

Community Engagement Summary

Fireworks by-law review

Summary of feedback

This summary is a snapshot of all engagement activities and findings as we seek to update a by-law that regulates fireworks. It describes what we did, what we heard and what action we will take because of our research, a scan of municipal best practices, and other information we gathered from the community.

What we did

The project 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-law 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, 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
- Guelph Fire Department

Additional cultural groups were contacted for an interview; however, no response was received.

What we heard

Survey response summary

The online survey polled responses from 1,325 community members. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents have not attended or coordinated fireworks displays in the past five years. Of the 785 respondents who indicated that they did attend or coordinated fireworks displays in the past five years, fifty-two per cent used them to mark a celebration. As part of the survey, staff asked residents what their top three statements about their experience regarding professional and private firework displays were. These results can be seen ranked from one to ten in Table 1, where one represents the most frequently selected response.

Table 1: Ranked statements that describe professional and private fireworks displays.

What are the top three statements from this list you might use to describe the experience?	Professional	Private	Change from Professional to Private
Scares wildlife	1	1	0
Harmful to the environment	2	3	-1
Togetherness or community	3	6	-3
Too loud	4	2	+2
Fun	5	5	0
Exciting	6	7	-1
Expensive	7	8	-1
Trustworthy products	8	9	-1
Dangerous	9	4	+5
Significant	10	10	0

The overall top statements between professional and private fireworks are: “Scares wildlife,” “Harmful to the environment” and “Too loud.” Respondents also selected expressions that indicate a sentiment that professional fireworks displays bring the community together more while being less dangerous than private fireworks displays. This trend is emphasized in how respondents noted how safe they considered different types of fireworks. These results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceived levels of safety for various types of fireworks.

Perceived level of safety	Professional fireworks	Retail fireworks that shoot up into the sky	Retail fireworks that sparkle up from the ground	Hand-held sparklers	Sparklers as birthday cake toppers or similar
Very unsafe	8%	35%	28%	14%	6%
Unsafe	9%	31%	32%	17%	15%
Neutral	24%	15%	21%	33%	35%
Safe	35%	13%	12%	27%	31%
Very safe	24%	6%	6%	9%	12%

Fifty-eight per cent of respondents felt safe or very safe when in relation to professional fireworks. This is compared to the 19 per cent of respondents who felt safe or very safe with retail fireworks. Overall, respondents indicated a sentiment that professional fireworks are safer than retail fireworks.

Respondents were asked their level of support for three different ways to regulate fireworks.

- **Private and public fireworks:** This is the current status quo in Guelph. Individuals can choose to set off consumer grade fireworks in accordance with the current fireworks by-law.
- **Permit only:** Residents would need to get a permit to set off fireworks in Guelph. This would include additional requirements and restrictions.
- **Fireworks ban:** A complete ban of fireworks within Guelph.

The results of this question can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Levels of support for each option if used as a model to build Guelph’s bylaw

Level of support	Private and public fireworks	Permit only	Fireworks ban
Very unsupportive	55%	39%	28%
Unsupportive	10%	10%	7%
Neutral	10%	17%	9%
Supportive	6%	13%	9%
Very supportive	20%	22%	47%

Sixty-five per cent of respondents noted that they were unsupportive or very unsupportive of unregulated public and private fireworks. Similarly, 56 per cent of respondents indicated they were supportive to very supportive of a firework ban. The permit-only option received noticeably more support compared to unregulated private fireworks displays.

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

- **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 displays 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.

Meeting and interview summary

We also engaged through direct conversations with various organizations, leaders, and members of the community. This allowed staff to get information from key interested parties in Guelph and gain a more fulsome understanding of community sentiment. Each interview brought a new perspective to the topic.

- Guelph Sikh Society
 - Several years ago, the Guelph Sikh Society publicly took the stance of not supporting fireworks during Diwali. They wish the celebration to be “about enjoyment, not injury.” Their mission is to take care people and put safety first.
- Guelph Humane Society
 - Their stance is in support of a total ban. However, they recognize the value of community celebrations and strongly support a cultural shift to noiseless forms of celebration, such as drone shows, laser, or light demonstrations.
 - They recalled several Canada Day celebrations at Riverside Park where numerous geese were disoriented during and following a fireworks display in Riverside Park and flew into traffic. One year, as many as 20 Canada Geese were killed or injured. They noted that the event hosts began sending volunteers through the park to scare off geese before the fireworks display for several years. However, it was not always effective and the weather sometimes got in the way.
- Guelph Chinese Canadian Cultural Group
 - In Canada, the Guelph Chinese Canadian Cultural Group has become accustomed to celebrating spring festivals without fireworks. They celebrate with an indoor gala. There is no expectation for the use of fireworks; however, fireworks would add to the festivities and increase the fun of the celebration. They would consider adding fireworks to their celebration if they could do so legally and safely.
- Guelph Youth Council (GYC)
 - Though conversations and activities the group of engaged youth expressed happy memories of fireworks celebrations and shared comments around the positive effect that fireworks celebrations have had on themselves, neighbourhood cohesion, and a sense of community and celebration.
 - During a ‘dotmocracy’ weighted ranking activity, the GYC as a group expressed interest in increasing the number of days each year in which fireworks are allowed while improving safety measures in the existing by-law. The ‘vote’ tally resulted in the following order of preference of among the options presented:
 - Increase days allowed and improve safety (16)
 - Keep existing days and improve safety (14)
 - Require permits for any fireworks (7)
 - Ban fireworks in Guelph (0)
 - When asked about potential alternatives of interest, members of the GYC suggested a drone show or flying lanterns.
- Guelph Police
 - Guelph Police noted that they do not have issues with fireworks in Guelph as enforcement is carried out by the City of Guelph Bylaw Officers.

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- They did seem to lean toward the option of a permit-only by-law. The reason is that it would shift enforcement to Guelph Fire and that Guelph Fire has a different relationship with the public.
 - Guelph Fire Department
 - The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) advocates banning store-bought fireworks.
 - Community engagement public meetings
 - The City conducted one virtual and one in person public engagement meeting. Each meeting had one participant attend.
 - The virtual meeting participant talked about concerns with the current by-law. They highlight the frustration with the load noise that can effect humans and animals.
 - The in-person meeting participant talked about the cultural and community significance around celebrations with fireworks, specifically among the Hindu community. They recommended that if the City did restrict fireworks, then other options need to be provided. They suggested centralized safe fireworks discharge areas where people could bring their own fireworks and set them off in a safe and supervised manner.

What we are doing

Staff will review the community's feedback alongside research results and municipal best practices. Working closely across City departments including Bylaw and the Guelph Fire Department, staff will prepare and present a report to the Committee of the Whole on October 1, 2024. Upon presenting the recommendations in that report, staff will look to Council for further direction around the development of changes to the existing Fireworks By-law.

What we are not doing

The project team heard concerns from residents about other types of excessive noise, such as music, gun ranges and parties. Though all comments and perspectives are appreciated, these concerns cannot be addressed through the Fireworks By-law. This feedback has been recorded and shared for more appropriate regulation and policy research purposes as they may arise.

Next Steps

Staff will present a report providing data-driven recommendations to the Committee of the Whole on October 1, 2024. The community is invited to review the report ahead of the meeting and to delegate or submit correspondence if they have additional input they would like to submit for consideration.

Interested community members can find information on speaking as a delegate or sending comments to Council on <https://guelph.ca/council>.