

Staff Report



To	Committee of the Whole
Service Area	Public Services
Date	Tuesday, October 1, 2024
Subject	Fireworks By-law Review

Recommendation

1. That staff be directed to create a new permit-based fireworks by-law to replace and repeal Fireworks By-law (1993)-14362.
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Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

The purpose of the report is to present the findings of the fireworks by-law review that City staff conducted as directed by Council. Staff are also seeking Council approval for the creation of a new Fireworks By-law based on a permit system.

Key Findings

Fireworks have historically been used to celebrate certain events in Guelph. Fireworks light up the night sky and can provide enjoyment and a sense of community for those participating in or watching these displays. However, the noise and light they generate can have a negative impact on people, animals, and nature.

Based on feedback received, staff are recommending the by-law be updated to a permit system to reflect the concerns of residents. A permit-based by-law also reflects the practices taken by other municipalities.

Strategic Plan Alignment

A fireworks by-law review aligns with Guelph's strategic goal of supporting community well-being.

Future Guelph Theme

People and Economy

Future Guelph Objectives

People and Economy: Support community well-being

Financial Implications

This review was conducted within the Operations Department's existing budget. If Council passes the recommendations, work will be completed using existing resources; therefore, there will be no additional operational costs. A new fireworks permit fee will be added to the rates, fees, and charges guide through the 2025 budget confirmation process. Any revenue associated with the fireworks permit will be used to offset enforcement staff costs.

Report

Background

Celebratory events have often incorporated fireworks displays, and Guelph allows their use for Canada Day, Victoria Day, and in 2013, Diwali was added to the list of approved occasions to accommodate the city's growing population. Fireworks can unite communities in celebration, but they can also be disruptive to individuals sensitive to loud noises, smoke, and potential safety hazards. Guelph's City staff has been tasked by Council with reviewing the existing fireworks by-law to consider these concerns.

Upcoming Current Allowed Dates for Fireworks

Many cultural events involve the use of fireworks as part of the festivities. Some are currently allowed to use consumer fireworks, and some are not. Below are the events that have used fireworks in the past.

- **Victoria Day**
- **Canada Day**
- **Diwali**
- **New Year Celebration** (former City authorized celebrations at Riverside Park)

Human and Environmental Impacts

Noise Pollution

Noise from fireworks can reach levels as high as 120 to 170 decibels. This sound can disrupt sleep, trigger PTSD and disturb pets/wildlife.

Chemical and Physical Pollution

Fireworks release many contaminants that may affect air quality including carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen, sulfur dioxide, heavy metals, and particulate matter. Toxic hazes created by particulate matter from fireworks can be a hazardous air pollutant due to its ability to affect people's breathing.

Debris from the fireworks' casing may fall into nearby properties, posing a physical hazard. Additionally, the leftover base of the fireworks can cause environmental pollution if not disposed of properly.

Fire Risk

In 2022, the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) voted to pass "2022.3. Consumer Fireworks". The resolution calls for Fire Chiefs to advocate for banning consumer fireworks. Guelph Fire Chiefs are members of CAFC.

Bodily Harm

A 2016 Consumer Product Safety Commission report noted that children under 15 accounted for nearly a third of the fireworks-related injuries treated in emergency rooms in 2016. Young people (those 24 or younger) seem most at risk of injury.

The potential harm from fireworks extends from minor burns to loss of fingers, damaged eyes and ears, and, in very rare cases, death.¹

PTSD

Fireworks can be triggering for individuals with PTSD. Even those without PTSD can be affected due to sleep disruptions and increased stress.

Animals/Pets

Fireworks significantly impact animals, especially those with sensitive hearing, like dogs, cats, and birds. The loud noise and bright flashes can cause fear, panic, and anxiety in animals, leading to physical and emotional stress. Pets may try to run away or hide, causing them to get lost or injured. Wildlife can also be affected, with birds and other animals abandoning their nests or habitat due to the disturbance caused by fireworks.²

Public Engagement

The engagement team hosted two community engagement meetings: one virtual meeting on May 15, 2024, and one held in person at West End Community Centre on May 30, 2024. These meetings aimed to gauge the community's views on fireworks and how the current by-laws can be improved.

An online survey with the broader community was open for feedback between May 7 and June 16, 2024, on haveyoursay.guelph.ca. Staff also had a booth at the Guelph Multicultural Festival that ran from June 13 to June 15, 2024, to hear from the community, distribute the survey, and promote engagement activities.

In addition to discussions with internal City departments, staff interviewed leaders with specific organizations in the community to gain a greater understanding, including:

- Guelph Sikh Society
- Guelph Humane Society
- Guelph Chinese Canadian Cultural Group
- Guelph Youth Council
- Guelph Police Service

Additional cultural groups were contacted for an interview; however, no response was received. The results were compiled in Attachment-1 What We Heard - Fireworks By-law Review.

The engagement results show sixty-five per cent of respondents noted that they were unsupportive or very unsupportive of unregulated public and private fireworks. Similarly, fifty-six per cent of respondents indicated they were supportive to very supportive of a firework ban. The permit-only option received noticeably more support (thirty-four per cent were supportive to very supportive) compared to the current practice of unregulated private fireworks displays (twenty-five per cent were supportive to very supportive).

Upon review of comments provided throughout the survey, staff found several key themes:

¹ (The Eye Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, n.d.)

² (The Humane Society of the United States, 2023)

- **Safety and environmental concerns:** There is a prevalent concern about the safety risks and environmental impact of fireworks. Issues such as fire hazards, harm to wildlife, and pollution were frequently mentioned.
- **Noise and disturbance challenges:** Many respondents are troubled by the noise caused by fireworks, which can cause stress and anxiety for pets, wildlife, and those who are neurodivergent or have PTSD.
- **Regulation and improved enforcement:** There is a strong call for better enforcement of existing by-laws and regulations. Suggestions include a permit system to ensure safety and limit disturbances.
- **Preference for public vs. private displays:** A general preference for public, professionally organized fireworks display over private ones was expressed, with alternatives such as drone shows, or silent fireworks proposed.
- **Cultural and community significance:** While recognizing the traditional aspect of fireworks in celebrations, there is a desire to balance this tradition with contemporary safety and environmental concerns.

Recommendations

Based on the community feedback and practices used by other Ontario municipalities, staff recommend that Council direct staff to create a permit-based fireworks by-law. The by-law would use a permit system for large fireworks displays such as community and special events. The by-law would include regulations such as:

- Minimum safe distances from residences and all vulnerable occupancies (schools, nursing, and care facilities)
- Displays be discharged by a licensed display supervisor
- Sufficient liability insurance
- Safety inspections for safety
- Fireworks should be planned for acceptable times and locations
- Animal safety management

This also would mean the discharging of fireworks for personal use would not be allowed. Furthermore, the sale of home fireworks would be prohibited. This balances residents' safety concerns, cultural practices, and the need for community events. Staff would recommend a permit fee of \$100 per event.

Financial Implications

This review was conducted within the existing Operations Department's budget. If Council passes the recommendations, work will be completed by existing resources; therefore, there will be no additional operational costs. A new fireworks permit fee will be added to the rates, fees, and charges guide through the 2025 budget confirmation process. Any revenue associated with the fireworks permit will be used to offset enforcement staff costs.

Consultations and Engagement

As indicated in this report, staff held fulsome public engagement sessions both online and in person, along with meetings with community leaders. The staff summary is attached to this report.

In addition to public engagement, staff reached out to a number of City divisions and external agencies, including Guelph Humane Society, Corporate and Community Safety, Guelph Fire, and Guelph Police Services.

Attachments

Attachment-1 What We Heard - Fireworks By-law Review

Departmental Approval

None

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