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Town of Aurora

General Committee Report

No. CMS23-001

Subject: Recreation and Culture Grant and Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs Policy Refresh

Prepared by: Lisa Warth, Manager of Recreation Services and Phillip Rose, Manager of Cultural Services

Department: Community Services

Date: January 17, 2023

Recommendation

1. That Report No. CMS23-001 be received; and
2. That the merger of the Recreation and Culture Grant and the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs into a single Community Support Grant Program be approved; and
3. That staff be directed to return with a Grant Policy for the new Community Support Grant Program.

Executive Summary

This report details proposed changes to the Recreation and Culture Grant Program and the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs and seeks Council's approval to merge the two funding programs into one streamlined grant program that is made available to individuals, community groups, and local businesses that serve the Aurora community.

- The Recreation and Culture Grant Program and the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs have supported several local individuals, businesses, and community organizations over the last several years.
- Staff propose updating and merging the Recreation and Culture Grant Program and Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs into a single grant program to make it more accessible, impactful, and transparent.

- If merged, the new program would be called the Community Support Grant Program and would be administered by the Community Services Department with support from Corporate Communications.
- The combined total of the new Community Support Grant Program would allow the Town to better assist organizations, businesses, and individuals in becoming stronger community partners.
- To ensure widespread awareness, staff will develop a multifaceted marketing and communications plan to promote the new Community Support Grant Program.
- Staff will undertake several next steps to ensure the refreshed Grant Program is ready to be launched in early 2023.

Background

Each year, Council allocates funds from the operating budget in support of the Recreation and Culture Grant and the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs. Traditionally, these budget lines include \$14,000 for the Recreation and Culture Grant and \$57,600 for the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs.

The Community Services Department (CMS) administers the Recreation and Culture Grant while Corporate Communications is responsible for the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs. Applications for both grants are processed throughout the year and updates on the allocation of funds for the Recreation and Culture Grant are presented to Council on a semi-annual basis.

On April 26, 2022, Council directed staff to provide an update on the Recreation and Culture Grant Policy review. In preparing this update, staff identified various areas of the grant program that could be improved. Staff also recognized that the Recreation and Culture Grant Program and the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs could be more efficiently managed if they were merged into a single streamlined grant program.

Analysis

The Recreation and Culture Grant Program and the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs have supported several local individuals, businesses, and community organizations over the last several years.

Recreation and Culture Grant

The Recreation and Culture Grant was created for the purpose of providing temporary financial assistance to community, culture, and recreation groups, as well as individuals that need support for various initiatives. The grant is also intended to help organizations become more stable, and therefore stronger community partners. Groups must have either not-for-profit or charitable status, primarily serve Aurora residents in some capacity, and represent Aurora provincially, nationally, or internationally. Individuals are also eligible to apply.

The maximum funding amount available to each applicant is \$1,000, and recipients are limited to receiving funding for a maximum of three years within a five-year period. Since 2010, 72 grants have been allocated to the following categories of recipients:

Recreation and Culture Grant recipient category	Number of grants awarded
Sports	14
Individuals	10
School/School Club	7
Arts, Culture and Heritage	10
Charity	11
Cadet/Legion	3
Event	6
Other Community Group	11

To be approved for funding, applicants must submit a completed grant application that includes an acceptable financial statement and a proposed budget for the current budget year. Furthermore, they must indicate the purpose for which the funding is required and justify said purpose. They must also demonstrate that they meet the eligibility requirements stated above.

There is no set application deadline, so applicants can submit funding proposals throughout the calendar year. Once received by the Community Services Department, the applications are reviewed by the Director, who either approves or rejects funding

requests based on an evaluation of the applicant's eligibility criteria and the merits of the funding proposal. All applicants are informed in writing of the Town's decision, whether successful or not.

Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs

In 2019, Council approved Policy No. COMM-06 – Requests for Sponsorship, which was revised in 2021. This Policy, administered by Corporate Communications, was created to “assist community organizations and groups deliver services that are beneficial to the residents of Aurora and serve to promote the business plan objectives of the Town.”

The maximum funding amount is \$10,000, but only applicants seeking more than \$500 need to submit a written application form to be considered, and requests over \$10,000 require special funding and must be approved by Council.

Since 2019, Corporate Communications has approved 17 funding requests from a range of applicants, many of which fall under the same categories as the Recreation and Culture Grant, including sports organizations, cultural groups, event organizers, school groups, and charities and not-for-profits that serve Aurora residents.

To be approved for funding, applicants must submit a completed application form that includes information on the following areas of interest:

- Number of Aurora residents and/or businesses impacted
- Reach and exposure of the Town brand
- Economic impact
- Community impact
- Alignment with the Town's Strategic Plan and mission, vision and values
- Inclusivity, accessibility and diversity

Unlike the Recreation and Culture Grant, local businesses can apply to the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs, however, not-for-profit programs/services/events are given higher priority during the evaluation process.

Once received, the applications are reviewed by the Manager of Corporate Communications, who either approves or rejects funding requests based on an evaluation of the applicant's eligibility criteria and the merits of the funding proposal. All applicants are informed in writing of the Town's decision, whether successful or not.

Staff propose updating and merging the Recreation and Culture Grant Program and Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs into a single grant program to make it more accessible, impactful, and transparent.

Although the Recreation and Culture Grant and Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs have proven successful in supporting the needs of organizations and individuals providing culture, recreation and community-based initiatives, staff recommend updating and merging these grant programs to enhance their impact and appeal across the community and to streamline the application process.

Below is a list of updates that staff believe would significantly improve the refreshed grant program:

Area of concern with current program	Recommended Update
Grant applications are processed on a first-come-first-served basis throughout the calendar year.	Establish four intake deadlines annually (January, April, July and October) to encourage an even distribution of funds across the calendar year and allow staff to undertake targeted promotion during these intake periods to increase exposure for the grant.
Applicants can only receive funding for a maximum of three years of a five-year period.	All applications would be considered for funding regardless of how many times they have received funding in the past. This would mean that applications are evaluated based on merit rather than the frequency of past funding, although this would be taken into consideration during the selection process.
The stated purpose of the grant is broadly defined and therefore difficult to monitor its effectiveness.	Staff recommend more clearly defining the grant's purpose, which, under the new program, would be to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support the Town's Strategic Plan – applicants would need to choose one (or more) of the pillars of the Strategic Plan that it would support and describe how.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support the applicant's stated mission and mandate, in the case of organizations that apply. <p>These requirements would help to ensure the grant program is not only assisting organizations to meet their mission and build capacity, but they would also ensure grant recipients are more clearly aligning their initiatives with the Town's overall objectives as stated in the Strategic Plan.</p>
Applications are accessed and approved by the Director of Community Services (CMS) or the Manager of Corporate Communications.	Applications under the refreshed grant program would be evaluated by a Staff Evaluation Committee that would make recommendations to the Director of CMS regarding which applications to approve. The Evaluation Committee would be comprised of CMS staff and supported by Communications staff based on the nature of the funding request. The committee would use a defined rubric to ensure transparency and fairness when evaluating applications. This would spread out the workload among staff, reduce duplication, and ensure multiple perspectives inform the decision-making process.
The application process is not as user-friendly as it could be.	Staff propose streamlining the grant process by ensuring all forms are available as fillable PDFs that can be easily completed and submitted online. To assist applicants in completing the requisite forms, staff also propose hosting a virtual information session prior to each intake deadline to answer any questions from applicants and add clarity to the process.

Recipients are not asked to submit a final report that the Town can use to evaluate how well the grant supported the initiative it funded or the Town's objectives.	The revised program would make a final report mandatory for all successful applicants. Staff would use the data from these reports to better understand its impact and overall success, which will be reported to Council bi-annually.
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If merged, the new program would be called the Community Support Grant Program and would be administered by the Community Services Department with support from Corporate Communications.

CMS staff have established partnerships and built relationships with various community groups, businesses, and individual residents, many of which are frequent applicants of either the Recreation and Culture Grant and/or the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs. Given these relationships, and the awareness CMS staff have of the community, staff agree that CMS is better positioned and resourced to administer the new Community Support Grant Program. Communications staff would assume a more advisory and consultative capacity under the new grant program, especially as it relates to the marketing and communication aspects of funding requests.

The combined total of the new Community Support Grant Program would allow the Town to better assist organizations, businesses, and individuals in becoming stronger community partners.

During the 2023 budget consultation process, staff will be requesting an increase to the allocation of operating budget funds to the Recreation and Culture Grant from \$14,000 to \$30,000. When combined with the \$57,600 allocated to the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs, this would bring the total annual grant amount to \$87,600.

This increased contribution would enhance the Town's ability to invest in the important work of various community groups, individuals, and businesses, and contribute to achieving the Town's Strategic Plan.

Under the new grant program, applicants would be eligible to receive up to \$10,000, which aligns with the current funding thresholds of the Sponsorship of Community Events and Programs.

To ensure widespread awareness, staff will develop a multifaceted marketing and communications plan to promote the new Community Support Grant Program.

Currently, information about the grant programs is shared on the Town's website and through word-of-mouth when Town staff hear from community groups seeking funding for a specific initiative.

There is, however, no proactive plan to inform eligible parties of the grant program to ensure it is maximized for community benefit. As part of the refreshed grant program, staff will develop a detailed marketing and communications plan that coincides with the four proposed intake deadlines to ensure the grant program is widely promoted, and awareness of this funding opportunity grows. The plan will include print and digital ads, newsletters, displays and signage, attendance at community events, virtual information sessions, the Town website, social media and more.

Staff will undertake several next steps to ensure the refreshed grant program is ready to be launched in early 2023.

With Council's approval to move forward with the recommended updates and merger of the two grant programs, staff will finalize all documents and processes necessary to launch the refreshed grant program as soon as possible. Some of the documents currently in draft form that are to be finalized include:

- New Community Support Grant Program Administrative Policy
- Updated Rubric against which all applications will be assessed
- New Guidelines to assist applicants in preparing their application
- Updated Application form
- New Final Report form
- New Marketing and Communications Plan as detailed above
- New Legal agreement between the Town and the funding recipient

Staff will return with the Community Support Program Administrative Policy for Council's review and approval at a later date. Once launched, staff will update Council on the allocation of funds on a semi-annual basis.

Advisory Committee Review

With the Advisory Committees paused during the election cycle and have not yet started up again, consultation with the Community Advisory Committee was not possible.

Legal Considerations

Currently, an agreement is not entered into with an organization who receives a grant under the Recreation and Culture Grant since the current amount of the grant is minimal. An agreement is entered into with an organization who receives a sponsorship

grant, so that terms may be included relating to the use of the Town's logo. Lastly, the Town has a standard funding agreement for any Council approved funding to organizations during the budget process.

If Council approves the refreshed grant program, staff will work on a standard agreement to complement the program.

Financial Implications

The proposed 2023 operating budget includes \$30,000 in support of the Culture and Recreation grant program. A further \$2,000 is included in this budget in support of the John West Memorial Scholarship program, funded from the John West Memorial Scholarship Award reserve.

This report outlines a proposal to merge the Recreation and Culture Grant Program and the Sponsorship of Community Programs and Events. If approved, the combined total would be \$87,600 and managed through one account.

Communications

The Communications division will inform residents of the new grant by deploying a multifaceted marketing and communications campaign.

Climate Change Considerations

The recommendations from this report do not impact greenhouse gas emissions or impact climate change adaptation.

Link to Strategic Plan

The proposed Community Support Grant Program supports the following Strategic Plan goals and key objectives:

Supporting an exceptional quality of life for all in its accomplishment in satisfying requirements in the following key objectives within these goal statements:

- **Invest in sustainable infrastructure**
- **Celebrating and promoting our culture**
- **Encourage an active and healthy lifestyle**
- **Strengthening the fabric of our community**

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

1. Council may provide further direction.

Conclusions

This report provides an overview of proposed changes to the Recreation and Culture Grant Program and Sponsorship of Community Programs and Events, recommends that the two grant programs be merged, and details the next steps staff will take to ensure the refreshed grant program is ready to be launched as soon as possible.

Attachments

None

Previous Reports

PR11-021, Community and Cultural Grant, May 31, 2011

CA019-001, Requests for Sponsorship Policy, January 22, 2019

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on December 15, 2022.

Approvals

Approved by Robin McDougall, Director, Community Services Department

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer