
SUBJECT: Building Vibrant Communities – updates to recreation, community and culture grant programs and policy

TO: Committee of the Whole

FROM: Community Services
Recreation, Community and Culture

Report Number: CSS-04-26

Wards Affected: all

Date to Committee: March 3, 2026

Date to Council: March 10, 2026

Recommendation

Approve the revised Corporate Community Investment Policy, as outlined in Appendix A of community services report CSS-04-26, and formally repeal the previous version.

Executive Summary

This report recommends replacing the City's existing Corporate Community Investment Policy originally designed to guide community grants administered through Recreation, Community and Culture (RCC), with a modernized policy that better reflects the City's strategic direction and evolving community needs. The updated policy introduces a unified corporate framework for municipal investments in community initiatives, establishing clear values, principles, and governance roles. It aims to strengthen transparency, accountability, and consistency across departments while enabling divisions to develop tailored departmental policies and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to meet program-specific requirements.

In 2025, staff reviewed RCC grants and municipal incentive programs, informed by community feedback, staff consultations, and an internal audit. This review identified several gaps in the current policy, including unclear principles and eligibility criteria, the absence of a corporate framework to guide investment priorities, outdated transparency and accountability mechanisms, and limited alignment with Council's strategic objectives. The revised policy addresses these issues by establishing a clear corporate foundation for investment decisions,

improving administrative consistency, and strengthening alignment with the City's long-term goals.

The implications of this policy update are corporate in scope. Financial impacts are neutral, with no changes recommended to existing investment envelopes of \$158,500 annually. Communications updates will enhance clarity for both staff and applicants regarding corporate principles, priorities, and processes.

Municipal investment in community initiatives remains a critical tool for supporting a vibrant, connected, and inclusive city. These investments help strengthen local organizations, expand access to programs and services, and build social infrastructure that enhances wellbeing, belonging, and quality of life. Community funding also enables the City to leverage volunteerism, partnerships, and shared resources, multiplying the impact of municipal dollars and supporting outcomes that align with Council's strategic direction as well as evolving community needs and interests.

The policy has been informed by engagement, including staff consultations, internal audit findings, community input, and strategic planning work. Strengthened governance and clearer criteria will reduce legal risk associated with funding decisions. Implementation will be supported through staff training and updated departmental SOPs to ensure consistent application.

Recommendation Report

Background

The City of Burlington invests in community initiatives to help build a vibrant, connected, and inclusive city. These investments strengthen local organizations, expand access to programs and services, and contribute to social infrastructure that enhances wellbeing, belonging, and overall quality of life. Through community funding, the City is also able to leverage volunteerism, partnerships, and shared resources, multiplying the impact of municipal dollars and supporting outcomes that align with Council’s strategic direction and evolving community needs and interests.

Recreation, Community, and Culture (RCC) delivers several microgrant programs that contribute to this work, including:

- **The Burlington Arts and Culture Grant**, which supports cultural vibrancy and creative expression;
- **The Community Development Grant**, which empowers community groups to expand or enhance RCC programs and services;
- **The Love My Neighbourhood Grant**, which strengthens neighbourhood resilience through local connection and participation; and
- **The Building Community Together Grant**, which matches community contributions to support small-scale community infrastructure enhancement.

The following chart illustrates the spectrum of how the City’s microgrant programs collectively support the lifecycle of community driven initiatives from early-stage ideation and capacity-building, to strengthening programs and services, to collaborative infrastructure development.

Investment Category	Criteria	Intent	Grant Streams
Project Innovation and Incubation	Early-stage & Low-org Projects	Idea to Impact Investment: Provides development, planning, capacity-building, feasibility support and transition funding to bring concepts to implementation readiness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love My Neighbourhood Grant • Arts & Culture Grant
Project Acceleration	Implementation-Ready Projects	Vetted service providers with demonstrated capacity: Supports initiatives that would not proceed without financial investment, enabling timely delivery, scale, or impact that expands services to community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts & Culture Grant • Community Development Grant

Investment Category	Criteria	Intent	Grant Streams
Strategic Partnerships	Proven-Partner Projects	Shared Investment: Leverages cross-sector partnerships and responsibilities to expand program reach, infrastructure capacity, service diversity, and long-term community benefit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Development Grant • Building Community Together Grant

In 2025, RCC undertook a comprehensive review of its grant programs, supported by an internal audit conducted by the City Auditor. This work also examined related investment programs across other departments such as those supporting heritage preservation and private property climate resilience, and benchmarked Burlington’s approach against 40 grant programs in ten comparator municipalities. The review confirmed that staff have consistently administered grants with sound judgment. However, it also identified the need for a unified corporate policy framework to guide consistent, transparent, and efficient administration across departments.

In response, RCC used its operational experience, audit insights, community feedback, and benchmarking results to develop an updated Community Investment Policy. The revised policy introduces a cross-departmental framework that aligns investments with Council’s strategic priorities, strengthens transparency and accountability, and modernizes roles, responsibilities, and governance expectations. This work is timely given the increasing scale, diversity, and complexity of community-led initiatives.

The updated policy builds on established strengths while clearly articulating the purpose, values, and strategic alignment of municipal investments. It defines eligibility and exclusions, clarifies governance structures, and provides a strong foundation for future investment decisions. This will guide the development of departmental procedures and SOPs, ensuring consistent, equitable, and sustainable resource allocation across the organization.

Analysis

During the policy review, staff considered whether a broader, citywide Framework for Community Investment should be developed, similar to approaches used in several peer municipalities. While such a framework could provide long-term benefits, staff determined that updating the existing Community Investment Policy is the most effective and timely step to support current program needs and improve consistency across the various investment programs.

Community investment plays a vital role in enabling residents, community groups, neighbourhood leaders, and artists to advance ideas and projects that contribute directly to the City's strategic priorities. These microgrants help activate local creativity, strengthen neighbourhoods, and extend municipal service delivery in ways that are more responsive, nimble, and community driven. By supporting initiatives that foster belonging, cultural expression, local leadership, and shared stewardship, these investments serve as a key mechanism through which the City advances the goals of its Strategic Plan, the Live & Play Plan, and emerging strategies such as the forthcoming Culture Plan and Neighbourhood Strategy. As these strategies evolve, the microgrant programs will also evolve to ensure alignment with community needs and corporate priorities.

Following the updated Community Investment Policy, staff will revise departmental Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure consistent, transparent, and equitable administration across all streams. Work is also underway on a communications approach that will present a simplified, unified entry point for community members seeking City support. This will help applicants better understand available programs, navigate eligibility, and submit proposals through a clear and accessible process.

Internally, staff are enhancing supporting processes to strengthen accountability and continuous improvement. Updates include improvements to intake and application workflows, clearer eligibility assessments across programs, and updated post project evaluation frameworks to track outcomes, return on investment, community impact, and reporting requirements. These refinements will ensure a stronger evidence base for future investment decisions and reinforce consistent application of the policy across departments. Together, these efforts position the City to better support community led initiatives while ensuring transparency, accessibility, and alignment with long-term municipal goals.

Lastly, to further strengthen and coordinate the City's overall community investment efforts, staff are in discussion regarding a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Burlington Community Foundation, a leader in community granting for nearly three decades. This collaboration is intended to build on the City's established grant practices by aligning them with evolving sector best practices, exploring opportunities for greater coordination and shared granting processes, and identifying ways to further enhance community impact. Through this work, City staff and the Foundation will also examine the potential for a pilot partnership in 2026, with the goal of strengthening an integrated, strategic approach to supporting Burlington's community- led initiatives.

Engagement:

The updated policy reflects input from internal staff and incorporates best practices in municipal community investment. Insights were drawn from day-to-day grant administration, internal audit findings, and benchmarking against practices in other municipalities. To support

continuous improvement, RCC introduced an annual survey in 2025 for both successful grant recipients and applicants who were not selected. Responses were positive, and the feedback collected offers valuable insight into the applicant's experience, program accessibility, and overall impact. This mechanism will continue to inform refinements that enhance the effectiveness, transparency, and equity of the City's community investment programs.

Recommendation Details

It is recommended that Council approve the updated Corporate Community Investment Policy and formally repeal the existing version, which no longer reflects current practices or provides the clarity, consistency, and accountability required to support effective, equitable decision-making. The updated policy establishes a modern corporate framework for community investment that aligns with Council's strategic direction, supports consistent administration across departments, and responds to the evolving needs of residents, community groups, neighbourhood leaders, and artists.

The revised policy strengthens governance and creates a clear foundation for how the City invests in community-led initiatives, ensuring decisions are transparent, defensible, and aligned with shared municipal values. It also provides the flexibility needed for departments to develop program specific- procedures and adapt to changing community needs.

Key benefits of approving the updated policy include:

- **Clear Direction and Shared Values:**
The policy articulates the City's purpose, values, and principles for community investment. It establishes consistent expectations for eligibility, decision-making, and alignment with Council priorities, creating a shared corporate approach.
- **Greater Transparency and Fairness:**
By clarifying governance roles and requiring services to adopt supporting procedures, the policy enhances transparency for applicants and strengthens the City's ability to track outcomes, manage risk, and demonstrate accountability.
- **Consistency Across Grant Programs:**
The policy provides a unified corporate structure that enables the City to administer programs in a consistent and coordinated manner while maintaining flexibility to address program-specific needs.
- **Flexibility to Meet Changing Community Needs:**
With a clear overarching framework in place, the City can design and evolve programs that respond to emerging opportunities and priorities—supporting innovation and strengthening the City's relationship with community partners.

- **Reduced Risk and Clearer Rules:**

The policy provides clearer principles, criteria, and responsibilities, reducing ambiguity and ensuring funding decisions are fair, defensible, and aligned with corporate and legal expectations.

Key Dates & Milestones

- **Q1 2026 – Council Approval**

Council approval of the updated Corporate Community Investment Policy and repeal of the existing policy.

- **Q2 2026 – Departmental Alignment and SOP Updates**

Development and alignment of departmental policies (as required) with the new corporate policy. Updates to departmental Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are initiated to support consistent implementation.

- **Q3 2026 – Public Communications Launch**

Rollout of a coordinated communications approach to provide clear, accessible information to the community about available programs and how to apply.

- **Q4 2026 – Full Implementation**

Implementation of a coordinated application intake, evaluation, and reporting process across all relevant departments.

Implications

Approval of the updated Corporate Community Investment Policy will modernize the City's approach to community funding by replacing an outdated policy that no longer reflects current practices or expectations. The revised policy strengthens governance, improves transparency, and provides a consistent corporate framework for how community investments are administered. It also gives the department flexibility to design program-specific procedures while ensuring alignment with shared values and Council priorities.

For the community, the updated policy offers clearer expectations, more equitable decision-making, and a more transparent process for how funding decisions are made. Internally, it reduces ambiguity, improves administrative consistency, and supports better tracking of outcomes and risk management.

There are no direct financial impacts resulting from approval of the policy. Any future resource needs will be considered through regular budget processes. By clarifying roles, responsibilities,

and decision-making criteria, the updated policy also reduces legal and operational risk and better aligns community investment practices with corporate and strategic priorities.

References

[Current Community Investment Policy](#)

[AUD-03-25 Community Grants Audit](#)

[AUD-03-25 Appendix A: Community Grants Audit Report](#)

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. Corporate Community Investment Policy

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.