

Staff Report



To	Committee of the Whole
Service Area	Public Services
Date	Tuesday, October 3, 2023
Subject	Community Grant Policy Update

Recommendation

1. That the Community Grant Allocation Panel be dissolved and that the authority to award Community Grants be delegated to the Deputy Chief Administration Officer of Public Services, as outlined in the Community Grant Policy Update report dated October 3, 2023.
 2. That the Community Grant equity-related policy changes outlined in the Community Grant Policy Update report, dated October 3, 2023, be approved and added to the Community Grant Policy.
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Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

To update Council on the Community Grant Policy and recommend changes to delegation of authority and the Policy for consideration.

Key Findings

The Community Grant is the City's annual grant program for not-for-profits in the community. It requests that organizations demonstrate how they align with the goals of Guelph's Community Plan. The Community Grant Program can award organizations with up to three years of funding.

Despite the success of the program, staff were made aware of two challenges with the program. These include challenges of deliberating on grant applications in open session and barriers for Indigenous groups in applying for, and receiving, grants. To address these challenges, staff recommend two changes to the Community Grant policy.

First, providing delegation of authority of funding decisions to the Deputy Chief Administrative Officer (DCAO) of Public Services will allow the program to continue to engage residents in Community Grant decision-making; allow decisions to be made with a wide-range of expertise in the group; protect the reputation and privacy of panel members and applicant organizations; and ensure the objectivity and integrity of the process by creating an environment that allows for the free exchange of opinions.

Second, in response to equity barriers heard from Indigenous groups and community members, staff are proposing several policy and program changes as a first step to creating better access to City funding.

Strategic Plan Alignment

This work aligns closely with two different priorities of the Strategic Plan. The changes proposed help build more equity within City programs and help to advance the goals of Guelph's Community Plan.

Foundations 5.3: Remove barriers by integrating Guelph's Equity Lens into everything we do.

Support Community Wellbeing 13.1: Convene the community to advance the goals of Guelph's Community Plan

Financial Implications

No financial implications

Report

Background

The City works with and supports many local organizations in the community to improve the wellbeing of Guelph residents. These organizations deliver a wide range of services from organizing sports and recreational activities, to staging arts and culture events, to meeting basic human needs such as food and shelter.

The Council-approved [Community Investment Strategy](#) (CIS) provides the City with a strategy for providing funding and in-kind supports to local not-for-profit organizations. The [Guelph Community Grant Program](#) is one funding method of the CIS. The Grant Program is designed to direct City funding to not-for-profit, non-governmental community organizations that promote the wellbeing of Guelph residents.

The Community Grant is formerly known as the Wellbeing Grant and aligns to the goals and performance indicators of the City of Guelph Community Plan.

Organizations are required to demonstrate how their work will contribute to Community Plan goals. Eligible organizations can apply through an annual application process for a small operating grant for up to three years of funding.

Authority to make grant allocation decisions on behalf of City Council is currently delegated to a panel of six community members with a wide range of appropriate skills and knowledge. The panel's decisions follow a set of guidelines outlined in the Guelph Community Grants Policy, and funding decisions are aligned to the City's community and strategic plans. Applicants must clearly show how they benefit Guelph residents and support the goals of the City.

Successful applicants are required to report on their grants annually, reporting includes activities undertaken, indicators they are measuring their work by, how the grant was spent, and the overall success of the work.

City Staff review all individual reports and report annually to Council for information. In 2023, 56 not-for-profit organizations received a total of \$336,100 from the City of Guelph Community Grant.

Over the last year, the following two issues were raised with staff by both the Community Grant Panel, and Community Grant applicants:

- Changes to delegation of authority and the grant panel to address the challenges of deliberating on grant applications in open session
- Changes to the grant policy to address barriers for Indigenous groups

Recommended Change to Delegation of Authority and Community Grant Panel

Since the creation of the Community Grant Panel, court rulings have significantly expanded what qualifies as a local board under the Municipal Act and, as such, the Community Grant Panel is now considered a local board. The Municipal Act requires that all local boards follow the same transparency and accountability regulations that apply to City Council. This includes holding open meetings and oversight from the Integrity Commissioner and Closed Meeting Investigator.

The implication for the grant panel was that they now need to deliberate on all Community Grant applications in open session. In the past, meetings were held in closed session to protect the objectivity and privacy of panel members, and the reputations of organizations which had submitted applications for evaluation.

For the 2023 grant cycle, the grant panel held their deliberations in open session, though no applicants attended meetings.

Following the 2023 grant cycle, the grant panel expressed concern with continuing this approach to grant deliberations in the future. These concerns include a:

- Risk to personal and professional reputation of panel members in the community
- Risk to applicants' reputations, or funding from other sources, if an applicant was assessed negatively in public
- Less objective decision-making process with panel members needing to balance honest assessments with the risks of doing so in front of applicants
- Challenge to the integrity of the process if having applicants being present in meetings is advantageous to the assessment of their application

The panel identified that the impact of continuing with this approach will create a decision-making process that would be less objective, carry greater risk for panel members and applicants, and would lead to recruitment challenges for these volunteer positions.

Staff have reviewed options and recommend that a working group of community members is maintained, but delegation of authority be moved from the panel to the DCAO of Public Services.

Under this recommendation, staff would recruit and select working group members, and operate under the panel's existing Terms of Reference with minor adaptations to reflect the change in delegation of authority and new structure. The group would continue to review and deliberate on applications and would make a recommendation to the DCAO of Public Services for approval. Under this proposed structure, the working group would not meet in open session and would instead discuss grant applications privately.

This recommended change in delegation of authority would allow deliberations to continue in closed session and would have the following benefits:

- Continue to engage residents in Community Grant decision-making

- Allow decisions to be made with a wide-range of expertise in the group
- Protect the reputation and privacy of panel members and applicant organizations
- Ensure the objectivity and integrity of the process by creating an environment that allows for the free exchange of opinions

To ensure continued transparency, the Terms of Reference and Grant Policy would be made public. City Staff would regularly post agendas and minutes for working group meetings to the City's website. City staff would continue to report to Council annually on Community Grant allocations. The annual report will include the selection criteria used to appoint members and include the names of working group members.

Authority would be limited to awarding the annual operating budget approved by City Council. Any disagreement of funding allocation between the working group recommendation and the DCAO of Public Services would be discussed with the working group. In accordance with the current policy, grant decisions are final and cannot be appealed.

The City Clerk's Office is currently working with the Guelph Lab on an Advisory Committees of Council Governance Review. The results of phase one of the review are scheduled to come before City Council in Q4, 2023. Given the review is underway, staff consulted with the City Clerk's Office to ensure alignment between that work and the recommendations included in this report. The current Chair of the Community Grant Panel has been consulted and is supportive of the approach above.

Recommended Changes to Community Grant Policy

During the last couple of funding cycles, staff heard from both applicants and the grant panel that local Indigenous groups encounter barriers in applying for, and receiving funds from, the Community Grant. As a result, staff have received one Community Grant application in the last five years from Indigenous-led groups.

The barriers identified can be put into the following categories:

- Format of application and reporting: online pdf forms are not accessible to everyone, and those with technological or income barriers may not be able to complete the forms electronically. In addition, staff heard that the reporting form is not something that some Indigenous groups would be comfortable with, and alternative forms of reporting could be explored.
- Language: staff heard that the language of "granting" itself creates barriers as it puts the City in a position of authority over Indigenous communities. Other language in the grant application might force applicants to misrepresent the work they are doing to fit into the City's form.
- Assessment of impact: staff heard that the way the assessment of the Community Grant is set up, would not necessarily see the value of work by and for Indigenous communities.
- Issue of incorporation: many Indigenous groups are unincorporated, and some are unincorporated by choice not to beholden to the Provincial government which regulates not-for-profits. The Community Grants eligibility requirement of only allowing incorporated not-for-profit organizations apply creates a barrier.

- Systemic issues: through the engagement, staff heard that the community grant is a competitive process which can encourage lateral violence between Indigenous groups in the community. The process also puts the Municipal government – an inherently colonial institution – in a position of authority over Indigenous groups, reinforcing those colonial structures. Engagement participants said that these relationships, reinforced through the grant program, can further degrade trust between the City and Indigenous communities.

In applying the City's Equity Lens to the Community Grant, staff engaged with the grant panel, some applicants, and members of the Indigenous community in Guelph through a community engagement process to learn more about the barriers and potential actions to take to build more equity into the program.

To honour the City's commitments to Truth and Reconciliation through the Community Plan and as a member of UNESCO Canada's Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities, staff recommend several policy and process changes for the Community Grant outlined below.

To address the issue of format, staff recommend increasing flexibility of the application to include electronic and paper submissions. For reporting, staff recommend implementing a pilot reporting process for the 2023 grant that will include an option for oral reporting in place of the report form. Oral reporting will still require organizations to share key information including success of the activities, metrics of success, number of people impacted, amounts of funds leveraged from other funders, and how the funds were spent.

To address the issue of language, staff will review language included in the policy, application, guidelines, report form, and the grant website to ensure that more accessible and inclusive language is used. The language and application itself will be simplified to ensure that only critical information for assessment is gathered.

To address the lack of equity work in the assessment of organizational impact, staff will add an equity-related assessment criteria in addition to the existing assessment criteria of the program. The criteria will include considerations for projects and initiatives that focus on equity and reconciliation, as well as those led by individuals identifying as Indigenous, Black, Racialized, or as a member of an equity-deserving group. In addition, staff will ensure that members of equity-deserving groups are represented on the working group reviewing applications.

To address issues of incorporation, staff will open up further options for groups to partner with incorporated not-for-profits, reducing barriers and limitations to partnership. These changes include allowing for not-for-profits to partner with groups and apply separately for their own work. Changes will also allow partner applications to apply for multi-year funding where they are currently limited to a single year of funding.

To address any broader systemic issues, staff are exploring pilot options through the Community Investment Reserve to support Indigenous communities with additional funds more directly, and outside of the Community Grant program. This will allow some additional funds to move to the community outside of a competitive grant process.

These recommendations represent the first step in developing a more equitable funding for Indigenous communities in Guelph. Staff will continue to engage with Indigenous and other equity-deserving groups to identify future barriers and opportunities, and to identify the impact program changes could have for the community.

Financial Implications

No financial implications

Consultations

Community Grant Panel Chair

Various Indigenous community members

Sara Sayyed, Strategy, Innovation and Intergovernmental Services

Attachments

None

Departmental Approval

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