



COUNCIL REPORT

Report Date: October 8, 2024
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Meeting Date: October 22, 2024
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TO: Vancouver City Council
FROM: City Clerk
SUBJECT: Future Direction of the Awards of Excellence Program

Recommendation:

THAT Council approve the revitalization of the Awards of Excellence Program with new focus areas and a scheduling adjustment to align with Council priorities, including the introduction of new award categories, as outlined in this report;

FURTHER THAT Council approve adjusting the event scheduling to a quadrennial cycle, with the next event to take place in 2025.

Alternative Consideration:

THAT Council approve discontinuation of the Awards of Excellence Program.

Executive Summary

This report assesses the sustainability and effectiveness of the Awards of Excellence program amidst observable declines in nomination rates and evolving community engagement trends. Initiated in 2013, the program's objective has been to celebrate and recognize individuals and organizations for their contributions towards creating a more inclusive, sustainable, and vibrant Vancouver. Despite concerted efforts to promote the program, including a comprehensive social media campaign and media outreach, the decline in nominations signals a need for reevaluation to ensure the program's alignment with Council priorities and the community's shifting interests. This comprehensive overview is intended to assist Council to make an informed decision on the future of the Awards of Excellence program.

Council Authority/Previous Decisions

On July 8, 2013, Council approved the report “Annual Civic Awards Program”.

City Manager’s Comments

The City Manager concurs with the foregoing recommendations.

Background

The Awards of Excellence program was established by Council in 2013 to recognize and celebrate the remarkable contributions of individuals, organizations, and initiatives that enhance the quality of life in Vancouver. The program aimed to unite various civic awards and make the process more straightforward while raising public awareness and engagement. The awards recognized achievements across various categories, including sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation, reflecting the diverse and dynamic community of the city.

Despite its initial success and positive reception, the program has faced challenges in recent years. There has been a noticeable decline in nominations and participation, with a high of 131 nominations in 2014 to 53 in 2022 for 15 awards in 6 categories. The low numbers of nominations, year after year, has raised concerns about the program's format and its relevance for Vancouver residents.

Several factors may have contributed to this decline, such as event fatigue, the increasing prominence of digital platforms for recognition and community engagement, and a possible shift in the public's perception of the value and prestige of such awards. The post-pandemic landscape has also impacted public gatherings and events, leading to a reevaluation of how best to acknowledge and celebrate community contributions.

In light of these challenges, the program was put on hold in 2023 to allow for a comprehensive review and to consider adjustments that better align with the city's current needs and strategic goals. This pause provided an opportunity to reflect on the program's objectives, evaluate its impact, and explore new approaches to recognize the contributions of Vancouver's citizens and organizations.

This report presents alternatives for the Awards of Excellence program following the review period. It aims to address the challenges of declining engagement by either realigning the program with council priorities or alternatively reallocating resources to other areas to meet Vancouver's current needs. This approach ensures that the program, whether through its continuation in a refreshed format or its discontinuation, aligns with and supports the overarching goals and priorities of Vancouver's civic life.

Expense Summary and Financial Considerations

The table below (Table 1.) outlines the historical expenses of the Awards of Excellence program, showing significant fluctuations over the years. Notably, expenses peaked in 2015, with a trend towards lower expenses in later years due to the City changing the event venue from the Vancouver Playhouse in the first year and the Orpheum in the second year to the Roundhouse

Community Centre for all subsequent years. This venue change was made to enhance accessibility.

Note: The program was not held in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1.

Year	Expense	Nominees	Nominees per Award	Expense per Award	Awards presented
2014	\$93,501.06	131	7.28	\$5194.5	18
2015	\$109,307.59	64	3.76	\$6429.86	17
2016	\$26,797.47	> 39	2.17	\$1488.75	18
2017	\$27,469.29	61	3.81	\$1716.83	16
2018	\$25,977.16	44	2.59	\$1528.07	17
2019	\$25,735.63	58	3.22	\$1429.76	18
2022	\$25,002.84	53	3.53	\$1666.86	15

Expenses include items such as catering, venue and equipment rentals, honoraria, ASL interpretation and marketing expenses.

Communication efforts and nomination trends

As one tactic to address the declining trend in nominations for the Awards of Excellence post-pandemic, the City Clerk's Office, supported by Civic Engagement and Communications (CEC), launched an extensive communication campaign in 2022. Despite a significant push across multiple platforms, including a small paid campaign, the expected uplift in nominations did not materialize. The table below (Table 2), Campaign Activities and Engagement Outcomes, outlines the campaign's efforts and the modest engagement outcomes, highlighting the need for a strategic reassessment.

Campaign Activities and Engagement Outcomes

Table 2.

Activity	Details	Intended Outcome
Communication Tactics	Information bulletin, 44 social media posts across Instagram, Facebook, Twitter from March to May 30	Boost nominations
Targeted Paid Promotions	Included in the social media effort	Increase award awareness and funnel to application

Activity	Details	Intended Outcome
Council Members' Support	Reposts by Council members	Additional visibility
Event-Day Coverage	Media advisory issued, interview opportunities, livestream link provided	119 livestream views, 60 public attendees
Media Focus	Coverage on call for nominations and specific awardees	Highlighted the Freedom of the City Award recipient

Despite the comprehensive and multi-faceted communication approach aimed at revitalizing the Awards of Excellence program post-pandemic, the anticipated surge in nominations did not occur. This outcome points to possible deeper challenges related to community engagement or shifting interests, suggesting the need for a strategic reassessment of the program's alignment with the community's current values and interests.

Overview of recognition programs

When evaluating the strategic direction for the Awards of Excellence Program, it's important to place the program within the context of the broader spectrum of recognition and awards that the City of Vancouver administers. The table (Table 3) below provides a concise summary of the City's recognition programs.

Table 3.

Award Program	Description
Civic Merit Award	Recognizes outstanding achievements in specific fields, with recipients' names inscribed in the Civic Merit Book. Require unanimous vote of Council.
Freedom of the City Award	The highest honour, awarded to those whose exceptional achievements bring recognition to Vancouver. Require unanimous vote of Council.
Arts and Culture Awards	Celebrates contributions to the arts and culture sector, enhancing city livability. Includes Vancouver's Poet Laureate and the City of Vancouver Book Award. Winners are selected by a jury of peers.
Heritage Awards	Acknowledges efforts in cultural heritage stewardship and historical preservation. Winners are selected by a jury of peers.
Artist Studio Award Program	Supports emerging artists with a three-year term, fostering innovation and artistic excellence. Selected by staff through an open, competitive process and selections are made based on artists' eligibility.

Discussion

The observed decline in nominations and engagement with the Awards of Excellence program underscores the need to reassess its relevance and alignment with Council priorities. This discussion recommends two options. Option 1 presents the revitalization of the program with a focus on new areas relevant to current Council priorities. As alternative recommendation, Option 2, outlines an option of discontinuation of the program to redirect resources toward other initiatives.

OPTION 1: Revitalization with new focus areas and adjusted schedule

New focus areas

The revitalization effort includes the introduction of new award categories designed to spotlight critical areas of civic contribution, aligning with and promoting Council's current priorities. The proposed categories are as follows:

Category	Description	Council Priority	Existing award being replaced
Mayor's Achievement Award	Recognizes those who have a legacy and reputation for making life better for a broad segment of our population. In particular, those who made Vancouver shine with their long-term commitment to public engagement and volunteering.	Vibrant and Diverse	Unchanged category
Leadership in Reconciliation	Recognizes individuals or organizations that have demonstrated leadership in advancing reconciliation efforts in Vancouver.	Reconciliation	Diversity and Inclusion
Equity Champion	Acknowledges individuals or organizations making strides in promoting equity, including addressing systemic barriers and creating equitable opportunities for all Vancouver residents.	Health, Inclusive and Equitable	Accessible City
Climate Action Innovator	Rewards innovative efforts to address climate change, including reducing carbon emissions, improving energy efficiency, and promoting renewable energy.	Climate Emergency	Greenest City Leadership

Category	Description	Council Priority	Existing award being replaced
Events Champion Award	Honours individuals or organizations contributing to the success of large-scale events in Vancouver, including in sports, arts, and culture.	Enable Large-scale Sporting, Cultural and Arts Events	New category

Adjusted schedule

It is recommended Council approve a shift from an annual event to an event that occurs in the third year of every Council term, positioning its next iteration for 2025. Such timing allows the program to align with the Council's priorities and strategically celebrate community achievements and progress.

Civic Engagement and Communications would support this adjustment by developing a proactive communication strategy to inform and engage the public about the changes to the awards. This will require reprioritizing work within Communications and Civic Engagement to create and execute a communications strategy, including a social media campaign, proactive and earned media strategies, and development of collateral for Council members to maximize visibility.

OPTION 2: Alternative consideration - Program discontinuation

As an alternative to adjusting the current program, Council may consider discontinuing the program and reallocating the budget elsewhere.

This alternative consideration is based on the following:

- **Adapting to engagement shifts:** Despite significant promotional efforts, a marked decrease in nominations highlights a change in community engagement preferences. Ending the program would allow the City to reallocate these resources more effectively, ensuring City activities align with current public interests and the evolving values of Vancouver's communities.
- **Strategic resource allocation for focused impact:** By discontinuing the Awards program, the City can redirect resources towards initiatives that align more closely Council priorities, ensure efficient governance, and directly impact community projects. This approach integrates Council's objectives of strategic resource use with the commitment to impactful and efficient governance, emphasizing the drive to allocate efforts and resources where they can achieve the most substantial benefits for Vancouver.
- **Reallocation to meet increasing demands:** With metrics for the External Relations and Protocol Team indicating growth in several areas of service — including micro

weddings, delegation visits and study tours, illumination requests, and half-masting notices — the discontinuation of the Awards program could provide funding to enhance these programs both within the ERP team and other support departments, such as CEC and ACCS. This adjustment is worth considering as the City anticipates a significant uptick in delegation requests related to FIFA 2026. By potentially redirecting resources and staff efforts from the Awards program to these areas of expanding service demand, the team could be better positioned provide robust support for major City events.

This alternative consideration is proposed to enhance the utilization of City resources and ensure alignment with Council priorities.

Financial implications

1. **Revitalization with new focus areas and scheduling adjustment:** Transitioning the Awards of Excellence program to a quadrennial cycle could yield cost savings by reducing the frequency of expenses from annual to once every four years. It offers a balanced way to refresh the program while effectively managing city resources.
2. **Discontinuation:** Discontinuing the program would enable the reallocation of approximately \$26,000 in funds towards other initiatives.

Legal implications

There are no legal concerns associated with this report's recommendations.

Conclusion

The report presents two options for the Awards of Excellence program for Council's consideration, as outlined in the report: revitalizing the program to align with current civic priorities or discontinuing the program to redirect financial and staff resources towards other key municipal priorities.

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