work and recovery related projects for the sector whenever possible.

To that end, Staff have championed the retention of the City's investment in the arts and culture community over the course of the pandemic in consultation with you. Staff recommended, and Council approved, the culture community retaining the \$341,000 investment made through the Cultural Grants program and further reduced application requirements and increased investment in the 2021 program to support our organizations in keeping their doors open. We recognize the impact of this pandemic has hit the arts and culture sector hard. With very little opportunity to gather and practice art, and the absence of public to gather in-person to patron live performances, a critical part of our community is struggling. We've watched and worked to support many of your organizations as you've sought unique, and innovative ways to engage with your audience through the digital experience. We intend to apply this same thinking to how we look at physical spaces for performance when we are able to gather again.

We continue to look for ways in which we can support the return of performance to the community and are committed to working with all of our arts and culture organizations to achieve this goal. Within the Recreation and Culture and Economic and Creative Development Departments, it is our vision to develop departments that embrace change, and strive to excel in its delivery of programs, culture, events, facilities, grant programming, education and resource tools, and the administration of the public art program in a financially efficient and effective way.

The Recreation and Culture and Economic and Creative Development Departments will continue to work with its user groups and during these difficult times, find creative and innovative ways to ensure that the programs, the culture, and the facilities we are responsible for, are ready to recover from COVID when the time is right.

We agree that Barrie residents must have access to arts and culture to maintain a healthy, vibrant lifestyle.

Sincerely,

Michael Prowse
Chief Administrative Officer

Rob Bell
Director of Recreation and Culture

Stephannie Schlichter
Director of Economic and Creative Development