

Surrey Arts Roundtable Report

Introduction

What are the needs of Surrey arts organizations? What barriers prevent them from growing, developing, and achieving their artistic goals? What can organizations do to address barriers? How can the City best support them to achieve their goals?

On Saturday, June 1, 2019, the Arts Council of Surrey hosted a Roundtable discussion at the Newton Cultural Centre. City of Surrey Cultural Services staff were invited to present. A total of 55 people attended, including representatives from 43 local arts organizations and several independent artists. Following a keynote address by Liane Davison, Manager of Culture for the City of Surrey, participants were divided into four breakout groups.

Groups were each asked to reflect on four questions:

1. What do organizations need to grow, professionalize, and achieve their creative goals?
2. What are the challenges and barriers that limit arts organizations' programming and development?
3. What are the actions that arts groups could take to address their own needs and challenges?
4. How can the City best support arts organizations?

Breakout groups were given ten minutes to address each question. Participants were asked to write down ideas on post-it notes and affix them to group boards. Following the breakout discussions, each group reported back to the full assembly. Notes from the reporting session, as well as the submitted post-it notes, informed the following summary analysis.

Themes

Although the mode and focus of the conversation varied group by group, several common themes emerged from the break-out discussions.

Funding

It comes as no surprise that roundtable participants see lack of funding as a primary barrier to their work. In recent years, the Canada Council for the Arts, the BC Arts Council, and the City of Surrey have all increased their funding levels. However, the continued need for increased arts funding was voiced multiple times in each breakout group. Participants discussed feeling the pressure of the high cost of venues and the need to pay staff, always against the backdrop of the sharply rising cost of living.

Grants are seen to be a foundational source of funding for arts organizations. There were several calls to increase the level of per capita funding in Surrey to a level comparable to other cities. Participants highlighted the need for organizations to access project funding, as well as “ongoing, reliable” core operating funding.

Attendees expressed frustration with their lack of success accessing funds from provincial and federal sources. While some people said they needed more information about grant opportunities, others said they were aware of BC Arts Council and Canada Council funding programs but found their application processes “confusing” and their eligibility requirements “difficult to breach.” A few participants described a perceived vicious cycle: while certain grant programs require applicants to employ professional artists, organizations need increased grant support to be able to pay their contractors. One person brought up the jury and peer-assessment process, identifying the “group selection, composition and monitoring process” of grant juries as a barrier.

A few participants mentioned struggling to find appropriate funding for specific groups and individuals, such as artists with disabilities. Several pointed out the specific needs of emerging artists.

Regarding the City of Surrey’s Cultural Grants program, a couple of attendees said they wished they could apply for more than one category of grant; i.e. request both an Operating and a Capacity Building grant in the same granting cycle. There was also some discussion around the eligibility requirements for the City’s newly established operating grant funding stream.

Space

The need for artistic infrastructure emerged as another major theme of the Roundtable. The need for more creative space in Surrey was mentioned again and again. Artists and arts organizations revealed a wide variety of space needs: studio space for visual artists, live-work spaces, office and meeting space, storage space, and rehearsal and production space each received multiple mentions. There was a request for low-cost bookable studios for teaching, workshops, and collectives. Event and networking space are also needed.

Participants also expressed a need for low cost or free exhibition space and performance venues. Several specifically called for another “large” or “400-seat” theatre. There were also a few mentions of amenities that could be added to existing creative spaces, including improved technical and display equipment.

Attendees had some creative ideas for ways to provide space to artists and arts groups, noting that schools, heritage properties and “underused city-owned venues” could be opened to arts users, and that potential zoning adjustments could “encourage older buildings to use space for artist collectives.” Participants also raised the possibility of ways of encouraging developers to support the arts through investment strategies and by incorporating space for art making and exhibition into new developments.

One participant gave the example of the Dusty Flowerpot Cabaret as a model Surrey could emulate. Since 1997, the City of Vancouver has leased the 2,254 square feet city-owned studio at East 5th and Scotia St. to arts organizations for the nominal rent of \$1 a year, in addition to payment of monthly strata fees (about \$642).

Opportunities

In addition to space, participants voiced the need for opportunities to grow and develop as artists and arts organizations. Participants wished for access to performance opportunities, open mic events, mentorships, training sessions, and apprenticeships. Several attendees brought up the need for artist residencies in Surrey, with one person suggesting the Banff Centre and the Harbourfront Centre in Toronto as possible models.

A handful of participants said that a Surrey literary festival was missing, which one person said could be a collaboration with libraries and university writers' groups.

Some roundtable attendees felt that the City of Surrey could be instrumental in creating opportunities for local artists and organizations. Ideas for City interventions proposed by participants include creating art competitions "to adorn the city with art by local artists," planning murals on city property or providing incentives for murals on businesses, establishing artist residencies and coordinating international artist exchanges, and founding a performing arts event such as a summer theatre festival, Fringe festival, or "extravaganza" to showcase multiple organizations.

Organizational Capacity

Challenges and frustrations related to organizational capacity were often the subject of discussion at the Roundtable session.

Human Resources

Staffing issues were frequently noted as a barrier to organizational growth. There was a sense of frustration that groups need skilled staff in order to advance their goals, but without those same staff members they lack the capacity to raise the money to hire or retain them. Several people said they needed administrative staff; others were looking for experienced producers, directors, and instructors. Still others simply wished to be able to pay the artists they engage. Multiple attendees also presented the need for energetic and skilled volunteers to support their activities.

Board recruitment was named as another challenge for local organizations. Several people mentioned the need for "people to help our society grow," and "engaged, active" directors with specific skills such as accounting, fundraising, and marketing. Several participants also expressed the need for board development training for their existing members, not only to improve skills required for the day-to-day operation of the organization, but also for board transition and succession planning.

Some additional ideas were advanced. One participant suggested speed-dating events for non-profits: "working with Boardlink to offer events that match non-profits looking for new directors with young professionals looking to volunteer on boards." Another person had the idea of connecting high school students who require volunteer hours to graduate with arts organizations in need of volunteers.

Skills Training

Staffing gaps aside, Roundtable attendees said they needed training in key not-for-profit management skills. Participants specifically mentioned building websites, social media marketing, and developing mailing lists and creating newsletters on online marketing platforms such as Mailchimp as skills they would like to further develop. They expressed interest in a series of workshop addressing these topics.

Grant-writing was another skill many participants said they would like to hone. Although it was acknowledged that the City already provides support and mentorships for grant applicants, participants wanted more assistance. Some attendees also wished they had support with other fundraising methods; for example, workshops demystifying the sponsorship process.

Organizations also need support as they make their very first steps. New and emerging organizations require guidance on “how to proceed as an organization,” which might include workshops or mentorships on career skills, help with the incorporation process, and start-up grants.

Connection

If any one theme dominated the Roundtable session, it was the need for increased communication and connection.

Connecting to Resources

Roundtable guests often expressed the opinion that the challenge of identifying, locating, and connecting with needed resources was a barrier to their success. Some specific gaps mentioned were information on performance opportunities, listings of available creative spaces, and message boards for human resources, training and mentorships, and materials.

There was widespread acknowledgement that the desired resources exist, but organizations simply don't know where or how to find them. In some cases, they don't know who to ask for help.

Participants envisioned a sort of online hub, where arts organizations could “post needs, events, offers (material, human resources, funding).” The site, described as a “common platform for exchange and communication” could also list grant opportunities, and include tips and “help [them] to be more successful.” It could also act as a central interface to inform the public about arts events and opportunities in Surrey, a place that would “give arts individuals and organizations a voice [to which] the people will listen.”

Audience Development

In fact, perhaps the most pressing communication challenge that arts organizations face is connecting more effectively with the communities that form their audiences. Organizations present at the Roundtable identified the challenge of drawing audiences, particularly people outside of their immediate artistic or cultural community, as a key barrier.

Many groups said they need help with marketing. Some people said they lack funds to pay for advertising, while others lack the knowledge and skills to create a successful marketing campaign. Still others said that time and human resources were a barrier to marketing. Some people simply wished the City could assist more with marketing.

When asked what they can do to meet their goals as an artist or arts organizations, many responded with ideas about connection. Roundtable participants acknowledged a few ways they could intensify their connection with prospective audiences; for example, reaching out to other communities, sending out invitations, including themselves in event and artist listings, and taking advantage of social media marketing.

The Roundtable gathering seemed to lead several people to the conclusion that forging more of a sense of community among arts groups would be a powerful way to boost interest in their individual initiatives and a route to growth as organizations. Lack of strategic cooperation between organizations was seen as a barrier to development.

Education

For Roundtable attendees, communication goes beyond sending out a message and having it heard - it means fostering an environment where the contributions arts organizations offer to the community can be understood and appreciated.

According to participants, the perception of the arts as “elitist” or “optional” is a major barrier to development in the arts sector. They felt this attitude is a result of a lack of funding for arts programs in public education.

Participants felt the City of Surrey could do more to educate local residents about the arts, both through staff leadership and through programs and policy. Among the suggestions was to “create an initiative to make the populus want to participate in the arts,” perhaps along the lines of ParticipACTION.

Final Observations

In addition to the themes that emerged from the Roundtable discussions, a couple of observations can be drawn from the event as a whole.

First, Roundtable attendees were relatively reticent in listing ways they could help themselves achieve their goals. Participants posted just 44 ideas under the heading “I Can,” compared with 101 comments under “Needs” and 94 comments for “City Can.” Perhaps participants felt that this was an opportunity to relay their requests to the City, so they were more focused on brainstorming needs that could only be met by the City. However, it could indicate a need for local organizations to build their capacity and take on a more active role in supporting the advancement of the sector.

Second, participants seemed to project a general sense of gratitude towards the City of Surrey. Although they often expressed frustration with their challenges and were certainly eager to share ideas for how the City could better support them, they seemed to generally view the city as an ally

and were pleased to have the opportunity to communicate with City staff. This atmosphere of trust bodes well for future shared initiatives to engage and enliven the arts community.

Appendix: Roundtable Attendees

Representatives of the following organizations attended the Roundtable event:

1001 Theatre Steps Society	Semiahmoo Potters Guild
African Stages	Surrey Arts West Society
Arts Umbrella	Surrey City Orchestra
ArtsCan	Surrey Festival of Dance
Calypso Hut Entertainment	Surrey Little Theatre
Canadian Authors – Metro Vancouver	Surrey Photography Club
Cloverdale Arts and Entertainment Association	Surrey Rockhounds
Dance Craft	Surrey Urban Farmers Market
Dancing Tones	Surrey Youth Orchestra
AFOHMAD	Maple Leaf Singers
Fraser Valley Chinese Cultural Association	The Vaudvillians
FVGSS	UCAP
Fraser Valley Potters Guild	Vancouver Cantonese Opera
KPU	Whispering Stones (independent artist)
Langley Arts Council	White Rock Social Justice
Larger than Life	XBA School of Dance
NAAD Foundation	Young Peoples Opera
Naked Stages Production	Westcoast Harmony Chorus
New School of Lace	
Options	
Peach Arch Chorus	
Peninsula Productions	
RCTC	
SAGA	
Semiahmoo Arts Society	