

Federal support helps break down 'walls' of Cultural Centre

Left temporarily without a permanent home due to the construction of Town Square, the Aurora Cultural Centre looked for new ways to reach Aurorans.

From finding alternate performance venues and gallery spaces, initiating public art projects like the Bell Box Murals, and doubling down on their livestreamed offerings, the Centre has been able to create a Cultural Centre beyond its formal walls thanks to support from public bodies like the Federal Government.

Last week, before a public art installation at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex created by Metis artist Tracey-Mae Chambers, the Centre celebrated the impact of a \$65,000 grant from FedDev Canada (Federal Economic Development Agency).

'The Aurora Cultural Centre does an amazing job and is obviously deserving of funding [but due to COVID] the organization wouldn't have been able to keep going because fundraising was down, attendance was down, and we really wanted cultural and community organizations to continue and thrive,' said Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy at the event. 'They are really what makes our communities so robust.'

The Tourism Relief Fund, she said, got more than a return on its investment.

'We invest in community organizations, we invest in people, and you see the returns,' she added.

Suzanne Haines, Executive Director of the Aurora Cultural Centre, had plenty of ways this return on investment was measured. In addition to the Aurora Bell Boxes, the grant money enabled the Centre to continue its live family programming, including their Meridian Magic Carpet and Kaleidoscope Family series, free to the public. Many more ticketed performances were also live-streamed thanks to tech that was purchased with the money.

'There were two other really significant projects that were percolating during COVID and we felt was really important to do and be part of is what we saw in the community: one was the Constellations World Music Festival last June and brought in three world artists into Town Park for free and we had over 600 people come to that, which was unbelievable,' said Ms. Haines, adding they hope to do it again. 'The other was the IDEA Symposium [where] the community came into a space together for two days at the Armoury and we brought in key thought leaders from the Black community, the Indigenous community, York Pride, the business community, and we asked them to speak to the community about what is needed in terms of Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility. It was really an opportunity to generate conversations. What's come out of that for us at the Aurora Cultural Centre is a whole lot of learning on where we're going in the future. Everyone who was there walked away feeling like they started that conversation.'

'Funded by this, all of that was possible. This was about bringing audiences back. It's about encouraging people to feel safe, have a conversation and to build some more bridges in the community. During the pandemic we would not have kept our doors open without the wage subsidy, without those really critical programs at a time when it was critical for us absolutely wouldn't have been possible.'

From here, the Aurora Cultural Centre Board will go into a strategic planning process in 2023 that will look at many components of the future, including its place within Aurora Town Square, and increasing the Centre's presence in the community.

'We have been able to test a lot of things and see where there's an appetite,' said Ms. Haines. 'Aurora Pops Up was a program fully funded by the Federal Government and all of those programs gave us an opportunity to do something. Can we maintain Aurora Pops Up? It's all a budgeting question because that is a free program. We need sponsors to step up, we need community to step up? At the end of the day, it's an opportunity to see what the community is interested in and they definitely loved Aurora Pops Up, they definitely loved the Bell Boxes and the public art? those are spaces that we do well and we can occupy and can respond to the

community.?

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