



Committee of the Whole Report

For the Meeting of June 12, 2025

To: Committee of the Whole **Date:** May 20, 2025
From: Kerri Moore, Director of Business and Community Relations
Subject: Street Vendor Bylaw and Engagement Summary Report

RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- i. Instruct the City Solicitor to prepare the necessary bylaw to replace and repeal the Street Vendor Bylaw 89-072 and amend related bylaws, if necessary, based on the recommendations outlined in the June 12 report; and
- ii. Approve staff recommendations to:
 - Develop a City-led busking program for buskers to audition for, and the City to schedule buskers at “elevated” busking locations where amplification, electronic tipping and a promotions campaign are established. As well, an engaging placemaking approach is considered to identify these “elevated” locations from busking locations in other areas of the downtown core.
 - Create a code of conduct as part of the street entertainment licensing process. Improve the current information package for buskers and create information sessions to roll out the code of conduct and education on how to busk in Victoria and be successful.
 - Review and improve the administrative process for busking: simplified guidelines and application process as well as a better response process to enable staff to manage complaints.
 - Continue to offer an annual busking showcase on Canada Day. Facilitate discussions with community event organizers on the feasibility of a community-led busking festival.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Victoria is reviewing the City’s bylaws to improve the busking experience downtown. Governing bylaws and licence conditions have been amended incrementally over several decades, with the latest amendment to the Street Entertainment Bylaw occurring in 2012.

The review is part of the City's OUR DWTN revitalization program's vision for a refreshed and improved downtown experience and aligns with objectives outlined in the Victoria Music Strategy to expand music in publicly-accessible places through the busker licensing program.

The update to the City's Street Vendor Bylaw to create a new Street Entertainment Bylaw will:

- Improve the quality of busking performances downtown.
- Establish busking locations that support scheduled, high-quality performances.
- Encourage talent development and provide opportunities for performers of varying proficiency levels.
- Strike a balance between resident and business needs with a successful busking program.

Although administration of busker registrations has functioned reasonably well, concerns have been expressed about the quality, locations and timing of performances, and there is a growing internal and external consensus that improvements could be made to elevate the overall program.

As a major destination hub for tourists, as well as our reputation as a cultural and music capital, strengthening the busking program will elevate and reinforce the exceptional talent the City can offer to residents and locals.

Some of the most vibrant, memorable cities have incredible street entertainment within their downtown core and tourism attractions. Victoria has the right mix of talent, urban infrastructure and climate to have a world-class busking program.

The review of the City's bylaws and subsequent recommendations aim to improve and enhance the busking program to rival other cities' programs and establish a new opportunity for creative talent to perform and engage residents and visitors. As one resident commented, "Talented buskers bring vibrancy, energy and liveability to downtown" and "a tradition that gives Victoria its character."

City staff undertook an extensive engagement process on the busking program during the summer of 2024 to better understand the various perspectives, opportunities and challenges inherent to performers activating public space.

To date, the Busking in Victoria engagement project has consisted of a two-phase approach. Phase 1 took place from October 2023 to January 2024, which included the City's OUR DWTN team conducting a comprehensive review of municipal busking best practices and engaging with a 12-member stakeholder working group. Members are comprised of seven licensed buskers, two downtown business owners and representatives of the Downtown Victoria Business Association, the Downtown Residents Association and the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority.

This engagement informed the next step to pilot ideas, including two types of busking locations around downtown last summer for public feedback. Juried buskers were scheduled to perform at eight "elevated" locations downtown and were paid \$50 per scheduled performance to complement their tips at these locations. In addition, five designated busking locations were piloted along Government Street for spacing, at which any licensed busker could perform for tips.

Phase 2 focused on public engagement in the form of a public survey available on the City's Have Your Say online engagement platform from June 25 to August 31, 2024. A print version of the survey was available upon request. The City heard from 239 people through the survey, which measured the community's support for busking downtown, as well as specific types of busking locations, sound amplification at specific sites, strategies to enhance busking downtown

and the types of busking and related amenities buskers and the public would like to see, such as covered spaces with comfortable seating, accessible parking and food trucks nearby to create a dynamic downtown experience.

Engagement feedback from Phases 1 and 2 has informed draft recommendations to update the City's Street Vendor Bylaw. The next step in this process is to establish a new bylaw for street entertainment.

During Phase 3 of engagement (June 2025 to January 2026), staff will meet with the working group to update them on progress made to date and the proposed recommendations and continue to test additional busking approaches in summer 2025, such as emerging performer busking locations, amplified busking in designated locations and an online calendar for staff to book key sites.

The table below identifies levels of support for strategies that could help improve the busking experience downtown.

The top four strategies are:

- The return of the annual busking festival
- Having designated locations for licensed, pre-qualified buskers
- A calendar of performances online and onsite
- The ability to tip buskers electronically

Ranking	Strategies that Could Support Busking	Percentage
1	Annual busking festival	71%
2	Designated locations and times for licensed, pre-qualified (auditioned/juried) buskers	64%
3	Calendar of performances available online and onsite	59%
4	Ability to tip buskers electronically	57%
5	Designated locations and times for emerging/novice buskers	54%
5	Comfortable/accessible seating nearby	54%
5	Public washroom nearby	54%
6	Shade/rain cover for buskers and spectators	52%
7	Consequences for buskers who do not follow the program rules	51%
8	Bylaw officers ensure buskers follow program rules	50%
9	Food trucks nearby	49%
10	Designated locations and times for sound-amplified performances by licensed, pre-qualified (auditioned/juried) buskers	48%
11	Opportunities for buskers and community to collaborate and share ideas and challenges	45%
12	Accessible locations (e.g., near parking, cycling corridor, walking path, etc.)	44%
13	Professional development and/or mentorship opportunities for buskers	38%

Purpose

To update Council on the busking review and engagement results and seek authority to create a new bylaw for street entertainment.

Background

The City's Street Vendor Bylaw is currently administered through a simple licensing process that provides basic guidelines for buskers to follow. The fee is set low (\$25) to encourage registration and ensure accessibility. There were 444 licensed buskers in 2024 and 326 licensed in 2023, an increase of 36 per cent in the past year.

An extensive communications and engagement strategy was developed to help inform this project. Attached as Appendix A is the Busking in Victoria Engagement Summary.

To help inform this work, a 12-member stakeholder working group was created, comprised of seven licensed buskers, two downtown business owners and a representative from the Downtown Victoria Business Association, the Downtown Residents Association, and the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority. Their feedback alongside the City's best practice research and engagement with other cities, resulted in several ideas and objectives to be piloted during the 2024 summer season for public feedback. The objectives included:

- Improve the quality of busking performances in key locations.
- Select buskers to perform at "elevated" busking locations and second or third tier locations.
- Establish sites that support scheduled, high-quality performances.
- Amplification in specific areas or no amplification.
- Considerations: locations, infrastructure, booking and reserving sites by juried buskers.
- Encourage the development of talent and provide opportunities for performers of varying skill levels.
- Consider including buskers as an opportunity through the City's Call for Musician Roster.
- Ensure that the right administrative tools are in place for positive outcomes and minimal negative impacts for everyone.
- Update licensing fees and guidelines to ensure program runs smoothly and that guidelines are followed.

Jurisdictional Scan

Staff reviewed existing literature and conducted phone and online interviews with staff from various cities across Canada to better understand how busking is managed. There is a broad diversity of approaches from very informal and loose regulations to more stringent and formalized programs and approaches. Attached in Appendix D is a jurisdictional scan of busking programs across Canada, UK and Ireland on how cities manage their busking programs and applicable bylaws and policies.

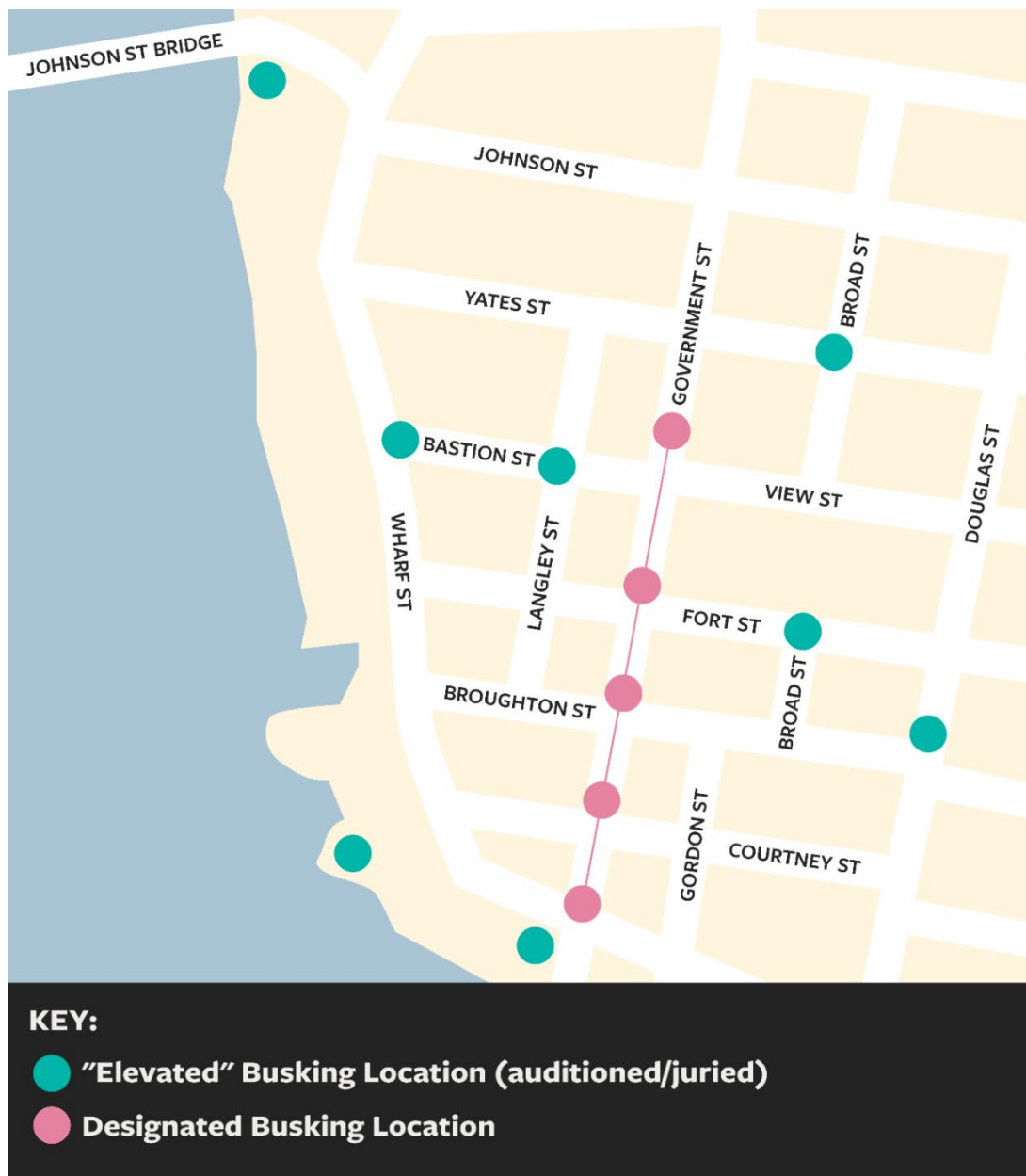
Pilot Phase

Building on input from the working group, best practice and engagement with other municipalities, the City piloted new busking locations downtown last summer and invited feedback through an online survey. Public input gathered through the survey (June 25-August 31, 2024), email correspondence and engagement with the project's stakeholder working group has informed recommendations for the City's new Street Entertainment Bylaw. The level of engagement was to consult.

Four hundred and fifteen licensed buskers were invited to audition over three days for an opportunity to be scheduled to perform at eight "elevated" locations downtown, enabling them to be paid \$50 per scheduled performance to complement their tips. Sixty-seven buskers participated in the audition process.

The eight "elevated" busking locations included the Upper Causeway near the Visitor Centre, Ship Point, two spots in Bastion Square (the plaza area near Wharf Street and the southwest corner of Langley and Bastion Streets), Johnson Street plaza, the northwest corner of Broad and Fort Streets and the northeast corners of both Broad and Yates Streets and Douglas and Broughton Streets.

Five designated locations along Government Street were piloted for spacing. Any licensed busker could perform at these locations for tips. The pilot ended on September 19, 2024.



Engagement Process

To date, the Busking in Victoria project has involved a two-phase engagement approach: 1) stakeholder working group engagement; and 2) the busking pilot for public feedback via an online/print survey.

Busking in Victoria pilot materials were creatively branded to drive participation in the survey and featured the OUR DWTN colours and wordmark.



All information materials linked to the City's Have Your Say online engagement platform at engage.victoria.ca, inviting people to take the survey.

Busking in Victoria



The City of Victoria is reviewing its Street Entertainment Bylaw to improve the busking experience downtown. The review is part of the City's OUR DWTN revitalization program's vision for a refreshed and improved downtown experience.

The City's OUR DWTN website page featured a link to the Have Your Say project page and information was noted on the City's homepage and events calendar.

A range of promotional tools were developed to drive survey participation, including a colourful printed handbill, poster, busking pavement decals, parking pay station advertising panels, display panels at City Hall and the Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre, in addition to a City Hall slide, stakeholder emails, digital newsletters, media release and social media campaign. Juried buskers were also issued branded lanyards.



(Above: Busking pavement decals.)

In addition, a busking showcase on Canada Day at Ship Point was held to inform buskers and the public about the pilot and the online survey.

ISSUES & ANALYSIS

There is agreement amongst respondents that the City needs to review and update the bylaw, create a more robust program to bring in more street entertainment into the core and step up enforcement for buskers not compliant with the bylaw.

Eighty-eight percent of survey respondents believe/strongly believe that busking enhances the vibrancy and cultural appearance of our downtown and support a busking program, with a desire to see more music, visual arts and dance performances.

The following section provides an analysis of what we heard through survey responses and email correspondence during the engagement phase of the pilot project.

Amplification

The most challenging aspect of the busking program is balancing the needs of downtown residents, businesses and the busking community regarding sound management, especially around amplification. Based on our engagement feedback, support is split on allowing amplification.

Some of the comments received from respondents include:

- Don't amplify as it makes it impossible for other buskers to perform nearby.
- Buskers with amplification are not being regulated.
- Don't ban amplification outright for all types of busking.
- Inability to use amplification is severely limiting for talented vocalists who do not want to harm their voices trying to project over traffic, wind, etc.
- Amplification needs to be considered based on the type of performance (e.g., vocalists or violinists versus a three-piece band with natural amplification due to their instruments). Needs to be based on decibel readings.
- Amplification at the Visitor Centre on Wharf Street impacts buskers performing on the Inner Harbour below.

- Only place to allow amplification should be at Ship Point and Lower Bastion Square.
- Controlled/regulated amplification would be beneficial to buskers and listeners.

Currently, the City's Noise Bylaw applies to all performances of a busker. Amplification of recorded or broadcast music, or any other means of increasing the volume of their performance at any time, is not allowed. The City is currently reviewing its Noise Bylaw, which is intended to align with the new Street Entertainment Bylaw.

Survey feedback on amplified sound is varied, with those who feel amplification should be banned (and be enforced), used only for vocals and "soft" instruments and/or for specific "elevated" locations. Some comment that amplification needs to be defined, monitored and measured in decibels, whether it is electronically amplified or created by the natural sounds of an instrument (e.g., saxophone, drums, trumpet, etc.).

In the survey, 52 per cent of respondents support/strongly support sound amplification at specific "elevated" busking locations featuring auditioned/juried buskers, 14 per cent are neutral, while 35 per cent don't support/strongly don't support.

1. **Recommendation:** Staff recommend a balanced approach where amplification is allowed at certain "elevated" locations such as Ship Point and Centennial Square and at certain times of day, with support from Bylaw officers to enforce the rules.

Hours and Duration

Currently, licensed buskers can perform between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m., Monday through Sunday but cannot busk in the same location for longer than two hours or after completion of that person's repertoire, whichever occurs first, and may not repeat the repertoire in the same location and timeframe.

There is strong support to enforce the existing bylaw and ensure time limits are adhered to at designated locations.

Location

Currently, buskers cannot move to a new location that is closer than the equivalent of two City blocks to a location that was used by that person for the purposes of performing the same day and cannot remain in that location for longer than two hours. Additionally, they must not obstruct pedestrian traffic or entryways into businesses nor perform closely to another busker and cannot excessively or unreasonably disturb another business to which the busker is adjacent.

Buskers currently cannot busk in a park, including Centennial Square, Bastion Square or at any special events permitted by the City. Several other conditions apply to bagpipers, chalk artists, acoustic bands and balloon artists, which are detailed under Appendix B (Street Entertainment Miscellaneous Amendments Bylaw 2012 (No. 12-030)).

During the pilot phase of the project, "elevated" busking locations were created to allow for juried, amplified busking performances to test how this concept could work. There was strong support to continue the eight "elevated" busking locations, however, there was a mix of feedback on the Government Street locations, with concerns about excessive noise and lack of enforcement. There were also concerns with some busking locations being too close to businesses and being disruptive (e.g., Bastion Square near Langley Street.) Overall, 86 per cent of survey respondents support

busking along Government Street and 80 per cent support/strongly support having designated busking locations on Government Street between Yates and Wharf Streets.

Fifty-one per cent think that the City should allow busking to take place anywhere along Government Street, while 30 per cent do not and 19 per cent are unsure.

Businesses would like to ensure busking locations do not block or impede customer access and that there be a limit on amplification during business hours. Residents also want the City to consider locating busking away from residences and hotels, for example at plaza areas where people can gather safely and not impede pedestrian flow or block entryways. Respondents suggest that designated busking zones be strategically located to minimize disruption and that there also be specific “no busking” zones.

Four “elevated” busking locations ranked highest for support include:

- Bastion Square (near Wharf Street)
- Ship Point
- Upper Causeway near the Visitor Centre
- Bastion Square (southwest corner of Broad and Fort Streets)

2. **Recommendation:** Develop a City-led busking program for buskers to audition for, and the City to schedule buskers at “elevated” busking locations where amplification, electronic tipping and a promotions campaign are established. As well, an engaging placemaking approach is considered to identify these “elevated” locations from busking locations in other areas of the downtown core.

Juried vs. Non-Juried

There is support for a juried process to elevate the talent and mitigate performances that are of poor quality and detract from residents’ and businesses’ experience of Victoria’s downtown. Respondents support a City-led auditioning process, which has now been in place through the piloting phase for the past two years. Businesses support juried licensed buskers to improve the quality of the performances.

3. **Recommendation:** Establish a juried busking program for “elevated” busking locations downtown. Other non-juried, open busking locations will continue in less prominent lower-traffic volume locations throughout the city.

Code of Conduct

Currently, there is no code of conduct for busking in Victoria. Within the jurisdictional scan, many cities had implemented a code of conduct as part of their licensing process. During engagement, licensed buskers commented that many unlicensed buskers are not following the rules, including taking a spot from licensed buskers, overstaying their location and acting aggressively and amplifying sound.

A code of conduct alongside enhanced enforcement of the bylaw are recommended. Several options could be considered to ensure buskers are complying with the rules, including a more robust licensing process with guidelines, information sessions, as well as training for parking ambassadors and bylaw officers to encourage compliance without the need for fines and revoking licences.

4. **Recommendation:** Create a code of conduct as part of the street entertainment licensing process. Improve the current information package for buskers and create information sessions to roll out the code of conduct and education on how to busk in Victoria and be successful.

Enforcement

Buskers must obtain a business licence and busker identification to perform in public spaces. A busker must display and show identification if asked by a Bylaw or Police officer. Failure to do so can result in fines of up to \$125.

Survey and email feedback note that current busking rules are not being followed and Bylaw Services staff need to monitor and enforce current and any future busking rules. Stronger enforcement of the rules, fining and revoking licences and more patrols are cited as needed by businesses and residents.

While many downtown residents and business owner/operators support busking, some express concern regarding some buskers lacking talent, staying longer than the two-hour limit, performing too loudly, repeating songs or being verbally and physically aggressive to passers-by. In addition, the 10 p.m. cut-off for busking is not being respected or enforced in downtown residential areas and some buskers block business entrances or take up too much space on the sidewalk.

Creating a feedback mechanism and opportunities for collaboration between buskers, downtown residents and businesses are suggested to improve the busking experience.

5. **Recommendation:** Consider an increase to fines as well as additional staff support to monitor busking in key areas of downtown (e.g., Government Street). This could be included within existing staff resources such as Parking Ambassadors or summer co-op student placements.

Staff Oversight and Programming

Currently, the Finance department's Licensing division and Bylaw Services administer and enforce this program.

Arts, Culture and Events staff saw an opportunity to provide more support and direction to busking on City property, informed by the vision and direction set out in the City's OUR DWTN revitalization program, the Victoria Music Strategy and the Create Victoria Arts and Culture Master Plan.

Alongside the need for more robust busker programming is the desire to simplify administrative processes for buskers to apply for a licence. Based on busker feedback, the fee structure would not be drastically increased, however, as the fee has not been adjusted in over a decade, a modest increase to cover administrative costs is recommended.

6. **Recommendation:** Review and improve the administrative process for busking. A simplified bylaw, guidelines and application process are to be included as part of the overall review of the busking program, as well as a better response process to enable staff to manage complaints and improve response times for service calls.

Busking Festival

Feedback from the survey indicates a desire to bring back an annual busking festival as well as more professional development opportunities to enhance and grow the busking community in Victoria. Data gathered during development of the Victoria Music Strategy, indicates a high percentage of musicians who live and work in our city.

Busking is a valuable entry point for many musicians, offering them a platform to showcase their talent and hone their craft. Expanding the City's Music Roster to include buskers is one way to support the pipeline of emerging talent and retain artists as it aligns with two Victoria Music Strategy actions:

- Action 16: "Increase music programming budget and the busker licensing program to expand music in publicly accessible places."
- Action 18: "Work with business and tourism partners to program music in retail, transit hubs and key attractions to showcase local talent."

On Canada Day 2024, the busking showcase at Ship Point was well received and featured an information booth for buskers and the public to learn more about the busking pilot and the online survey. The City will offer the Canada Day busking showcase again in 2025, with an opportunity to expand in future years.

7. **Recommendation:** Continue to offer an annual busking showcase on Canada Day. Facilitate discussions with community event organizers on the feasibility of a community-led busking festival.

Summary of Busking Recommendations

1. **Recommendation:** Staff recommend a balanced approach where amplification is allowed at certain "elevated" locations such as Ship Point and Centennial Square and at certain times of day, with support from Bylaw officers to enforce the rules.
2. **Recommendation:** Develop a City-led busking program for buskers to audition for, and the City to schedule buskers at "elevated" busking locations where amplification, electronic tipping and a promotions campaign are established. As well, an engaging placemaking approach is considered to identify these "elevated" locations from busking locations in other areas of the downtown core.
3. **Recommendation:** Establish a juried busking program for "elevated" busking locations downtown. Other non-juried open busking locations will continue in less prominent lower traffic volume locations throughout the city.
4. **Recommendation:** Create a code of conduct as part of the street entertainment licensing process. Improve the current information package for buskers and create information sessions to roll out the code of conduct and education on how to busk in Victoria and be successful.
5. **Recommendation:** Consider an increase to fines as well as additional staff support to monitor busking in key areas of downtown (e.g., Government Street). This could be included

within existing staff resources such as Parking Ambassadors or summer co-op student placements.

6. **Recommendation:** Review and improve the administrative process for busking. A simplified bylaw, guidelines and application process are to be included as part of the overall review of the busking program, as well as a better response process to enable staff to manage complaints and improve response times for service calls.
7. **Recommendation:** Continue to offer an annual busking showcase on Canada Day. Facilitate discussions with community event organizers on the feasibility of a community-led busking festival.

OPTIONS & IMPACTS

OPTION 1 (Recommended):

- i. Instruct the City Solicitor to prepare the necessary bylaw to replace and repeal the Street Vendor Bylaw 89-072 and amend related bylaws, if necessary, based on the recommendations outlined in the June 12 report; and
- ii. Approve staff recommendations to:
 - Develop a City-led busking program for buskers to audition for, and the City to schedule buskers at “elevated” busking locations where amplification, electronic tipping and a promotions campaign are established. As well, an engaging placemaking approach is considered to identify these “elevated” locations from busking locations in other areas of the downtown core.
 - Create a code of conduct as part of the Street Entertainment licensing process. Improve the current information package for buskers and create information sessions to roll out the code of conduct and education on how to busk in Victoria and be successful.
 - Review and improve the administrative process for busking: simplified guidelines and application process as well as a better response process to enable staff to manage complaints.
 - Continue to offer an annual busking showcase on Canada Day. Facilitate discussions with community event organizers on the feasibility of a community-led busking festival.

Updating and simplifying the bylaw, creating a program with clear guidelines and process, along with staff resources, will improve the experience for businesses, residents, buskers and staff in managing this program. The busking program could capitalize on the opportunities inherent to a robust street entertainment program in the capital city that attracts many visitors and tourists to our downtown.

OPTION 2:

- Do not direct staff to replace and repeal the Street Vendor Bylaw and related bylaws and continue with existing regulations.

Staff would continue with the status quo with the existing bylaws to regulate busking and manage with other options to improve the busking experience such as guidelines and policies outlined in this report without the supporting bylaws to manage this program.

Accessibility Impact Statement

2023 – 2026 Strategic Plan

- Support arts programming, including public programming, live music and public art.
- Support and simplify processes for creating murals, events festivals and experiential activities.
- Activate streets, sidewalks, patios and public spaces and support business initiatives and ideas.
- Beautify, support and enhance Victoria's downtown and urban villages.

Impacts to Financial Plan

No impacts to the Financial Plan.

Official Community Plan Consistency Statement

16. A. Victoria is a place where artists can thrive and where people from all walks of life enjoy formal and informal opportunities to create and enjoy the arts, culture, and entertainment activities.

14. F. That the function of the Urban Core as the primary regional centre of employment, learning, arts, culture, entertainment, recreation and specialty retail is maintained and enhanced with high quality facilities, services and events.

14.43.3 Advancing strategies for arts, culture, and entertainment as identified in the City's cultural plans, policies and initiatives and local area plans

CONCLUSIONS

Improving the busking experience for businesses, residents and the busking community could have profound positive benefits for downtown. As a global destination, showcasing our local talent and cultural richness would provide a unique and unforgettable experience for people visiting downtown. Investing staff time and resources in this initiative is a valuable way to enhance Victoria's cultural and economic vibrancy.

Victoria has all the ingredients to become a world-class destination for street entertainment. While balancing the needs of residents, businesses and buskers may present challenges, through improved guidelines, enforcement and stronger administrative support, the City's busking program has the potential to be a major draw for people to visit Victoria's downtown.

Respectfully submitted,

Nichola Reddington
Manager, Arts, Culture and Events

Kerri Moore
Director Business and Community Relations

Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager

List of Attachments (if relevant)

Appendix A: Busking in Victoria Survey Report
Appendix B: Busking in Victoria Engagement Summary
Appendix C: Street Entertainment Miscellaneous Amendments Bylaw 2012 (No. 12-030)
Appendix D: Street Vendor Bylaw
Appendix E: Street Entertainer: Business Licence Application
Appendix F: Busking Jurisdictional Scan