

June 21, 2024

Dear Councillors, Mayor Guthrie, and the City Clerk's Office:

We are writing, on behalf of concerned members of the Guelph arts community, about what took place at the Committee of the Whole last week, on Tuesday, June 4th.

Like the City and many in the community, we support the use of the Drill Hall for Arts and Culture purposes and are excited by the possibilities such use presents for achieving the goals set out in Guelph's Culture Plan. We are concerned, however, with the City's decision to explore working exclusively with the Guelph Centre for Visual Arts (GCVA) and to provide them with \$10,000 from the 2024 Community Investment Strategy account. After close review by members of the arts community, we believe that the GCVA's proposal presents a number of serious concerns that show limited knowledge of how the arts sector works (e.g., arts granting mechanisms) and a lack of deep understanding on other key considerations such as equity, accessibility, and passive building, to name a few. Recognizing the potential of activating the Drill Hall for Arts and Culture, we believe related decisions should be made in a community-engaged way and want to caution against a "business as usual" approach which runs the risk of further perpetuating systemic inequity in the sector.

Our key concerns, which we elaborate on below, are related to:

- **equity and community-engagement** within the City's decisions related to the Drill Hall;
- **accessible, equitable, and sustainable use of the proposed space**; and
- **the need for leadership with a deep understanding of the arts sector.**

We strongly urge Council to:

- bring this matter to discussion at the upcoming Council meeting on June 25th;
- reopen the RFEOI process for the Drill Hall to the public, reflecting the City's intention to use it for an Arts and Culture space and updating the terms to provide any interested applicant with the resources being offered to the GCVA; and
- reallocate the \$10,000 funding to a community-engaged feasibility study

Concerns related to systemic inequity in City process

We believe that allocating \$10,000 from the 2024 Community Investment Strategy to the GCVA during the June 4th Committee of the Whole to conduct a feasibility study represents systemic inequity in this process. The availability of this \$10,000 was not included in the initial RFEOI. Additionally, the proposal put forth by the GCVA requires that the City invest further funding into the structural renovations of the Drill Hall. Motion # 1, as outlined in the Council Memo dated June 25th, 2024 titled "[Guelph Centre for Visual Art Feasibility Study Parameters](#)" details four possible scenarios for further capital or operating support for Council to consider in working with the GCVA. These scenarios were not included in the initial RFEOI released by the City, and as such we believe that this has not been an open and transparent process. If the City is considering such an

arrangement, and is willing to invest additional resources in the structural renovations of the Drill Hall, we call on Council to adapt the RFEOI to reflect this, as well as the availability of \$10,000 to support a feasibility study, and reopen the RFEOI to the public.

In a sector struggling with funding cuts and restrictions, receiving \$10,000 of funds from the City would have a significant impact on many arts organizations in Guelph (many of whom struggle to meet their payroll needs). And, importantly, a guarantee of \$10,000 would have made the RFEOI process more widely accessible to other potential applicants. We are concerned that rather than basing this funding decision on a proven track record of success or community-identified need, directing such funding to an organization like GCVA, which does not offer programming, has a limited role in the community, and is led by a former City Councillor, is based on existing relationships rather than evidenced need or merit.

Concerns related to accessible arts space

During the Committee of the Whole meeting, many delegates spoke in support of the GCVA's application. When asked, delegates were unable to speak to the measures that would be taken to ensure public accessibility of the proposed use of the Drill Hall. This is concerning and does not align with the City's goal to "eliminate barriers to participation in culture" (Objective 8 in the Guelph Culture Plan), including "employing principles of universal design, technology aids, and accommodations such as relaxed performances, audio-described performances, open captions, and ASL interpretation to engage artists and audience members with disabilities (Obj. 8.3). Accessibility measures need to be centred in the physical design of arts and culture spaces as well as in organizational structure and the development of programming. This work should be done *with* community members with accessibility needs involved; it should not be rushed or phased in as an afterthought, and typically requires extensive resources. To borrow an example from the current retrofit of a downtown street-level commercial space, into Art Not Shame's community arts hub, simply installing a height-adjustable counter and sink requires extensive work to rough-in plumbing and structurally reinforce the unit to accommodate different access needs. In other words, many decisions that would impact the accessibility of a space need to be made and executed at the rough-in stage, before drywall is installed and the space is ready for occupancy.

Additionally, to be truly accessible, those managing a space must also consider other aspects of accessibility, including socio-cultural and cognitive accessibility; for instance, providing space for cultural programming for Indigenous community members, gender neutral bathrooms, free or affordable membership and rental rates, and sensory-friendly spaces. None of these considerations have been adequately accounted for in the GCVA's proposal, despite 'accessibility' and 'diversity and inclusion' being listed as a Key Performance Indicator.

Concerns related to meeting benchmarks for net-zero energy consumption, and passive building design.

Delegates in support of GCVA also expressed the potential of achieving passive building standards as part of their commitment to sustainability, while also referencing the plan to renovate the space in stages, and/or use it in its current, unfinished state. Delegates referenced being able to achieve such standards on a shoestring budget. We are concerned this represents a lack of deep understanding of what such building practices require. Based on our experience, consultation, and knowledge about passive building design, such work is often prohibitively expensive for for-profits

and nonprofits alike. A building like the Drill Hall would require a substantial amount of work to add the air and vapour control layers and the insulation necessary to meet Passive House requirements. While these tasks are not impossible, they cannot be achieved with limited resources, they are very rarely phased - a strategy which is at odds with the goal of continuity of control layers - and they are nearly impossible to do with occupants in place for logistical and financial reasons.

Concerns related to limited understanding of funding landscape and economic reality of arts sector

The Staff Report Committee of the Whole June 2024 clearly outlined,

“The RFEOI identified that there were no City funds available to invest further in the building. The RFEOI required proponents to include a business plan that included lease payments or any other potential funding information. The proponents [the Guelph Centre for Visual Arts] provided this information, but it did not identify revenue that would make the City whole from any further investment. No lease payments or debt repayment was proposed. Nominal profit sharing was proposed, starting in year three. The revenue identified was nominal and would not address the City’s ability to repay debt or meet other financial obligations. This proposed financial model is not sustainable.”

For those of us with extensive experience navigating arts funding, we fully agree with the assessment of City Staff. The GCVA’s proposal lists numerous arts grants in their application; however, from our experience (which for some of us includes experience sitting on adjudicating committees for identified grants), we can share that the GCVA would either not be eligible or would be a very unlikely candidate for the funding opportunities listed in their proposal.

Organizations are ineligible to apply for Provincial or Federal arts operating funding until they have received a certain number of successful project grants, reach a certain revenue threshold, and have established a demonstrated history of active programming. In many cases, organizations must be invited to apply for operating funding. With grant deadlines once or twice annually, this can take many years (often 5+) to achieve. Sector development grants identified also explicitly exclude ongoing core/operational support. Additionally, many major grants require proof of leveraging funds; for example, before applying to the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund (a capital grant which has a more appropriate funding envelope for the scope and size of this project than those listed in GCVA’s proposal), organizations are required to have 50% of their funding confirmed, as well as a set of architectural plans, a building permit, cash flow forecasts, and again, a demonstrated history as an organization.

Given the rather restrictive funding landscape, it is essential for arts organizations to develop unrestricted revenue streams; this can be at odds with trying to make a space financially accessible to artists and organizations. A recent federally commissioned report, for example, indicates that affordable rental rates are approximately half of the current market rentals. Delegates at the Committee of the Whole meeting seemed out of touch with this reality, providing examples of revenue generation (\$50 workshops) that would be prohibitively expensive for young and emerging artists. We are worried that the GCVA’s business plan would create more inequity in the local arts sector for those who are less resourced.

A call for thoughtful community-engagement and collaboration

Finally, we want to encourage City staff and councilors to take these - and other - community concerns related to use of the Drill Hall seriously. We were disheartened when, in response to an initial letter outlining concerns of artists and arts organizations shared with Mayor and City councilors, some remarked that supporting the GCVA would signal a move away from competition towards collaboration. We believe that concerns with the GCVA proposal are not based in fear of competition but rather in care for Guelph's arts sector. Community initiatives, like using the Drill Hall as an Arts and Culture space, must not be immune from constructive criticism - particularly when they involve significant financial resources like those given by and requested from the City. Community engagement involves identifying and disrupting both personal privilege and systemic inequity; it can serve as a safeguard to ensuring that private interests take a backseat to community need and collective good. Systemic inequity is not always clear, but is something many of us believe we witnessed at the Committee of the Whole, where \$10,000 was granted to an organization that did not adequately meet the initial RFEOI or make a strong case for an accessible, equity-focused use of the Drill Hall. Receiving \$10,000 of City funding is something that many organizations and equity-deserving groups work tirelessly for, and is not a decision that should be made without careful consideration.

We share the dream of using the Drill Hall for Arts and Culture in the City of Guelph, but have significant concerns about the process, as well as the leadership of the GCVA, particularly with respect to their lack of planning around accessibility and equity, and City funds going toward some very tentative promises. The letters of support included in the GCVA's applications all clearly indicate a need for a community arts hub in the City, but do not make the case for why the GCVA is best placed to lead such a project. It is unclear how accessibility, equity, and inclusion have been accounted for in their application or consultation process - or how it will be in the future.

We believe that there are possibilities for a more collective model of planning and managing an Arts and Culture space in the Drill Hall, which engages existing organizations, artists, and community members already doing this work. The City has already invested significant funding into the renovation of the Drill Hall, over \$5 million, and will continue to spend \$120,000 annually to maintain it as is. If these and additional City funds will be directed to using this space for arts and culture, there are many existing organizations that have years of experience in the arts sector and the community connections necessary to adequately advise on this project.

Many thanks for your time and consideration.

Signed,

In alphabetical order:

1. Jude Akrey, Artist and Community Facilitator
2. Kira Alexanian, Artist
3. Mackenzie Anderson, Artist
4. Emmi Boyle, Artist and Educator

5. Meredith Blackmore, Artist and Educator
6. Paige Bromby - Artist and Arts Administrator
7. Stephanie Bryenton, Indigenous Community Member
8. Jessie Buchanan, Artist Studio Member at Necessary Arts, Indigenous Community Member
9. Hannah Cattran, Artist
10. Jillian Cockburn, Director of Operations, Art Not Shame
11. Alexa Collette, Artist and Educator
12. Chanel DesRoches, Artist and Owner of Necessary Arts Collective
13. Isabella De Tullio, Artist and Arts Community advocate
14. Lex Dulong, concerned community member
15. Richelle Forsey, Artist
16. Somer Graham, Artist
17. Frances Hahn, Artist
18. Maeve Hind, Artist and Community Facilitator
19. Dr. Elizabeth Jackson, Co-Chair, Art Not Shame and Director, Community Engaged Scholarship Institute
20. Madeline King, Artist
21. Amy Kipp, Community-Engaged Scholar, Community Care and Collective Art-Making
22. Nathan Lawr, Musician
23. Pao Ming Lee, Owner, Kapow Ice Cream
24. Maddie Lychek, Artist/Program Director, Ed Video Media Arts Centre
25. Alisa McDonald, Artist and Community Facilitator
26. Norma Mendoza, Co-Chair Art Not Shame, and Executive Producer
27. Lizzy Mikulich, Artist
28. Elia Morrison, Artist, Educator, Technical Director - Ed Video Media Arts Centre
29. Elia Morrison, Artist, Educator, Technical Director - Ed Video Media Arts Centre
30. Liz Newall, Artist and Community Member
31. Dr. Michelle Peek, Executive Director, Art Not Shame
32. Katherine Percival, Artist, Educator and Cultural Worker
33. Elise Puddy, Artist
34. Scarlett Raczycki, ED, Silence Guelph
35. Adriana Rosselli Londoño, Managing Director, Guelph Dance
36. Alexander Roth, concerned citizen
37. Kat Savic, Artist
38. Alexandra Sawatzky, Artist and Community-Engaged Scholar
39. Becky Swainson, Textile Artist and Owner of gather + make
40. Claire Wright, artist and musician,
41. Kavya Yoganathan - Artist and Arts based facilitator in Guelph
42. Anonymous
43. Anonymous