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SUBJECT: Waterfront Music Festival: results of call for applications and recommended next steps

TO: Committee of the Whole

FROM: Community Services  
Recreation, Community and Culture

Report Number: CSS-29-25

Wards Affected: all

Date to Committee: December 1, 2025

Date to Council: December 9, 2025

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## Recommendation

Receive and file for information community services report CSS-29-25 regarding Waterfront Music Festival: results of call for applications and recommended next steps with the outcome of the Waterfront Music Festival call for applications process, including the identification of MRG Live Ltd. as the top applicant through the Festivals and Events Strategy Team (FEST), in accordance with the City's Festivals and Events Policy; and

Direct the Director of Recreation, Community and Culture to bring forward an information report in Q1 2026, providing event details for the Waterfront Music Festival scheduled at Spencer Smith Park on Father's Day weekend, June 19–21, 2026.

## Executive Summary

At the Committee of the Whole meeting on October 6, 2025, and the subsequent Council meeting on October 14, Council directed staff to decline Burlington Sound of Music Festival Inc.'s 2026 funding request, reallocate \$150,000 from the Operating Budget to the Community Investment Fund, and initiate a Call for Applications to secure a new organizer for a waterfront music festival at Spencer Smith Park. Staff were also asked to explore alternative models and report back with findings.

In response, staff launched a city-wide public survey through Get Involved Burlington, receiving more than 3,500 responses. Residents expressed strong support for continuing a Father's Day weekend festival and emphasized clear priorities, including Canadian and local

talent, popular genres such as rock, pop/indie and folk, affordable and accessible programming, local vendors, environmental sustainability and a strong sense of community connection. This community feedback was shared publicly on the Get Involved page for potential applicants and directly informed the review process.

The Call for Applications, held from October 27 to November 21, generated significant interest across the sector, resulting in 12 submissions from a diverse range of organizers. These included established festival production companies with national experience, regional operators with long-standing histories in municipal and cultural events, Burlington-based cultural organizations proposing community-focused programming, and independent production teams seeking to launch new, locally rooted initiatives. Proposals reflected a wide spectrum of festival models, ranging from modest community-scale events under \$250,000 to large, multi-day music festivals exceeding \$2 million. Programming concepts featured combinations of Canadian headliners, emerging artists, family activities, vendor marketplaces, cultural activations, and downtown business engagement.

The range and diversity of submissions underscore the strong interest in Burlington's waterfront and confirm that commercial, not-for-profit, and community-based sectors all recognize the long-term potential for a renewed music festival at Spencer Smith Park. While organizers expressed enthusiasm for hosting in Burlington, they also raised concerns about the limited preparation time for a 2026 launch and highlighted the need for a longer-term agreement with the City to allow their event to grow and achieve its full vision over multiple years. Organizers further emphasized that any new festival will inevitably differ from its predecessor, reinforcing the importance of Council and the community being prepared to embrace the new chapter that this music festival will bring for Burlington.

All applications were reviewed using the City's Festivals and Events Policy, and the Festivals and Events Strategy Team (FEST) completed a thorough review based on the policy criteria of innovation, economic impact, sustainability, accessibility, professionalism, risk and safety, community impact, and local engagement. Through this structured review, MRG Live Ltd. was identified as the top applicant, demonstrating the strongest alignment with Burlington's policy framework, community priorities, and the City's objectives for a financially sustainable, high-quality waterfront festival. Staff recommend proceeding with MRG Live Ltd. to deliver the 2026 Waterfront Music Festival on June 19–21, 2026.

Staff have held a verbal discussion with the selected applicant, announcing them as the top candidate. Following Council's meeting on December 9, staff will continue working with the selected organizer to refine the details of their application. Over the coming months, staff will provide support in addressing the logistical requirements necessary to deliver the event. An information report will be prepared for Q1 2026 to present these details to Council and ensure they are shared with the broader community.

This process confirmed both the community's strong desire for a renewed waterfront music festival and the cultural sector's readiness to support its redevelopment. The Call for Applications also demonstrated the effectiveness of staff's broad and inclusive engagement strategy. Through intentional outreach across cultural networks, community groups, and local creative industries, the City received submissions from a highly diverse range of applicants, including organizers bringing forward new cultural perspectives and festival models not previously represented in Burlington's major event landscape. The breadth and variety of applications reflect a meaningful expansion of cultural participation and indicates that a wider cross-section of the community is interested in contributing to major civic events. This outcome validates the strength of the City's engagement approach and reinforces the importance of maintaining inclusive, accessible, and equity-focused practices in future cultural initiatives.

Delivery of a festival of this scale will require coordinated support across City departments, led by Recreation, Community and Culture (RCC) through the Special Events Team, in accordance with the delegated-authority by-law. Following the 2026 event, staff will complete a detailed evaluation, including an economic impact assessment and community feedback survey, to ensure continuous improvement and support the long-term stability of this festival as a signature cultural event for Burlington.

# Recommendation Report

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## Background

At the Committee of the Whole meeting on October 6, 2025, Council set a clear direction for the future of Burlington’s music festival programming, which was formally approved at the subsequent Council meeting on October 14, 2025, as such:

“Decline Burlington Sound of Music Festival Inc.’s current 2026 funding request per Appendix A, and invite SOM to participate in the Call for applications; Approve the reallocation of \$150,000—originally designated for Sound of Music in the 2026 Operating Budget—to the Community Investment Fund earmarked for a future music festival at Spencer Smith Park; and Direct staff to report back to Council with consideration for all discussions from the Committee of the Whole meeting of October 6, 2025 on exploration of potential opportunities for a different form of music festival and/or a different operator of a music festival at Spencer Smith Park, following a call for applications from potential event organizers”.

This direction established a clear mandate for staff to engage the community, assess market capacity, and undertake a transparent and policy-aligned process to identify a suitable organizer for a 2026 waterfront music festival.

To inform this work, staff launched a public survey on October 14, 2025, through the City’s Get Involved Burlington platform. The survey closed on November 17, receiving more than 3,500 responses. Respondents expressed strong support for continuing a festival on Father’s Day weekend and identified clear preferences, including:

- Canadian and local artists
- Genres such as rock, pop/indie, and mixed programming
- An emphasis on live music, local vendors, and community spirit
- Affordability (free or low-cost access)
- Environmental sustainability and accessible, family-friendly experiences

In alignment with Council direction and the Festivals and Events Policy, a Call for Applications was issued from October 27 to November 21, 2025. The call was promoted through Get Involved Burlington, social media, cultural networks, event-sector associations, and targeted outreach to ensure broad and inclusive visibility. This approach resulted in the City receiving 12 applications representing a wide breadth of organizers, including community-based groups, not-for-profit cultural organizations, established festival producers, commercial event companies, and independent creative teams proposing new festival concepts. Submissions reflected a diversity of festival models, scales, artistic visions, and delivery approaches,

demonstrating strong sector interest and confirming that multiple providers are prepared to support a waterfront festival in Burlington.

All applications were reviewed in alignment with the Festivals and Events Policy, with a detailed assessment conducted by the Festivals and Events Strategy Team (FEST). FEST is an interdepartmental group of subject-matter experts from across the City and partner agencies, responsible for assessing event feasibility, operational requirements, public safety, and alignment with municipal policies. This review concluded that a successful, financially viable waterfront music festival is achievable in 2026.

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## Analysis

The Call for Applications generated 12 submissions, reflecting strong interest from a diverse range of event organizers. While several applicants proposed unique cultural or community-focused concepts outside the scope of a waterfront music festival, staff are exploring opportunities to support these proposals at alternative locations or dates through the Special Events Team (SET) process. The majority of submissions, however, focused on delivering a waterfront music festival at Spencer Smith Park on June 19–21, 2026.

All applications were reviewed in accordance with the City's Festivals and Events Policy, with a detailed assessment conducted by the Festivals and Events Strategy Team (FEST). FEST is an interdepartmental group comprised of City staff from Recreation, Community and Culture and Financial Services, along with partner agencies including Halton Regional Police Service, Burlington Economic Development and Tourism, the Burlington Downtown Business Association, and the Burlington Performing Arts Centre. FEST's mandate is to evaluate event feasibility, operational requirements, public safety, and alignment with municipal policy.

Applicants were assessed against the criteria established in the Festivals and Events Policy, including:

- **Innovation** – introducing new or distinctive programming to the community
- **Economic Impact and Tourism** – generating local economic benefit and attracting visitors
- **Sustainability** – demonstrating environmentally responsible practices and long-term viability
- **Welcoming** – ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for diverse demographics
- **Location** – appropriate scale and scope for Spencer Smith Park
- **Professionalism** – proven organizational capacity and reliability
- **Risk and Safety Planning** – minimizing liability and ensuring public safety
- **Community Impact** – responding to community interests and trends
- **Local Engagement** – supporting local artists, vendors, sponsors, and businesses

Community priorities identified through the public survey—such as support for local talent, affordability, accessibility, and environmental responsibility—were incorporated as secondary considerations within the policy framework.

Through this evaluation, FEST identified MRG Live Ltd. as the top applicant, demonstrating the strongest overall alignment with the Festivals and Events Policy, Council direction, and the community priorities expressed through public engagement.

### **Options considered:**

#### **Option 1: Proceed with MRG Live Ltd. as the Music Festival Provider for 2026**

Under this option, staff would move forward with the top applicant identified through the Call for Applications. All submissions were evaluated by the Festivals and Events Strategy Team (FEST) in accordance with the Council-approved Festivals and Events Policy. Based on overall alignment with policy criteria, community priorities, and the City's objectives for a sustainable, high-quality waterfront music festival, MRG Live Ltd. was identified as the leading applicant.

MRG Live Ltd is a national live event and festivals producer, and a division of The MRG Group, one of Canada's largest independent entertainment organizations. Founded in 2008, by Matthew Gibbons, the company has grown to include offices in Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, Montreal and Toronto with more than 400 staff across its operations. Their Festivals & Events Team delivers large-scale public programming across Canada, specializing in talent procurement, production management, sponsorship sales, marketing, hospitality, and onsite operations.

MRG Live Ltd has extensive experience producing multi-day festivals, civic celebrations, artisan markets, and large family-focused events. Their portfolio includes the Khatsahlano Street Party (175,000 attendees), Surrey Fusion Festival (100,500 attendees), the Filberg Festival, and the Noel Holiday & Light Festival, among others. Key personnel assigned to the Burlington festival include senior leaders with 10–25 years of industry experience across festival strategy, talent buying, sponsorship development, production logistics, and public safety planning. Together, the team brings demonstrated capacity to plan, resource, and execute events of significant scale, with an emphasis on safety, accessibility, community inclusion, and operational excellence.

The proposed event concept is a free, two-day outdoor music festival centered at Spencer Smith Park, with additional activation possibilities within the downtown area. The concept focuses broadly on celebrating Canadian music and showcasing a range of talent, from nationally recognized artists to emerging and local performers, reflecting Burlington's cultural identity and community priorities. While detailed programming will be refined through further

planning, the model envisions multiple performance spaces that allow for a mix of mainstage acts, community-focused performances, and family-friendly programming. Festival elements may include food vendors, artisan marketplace components, licensed areas, and community partnerships that help create an accessible, multi-generational experience for residents and visitors. 2026 is intended to establish a strong foundation, with flexibility built in to adjust scale, partnerships, and programming as the festival grows in future years. A detailed information report outlining event details will be presented in Q1 of 2026.

Staff recommend entering into a three-year agreement with MRG Live Ltd. to deliver a waterfront music festival at Spencer Smith Park over Father's Day weekend, beginning June 19–21, 2026. The agreement will define roles, responsibilities, reporting expectations, and performance measures. Annual approval of the event will remain contingent on the organizer meeting all Special Events Team (SET) requirements and delivering the festival in accordance with City standards.

Following the inaugural 2026 festival, staff will commission an economic impact assessment and conduct a community feedback survey. These evaluations will support continuous improvement and inform planning for subsequent festival years.

### **Option 2: Pause for 2026 and Plan for 2027**

Under this option, the City would intentionally defer the launch of a new waterfront music festival until 2027, providing a longer runway for planning, partnership development, and operational readiness. A one-year pause may be warranted if the City wishes to:

- Allow for further planning certainty
- Strengthen long-term agreements and funding structures
- Provide the selected applicant more lead time for sponsorship, logistics, and artist bookings

Deferring to 2027 may also allow further alignment with external partners and local arts and culture organizations. With additional time, these partners could further develop coordinated business programs, downtown activations, marketing campaigns, and visitor-attraction strategies to maximize festival impact.

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### **Recommendation Details**

Staff recommend proceeding with Option 1 and confirm MRG Live Ltd. as the new Music Festival Provider for 2026.

This recommendation reflects Council's direction and the community's strong desire to see a waterfront music festival delivered in 2026. The public survey, which received more than 3,500 responses, demonstrated clear support for Canadian artists, affordability, sustainability, and

the continuation of Burlington's tradition of hosting a major summer festival at Spencer Smith Park.

The Call for Applications generated significant interest, with 12 submissions received. Following a comprehensive review by the Festivals and Events Strategy Team (FEST), MRG Live Ltd. was identified as the top applicant, presenting a proposal that aligns strongly with Council priorities and community feedback.

Proceeding with MRG Live Ltd. will ensure Burlington hosts a high-quality, financially sustainable, and community-focused waterfront music festival on June 19–21, 2026. Staff will support the organizer through the Special Events Team (SET) and enter into a multi-year agreement outlining roles, responsibilities, reporting expectations, and performance measures. Annual approval of the event will remain contingent on the organizer meeting all SET requirements and delivering the festival in accordance with City standards.

Following the inaugural 2026 festival, staff will commission an economic impact assessment and a community feedback survey. These evaluations will provide valuable insights to guide continuous improvement and ensure the festival evolves as a cornerstone of Burlington's cultural and community life.

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## **Key Dates & Milestones**

### **December 2025**

- Council confirms final selection of the music festival applicant.
- Staff initiate preliminary meetings with the selected organizer to begin planning.

### **Q1 2026**

- Establishment of a three-year agreement with the organizer, contingent on meeting Special Events Team (SET) requirements and successful delivery.
- SET finalizes event requirements for the June 19–21, 2026 festival.

### **June 2026**

- Waterfront Music Festival delivered at Spencer Smith Park, June 19–21.
- Launch of a community feedback survey to capture resident input.
- Staff collaborate with external partners and a third-party provider to conduct an economic impact assessment.

## July 2026

- Staff host a formal debrief with the event organizer to review outcomes and identify improvements for future years.
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### Implications

Proceeding with Option 1—working with MRG Live Ltd. as the new Music Festival Provider for 2026—will deliver significant benefits for Burlington by ensuring the community’s strong desire for a waterfront festival is met, while restoring trust in both government and the industry through a transparent and effective process. With a long history of hosting a Father’s Day weekend festival at Spencer Smith Park, this decision allows MRG Live Ltd. to begin a new chapter that honors tradition while introducing fresh energy and innovation. The City’s multi-year agreement provides stability and accountability, while coordinated support from Recreation, Community and Culture (RCC) and the Special Events Team will help manage operational risks and ensure a high-quality experience.

Beyond the immediate event, the festival is expected to strengthen Burlington’s cultural identity, showcase Canadian talent, and generate economic impact through tourism and local business engagement. Post-event evaluation, including an economic impact assessment and community feedback survey, will guide continuous improvement and reinforce the festival’s role as a cornerstone of Burlington’s cultural life. Importantly, this process has demonstrated how strategic outreach can attract strong sector interest and fill gaps in the market, offering a model the City may wish to replicate in the future when shaping new community-focused initiatives.

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### References

[Festivals and Events Policy](#)

[F-36-22](#) Financial Support for Sound of Music Inc

[RCC-14-24](#) Sound of Music Festival – 2024 Loan Request

[RCC-19-24](#) Sound of Music Festival - 2024 event recap and future city support

Follow up to [RCC-19-24](#) Sound of Music Festival-2024 Event Re-cap and Future City Support

[CSS-08-25](#) 2025 Sound of Music Festival loan request

[CSS-23-25](#) Burlington Sound of Music- 2025 Festival Re-cap and Next Steps

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### Strategic Alignment

- Designing and delivering complete communities

- Providing the best services and experiences
  - Protecting and improving the natural environment and taking action on climate change
  - Driving organizational performance
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**Appendices:**

A. Community Survey Results, Music Festival, Summary

**Report Approval:**

All reports are reviewed and approved by the Commissioner, Head of Corporate Affairs, Chief Financial Officer, and Commissioner of Legal and Legislative Services/City Solicitor.