

Stratford Arts & Culture Collective



**Planning Study for the SACC Respecting
the Grand Trunk Renewal Project**

March 2025

TCI Management Consultants

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Executive Summary

Shaping the Future of Stratford’s Local Arts and Culture Ecology

The Stratford Arts and Culture Collective (SACC) is a not-for-profit corporation dedicated to advancing affordable community-oriented arts and culture in Stratford. Supported by 24 local arts organizations and numerous individual artists, the SACC envisions a flexible, state-of-the-art space for theatre, music, dance, visual arts, literature, media, and more, for the local community. In late 2024, the SACC engaged TCI Management Consultants to assess the demand for such a facility, gauge financial feasibility, and outline the necessary steps to bring this vision to life.

This study coincides with Stratford City Council’s renewed commitment to redeveloping the Grand Trunk site. The City has directed the Ad-Hoc Grand Trunk Renewal Committee (AHGTRC) to explore options for this 18-acre community space, with the Stratford Public Library and the YMCA of Three Rivers expressing strong interest in being part of the revitalization. This collaboration presents a unique and timely opportunity for integrating a community performing arts facility into the redevelopment plan.

Study Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the critical role that an affordable, state-of-the-art performing arts venue for local use will play in the evolving cultural landscape of Stratford. The research demonstrates both strong demand and willingness from community groups to actively use and financially support such a facility. The Grand Trunk Renewal project presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to integrate this much-needed performance space into a shared community hub alongside the Stratford Public Library and the YMCA of Three Rivers.

The recent unanimous endorsement by Stratford City Council to explore a “shared community facility” signals a pivotal moment for the SACC. This directive provides the SACC with a clear and immediate mandate: to actively engage with municipal staff and key stakeholders, as well as its current and future members, to ensure that the community performing arts component remains a cornerstone of the Grand Trunk site’s redevelopment.

Strategic Recommendations for Moving Forward

On February 24, 2025, Stratford City Council unanimously endorsed the pursuit of a ‘shared community facility’ model, signaling its intention to play a leadership role in the Grand Trunk site redevelopment. To ensure the inclusion of a performing arts space as a key element of this vision, the SACC must take decisive action in the following areas:

1. Championing the Performing Arts Space as Essential

- Advocate for a dedicated community performance space within the Grand Trunk development, emphasizing its synergies with other cultural and recreational activities.
- Establish that the venue must have a capacity of 400-500 seats to maximize flexibility and accommodate diverse programming.
- Prioritize community organizations as the primary users, with commercial bookings structured to generate revenue that supports community access.
- Ensure state-of-the-art acoustics and technical infrastructure that align with Stratford’s reputation as a premier arts destination.

2. Strengthening Collaboration with Key Partners

- Establish a formal working relationship with the AHGTRC, ensuring the SACC remains actively engaged with the City, YMCA of Three Rivers, and Stratford Public Library.
- Participate in ongoing planning and decision-making to align the facility’s development with community needs.

3. Maintaining a Strong, Representative Voice for the Arts

- Continuously monitor and represent the evolving performing arts landscape in Stratford, recognizing new and emerging arts organizations.
- Advocate persistently for community-led arts initiatives, ensuring that local voices drive the project’s vision and execution.

A Call to Action

Stratford stands at a pivotal moment in its cultural development. A dedicated performing arts venue within the Grand Trunk site is not just an opportunity—it is a necessity for the city’s thriving community artistic ecosystem. The momentum behind the renewal project must be leveraged to secure a space that fosters creativity, accessibility, and artistic excellence for generations to come.

The SACC must now take bold steps to ensure this vision becomes a reality. By continuing to engage with municipal leaders, cultural partners, and the broader arts community, the SACC can play an instrumental role in shaping a facility that serves Stratford’s artists and audiences. The time to act is now—to transform this vision into a defining achievement for Stratford’s future.

1. Introduction and Context

1.1. Brief History of Efforts to Date

The vision of the Stratford Arts and Cultural Collective (SACC) is:

“Our dream is a flexible, state-of-the-art space for theatre, music, dance, visual arts, media, literature and more, led by Stratford and area artists in forms that are both traditional and non-traditional.”

The Stratford Arts and Culture Collective (SACC) is a not-for-profit corporation governed by a volunteer Board of Directors. The SACC is supported by 24 amateur, semi-professional and professional groups in all arts disciplines, plus numerous individual artists. Its goal is to create an affordable multiuse performing arts space for Stratford residents. While Stratford is known internationally for its annual Stratford Festival, its theatres are generally fully booked or are too costly for community arts organizations to afford. As a result, there is a shortage of quality, suitable spaces for many community organizations and artists to perform and to achieve their artistic visions. The SACC was established in 2016 to address the need for a mixed-use performing arts space.

The 2019 Project: TCI Management Consultants was engaged by the SACC in 2019 to conduct a feasibility study that would examine the degree of support in the community for the project and to provide decision makers with information to accept or reject the proposed creation of an Arts and Culture Centre in Stratford. That study contacted 30 arts and cultural organizations, all of whom expressed support for a community-serving performing arts facility. Most of the broader community surveyed also supported the need for such a facility. At that time, the two main sites examined included the Grand Trunk site which was perceived to be a long-term prospect and the Knox Presbyterian Church. TCI presented a financial analysis that showed a modest subsidy from the City would be required to make the performing arts centre feasible.

The 2022 Project: In 2022, TCI was asked to help the SACC assess the viability of working out a ‘Copperlight’ partnership agreement with BMI Inc., the owners of Knox Presbyterian Church in downtown Stratford, who had previously acquired the church as a development project. The concept proposed was to use the former sanctuary space as a venue for local theatre and performance-based individuals and organizations. TCI was asked to develop a Business Plan for the potential operation. In undertaking this work, the draft lease agreement was reviewed; a survey of 20 potential user organizations and individuals was undertaken; a financial model was developed; and various scenarios analyzed. In the end, ~~the~~ two basic scenarios were examined. The first was an ‘Anchor Tenant’ scenario where the SACC committed to leasing the space on a non-exclusive basis for a certain period of the year and in turn rented it out to local member organizations for their productions. Under this scenario, BMI also rented the non-exclusive space to other users for the remaining portion of the year and collected its rent directly from those users. A second ‘Broker’ scenario was developed where the SACC did not lease the space directly but rather acted as a broker between BMI and local performing arts organizations: coordinating productions, making required arrangements for the use of the space, and taking a commission from BMI’s rental of the space for its services, ~~but~~ while allowing BMI to handle financial

transactions directly with users. A fundamental conclusion from this analysis was that **neither** the 'Anchor Tenant' **nor** the 'Broker' scenario as outlined was a sustainable model for the SACC in the absence of external funding. Such support would need to have come from either the City from fundraising activities such as an annual fundraising campaign, or from regular assistance from a philanthropist or corporate supporter. Due to these impediments, the partnership arrangements at Copperlight did not materialize.

The Current Project: In 2023, Stratford City Council signalled its interest in more formally redeveloping the Grand Trunk site by establishing the Ad-Hoc Grand Trunk Renewal Committee to provide support and a forum for input and exchange of ideas on the renewal of the Grand Trunk building, as well as to advise Council on the execution of the Grand Trunk Master Plan and the redevelopment of the site. The Official Plan includes a variety of possible land uses, including performing arts, as well as recreation and institutional spaces. Coincidentally, a new YMCA is being planned on the same site. In addition, the Stratford Public Library is also interested in relocating to the Grand Trunk site. A multiuse performing arts space that could be shared with other groups, including the YMCA, the Stratford Public Library and others is an exciting opportunity which led to the current project.

In the summer of 2024, TCI Management Consultants was retained by the SACC to assist in determining how it could best serve the needs of performing arts groups and artists at the Grand Trunk site. This study will determine the extent to which such a facility would meet the current and future needs of the existing arts and culture organizations in the community.

1.2. Key Questions to be Addressed

TCI was engaged to assist the SACC in determining the performing arts design and functional attributes that would best serve the needs of performing arts groups and artists at the Grand Trunk site. Key questions to be addressed included:

1. What impacts will a multi-use performance space have upon the City of Stratford and area?
2. What is the optimal model for partnerships, governance and operation?
3. What are the critical factors underlying success and sustainability in the longer term?

To answer these questions, we proposed the following work elements to be addressed:

- A) **Assessment of Optimal Theatre Size and Utilization.** This component of the project is to determine on behalf of the SACC supporters, what sorts of operating parameters would be ideal for a performing arts theatre operation which in turn would be part of the overall Grand Trunk development. This assessment would probe:
 - *overall size of the facility in terms of physical footprint and facilities (e.g., number of seats, size of stage, primary and secondary space, etc.)*
 - *additional / related facilities or requirements (essential or desired)*
 - *anticipated frequency of use of the theatre facility*
 - *assessment of user groups' ability to pay, and high-level forecast of gross revenues generated*
- B) **Identify Strategic Role of the SACC.** A second and related component of the work is to articulate the strategic role of the SACC within the overall Grand Trunk development; specifically, its

function in liaising with arts and culture organizations and acting as the representative of these groups in terms of:

- *determining the exact status of a ‘supporter’ of the SACC, as well as the privileges and obligations of this status*
- *coordinating schedules between the SACC supporters and other users of performance facilities*
- *financial arrangements between the SACC supporters and the YMCA, the Stratford Public Library or other governing body of the theatre operation*
- *advising management of the Grand Trunk complex overall on an ongoing basis of the wishes and concerns of the SACC adherents*

C) **The SACC Operating Plan.** The third component of the scope of work envisaged is a detailed operating plan for the SACC, within the context of the first two phases of work as outlined above. Key tasks include:

- *an outline of an operating plan for the SACC including activities, roles and responsibilities; staffing requirements; governance structure; operating agreement with other partners in the performing arts facility (as well as the Grand Trunk development overall)*
- *financial projections for the SACC examining operating costs and revenues over the first 5 years of its operation once the Grand Trunk facility opens*
- *a workshop session with the Board to discuss the implications of the findings*

1.3. What We Did

The TCI team worked closely with the SACC Board Member, Chris Charlesworth, to help inform members and other stakeholders of the study and to take part in the stakeholder interviews.

Key tasks associated with each of the phases included:

Component of the Work	Specific Activities Undertaken and Proposed:
A. Assessment of Optimal Theatre Size and Utilization	• met with stakeholders to obtain complete context of the Grand Trunk initiative (City, YMCA, potential funders, etc.) • connected with all existing SACC supporters through a community survey of 17 interested performing arts and cultural organizations to identify essential and desirable elements of a performing arts / flex space • conducted interviews and surveys with approximately 15 stakeholder groups including the YMCA and Stratford Public Library and the City’s reps in the Community Services Department • canvassed non-SACC supporters to determine interest and willingness to participate in a theatre operation in the Grand Trunk Renewal project, and interest in the SACC initiative • determined the willingness of groups to pay for space that meets desired characteristics • determined utilization (frequency and capacity) from all the SACC supporters • determine overall feasibility of initiative from the SACC’s perspective

B. Identify Strategic Role of the SACC	• canvassed the SACC supporters regarding strategic priorities of their organizations, as well as thoughts regarding strategic role for the SACC • identified risks (and mitigation strategies) and rewards (and upside benefits) of the SACC's potential strategic roles in the development • convened workshop session with the SACC Board to discuss foundational elements of strategy: vision; mission; goals, strategies and actions; targets and milestones • prepared this strategy plan document for publication and distribution (hard copy and website)
C. SACC Operating Plan (proposed)	Was to include: • identification of operating considerations for the SACC within the contest of its strategic role as identified above • determination of staffing and other implications of the operating model developed • comment on governance implications of operating model within the framework of the overall Grand Trunk development • development of a financial model to explore alternative scenarios regarding costs and revenues • conduct a workshop session with Board and possibly others (<i>to be determined</i>) • prepare draft and final reports

1.4. Caveats and Limitations to the Analysis

The original proposal to the SACC for this work was that it would consist of essentially two components: the first, a high-level review of the demand for and utilization of a community-oriented performing arts facility, and the second, the development of a more detailed operating plan (Section C in the previous chart) showing the anticipated economic performance of the facility. This work was to be partially funded through a Trillium grant. However, this grant was not forthcoming and so the full project as initially conceived was not able to proceed. Through discussions between the SACC and TCI, it was determined that the first phase of this work still had value (components A and B in the previous chart) and should proceed at a reduced budget level. This report reflects the results of those efforts.

One other caveat should be highlighted. While potential user groups were asked what sorts of parameters they would find ideal for the performing arts facility, and some provided specifications to that effect, the actual design of a facility will of course not take place until some point in the future. At that time, when other potential users of the facility (organizations that may not exist yet) and other partners such as the YMCA and the Stratford Public Library are consulted, the detailed design work will take place. A Theatre Architect should be engaged to provide architectural and technical input into the overall plan for the Grand Trunk site's performing arts space.

2. Key Findings and Implications

2.1. Findings from Survey of Potential User Groups

Respondents to the survey and/or interviews included the following 15 individuals and organizations:

Infinity Dance Inc.	Provocation Ideas Festival
Kiwanis Festival of the Performing Arts	SpringWorks Festival (Hermoine Presents)
Music and Opera Appreciation Inc.	Stratford Concert Choir
Off the Wall Stratford Artists Alliance	Stratford Festival of Canada
Onrush Music Festival	Stratford Symphony Orchestra
On Stage Dance Studio	The Bunker Entertainment Inc.
Perth County Players	Kelly Walker, independent artist
Poetry Stratford	Bob Phillips, independent artist

The survey of organizations of potentially interested user groups revealed that there were eight organizations who expressed significant interest in using a facility several times per year¹. These groups were:

- 1) Infinity Dance Inc.
- 2) Music and Opera Appreciation Inc.
- 3) Perth County Players
- 4) Poetry Stratford
- 5) On Stage Dance Studio
- 6) Onrush Music Festival
- 7) Stratford Concert Choir
- 8) Stratford Symphony Orchestra

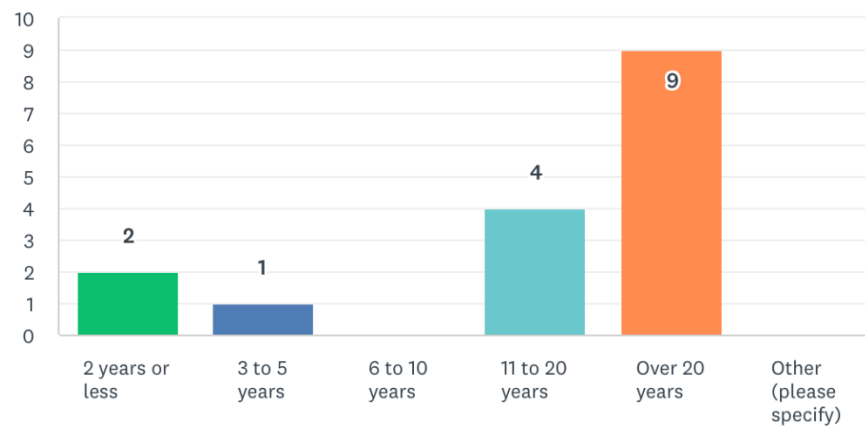
Key characteristics of all the user groups responding to the organization survey were as follows:

1. **New organizations are constantly forming.** As the chart below indicates, new arts organizations are continually being formed. While most respondents to the survey indicated that they had been around for 20 years or more, since the last survey of arts groups in 2022 (as previously described) **three** new arts organizations have been formed in the community: The Bunker Entertainment, Onrush Music Festival and Provocation Ideas Festival.

¹ For confidentiality reasons, the specific amounts from each group are not identified in this report; this information has been passed along to the SACC under separate cover.

How long has your organization been in existence?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 1



(This is important as one of the roles of the SACC as subsequently described will be to monitor the evolution of the performing arts scene in Stratford and to ensure that any new facility developed responds to the needs of all arts groups.)

- **The audience base is highly local.** In total, from 10 user-groups in aggregate, 78% of the audience is from the City of Stratford and 14% from elsewhere in Perth County. 6% are from Kitchener-Waterloo and London, and only 1% from Toronto.
- **Most responding groups anticipate slow growth in their audience base over the next decade.** Seven of eleven responding groups (about 64%) expect their audience base to grow between 1 and 5 percent per year. Two groups report audience growth of greater than 5% per year. One group expected stability in their audience base and one reported that the size of their audience base was 'volatile'.
- **Most responding groups report that there is a need for affordable community performance space.** Seven of eleven responding groups (about 64%) state that their organization needs this kind of space.

- **Accessibility, parking and seating were the major physical requirements of a new facility.** The physical requirements of this new performance space according to potential user groups, are as follows:

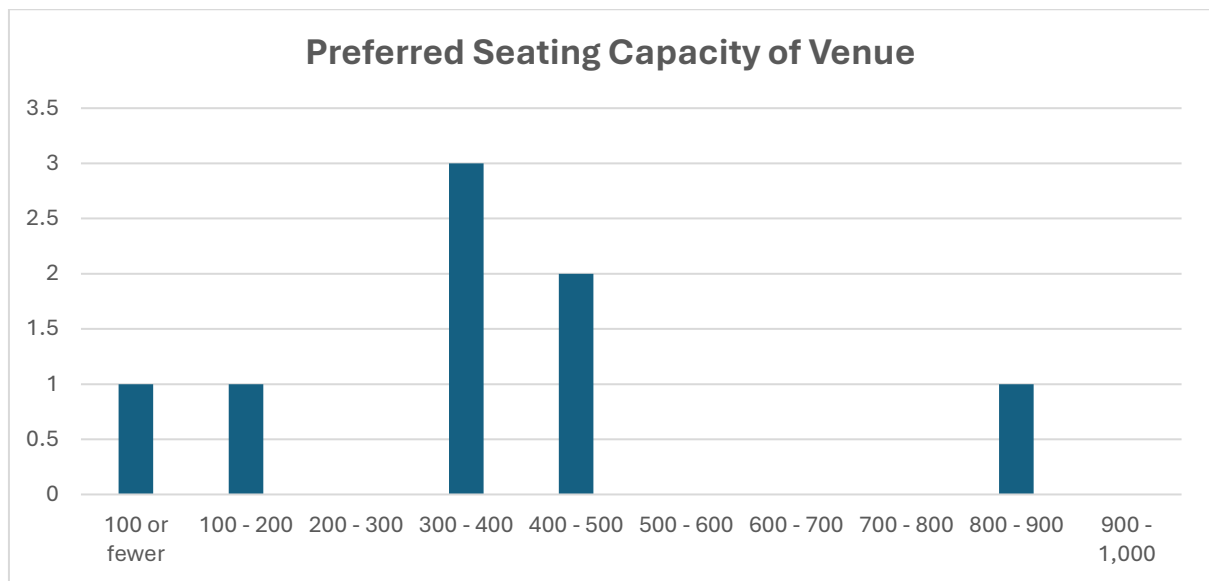
Requirement of the Space	Number of Respondents Mentioning This:
AODA (Accessibility (OADA compliant)	6
Adequate parking	6
Adequate / sufficient seating	4
Sufficient stage space	3
Good acoustics	3
Controllable temperature & humidity	3
Good transit access	3
Ticketing facilities	3
Gift shop / retail space	2

(It is assumed that other operational requirements of the space, such as affordability, security, insurance, etc.) will be in place.

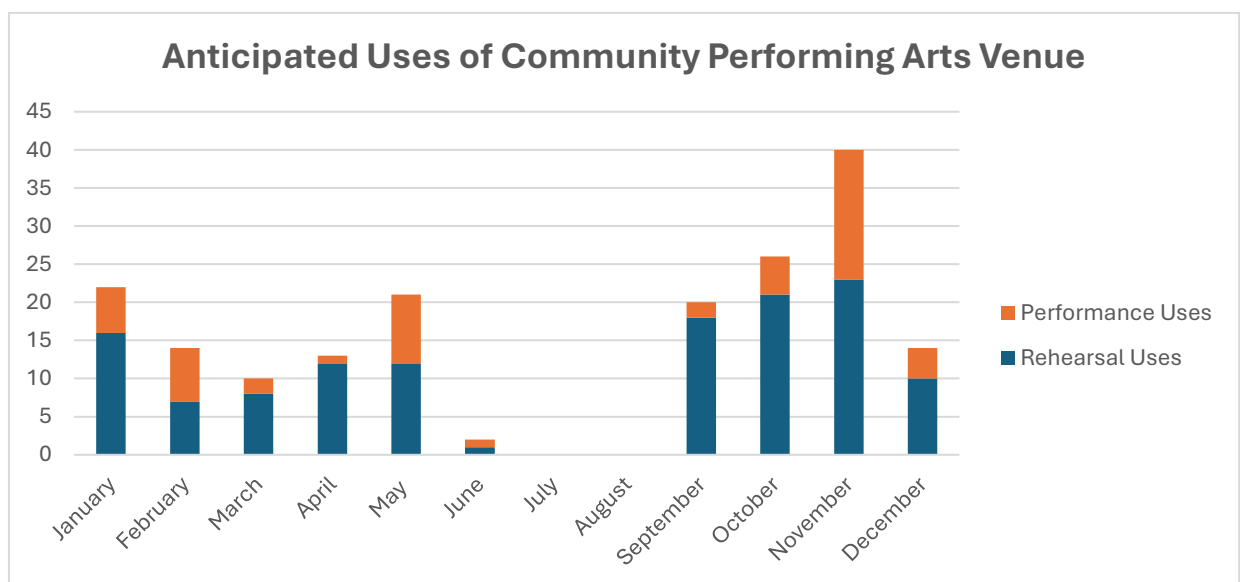
- **In terms of the type of space required, performance and rehearsal space are the major needs.** Of the organizations expressing interest, most desired having access to performance space in the new facility, followed by rehearsal and storage space:

Type of Space	Number of organizations expressing interest in having access to this type of space
Performance Space	10
Rehearsal Space	7
Storage Space	6
Office & Administrative Space	4
Studio / Workshop / Fabrication / Classroom Space	2
Display / Exhibition Space	1

- **Some need for storage space was identified.** Storage space is an issue that will need to be dealt with in the design stage for the community performing arts facility. Unlike performance and rehearsal space, storage space needs to be dedicated to the particular user group and cannot be easily shared (i.e. stored materials will need to be in place 100% of the time except when being used). The same situation likely applies to office and administrative space, which would be needed by some groups.
- **A wide variation in the preferred seating capacity of venue was noted.** Eight groups responded to a question about their preference for the size of a performing arts venue in terms of seating capacity, with a range from 50 to 850 seats. The chart below shows the number of groups responding to each size category:



- The survey revealed strong willingness to use a new community-oriented performance space.** Organizations were asked about their willingness to use a new space at the Grand Trunk location, assuming that it met all their needs as stated above and was affordable. Of 10 organizations responding, fully half (5 organizations) indicated that they would be willing to relocate all their operations (rehearsal and performance) to the new location; 4 indicated that they would likely use the facility regularly but continue to utilize other venues in the Stratford area as well; and one indicated that they had ‘no idea at this time’.
- Relatively heavy use of the facility would be expected in the Fall season with little to no use in the summer (at this time).** The groups also indicated their probable use of the facility in a typical year, in terms of rehearsals and performances, by month, shown in the chart below. As this chart of their collective use shows, the ‘peak season’ tends to be in the Fall, with November being by far the most popular month.



In total, the potential extent of use on the part of these groups was 182 uses of the facility per year, of which 128 (70%) were rehearsal uses, and 54 performance uses.

- **A significant contribution to operating cost of the facility could be expected by user groups.** In total, these groups would be able to pay on the order of \$74,000 annually towards the use of the facility. (The bulk of this amount would be from five user-groups.)

2.2. Findings from Interviews and Surveys of Interested Parties

In addition to the performing arts organizations surveyed, several individuals were interviewed as well. These 'interested parties' were not necessarily interested in using a performing arts facility for their own purposes, but in many cases were responding for the 'good of the community'. They were:

- Emily Robson, Corporate Initiatives Lead, City of Stratford
- Dan Mathieson, Grand Trunk Renewal Committee Chair
- Geoff Williams, Former SACC Board member
- Megan Smith-Harris, Stratford Film Festival, SACC support organization
- Aye Lighthouse Productions, SACC support organization
- Playmakers Theatre School, SACC support organization

In general, these respondents were strongly or 'somewhat' supportive of a multi-use performance space at the Grand Trunk site. While mostly were 'extremely familiar' or 'very familiar' with the SACC, three responded that they were only 'somewhat familiar' with the organization. Given that the respondents to the interested party's surveys and interviews are those that presumably have a greater-than-average interest in the performing arts, this speaks to some need on the part of the SACC for perhaps greater promotion and networking efforts².

In general, the notion of a shared facility with the YMCA of Three Rivers and the Stratford Public Library was supported. Three key benefits were seen:

- 1) there is a sense that the overall capital cost of the development would necessitate additional partners beyond just the City;
- 2) the participation of additional partners would ensure higher levels of utilization and performance; and
- 3) recognizing the contribution of the arts to overall mental health and well-being, the integration of physical, health and cultural activities was seen to be a benefit to the community (note that this does not necessarily mean in terms of the direct use of a community theatre or auditorium, but rather the participation of health-related and cultural-related organizations in a common community venture was seen to be a positive message of the importance of integration of these spheres of life).

In terms of possible conflicts between these partners, some potential issues were identified. These included some perception that the key players may appeal to different demographic groups (i.e. the YMCA of Three Rivers appealing more to younger singles and the Library more to families and older

² It is recognized that this will require a greater level of resources: see Section 3 of this report.

individuals³) and so there may not be much synergy, and the idea that if there were scheduling conflicts, the lead agency (whether the YMCA of Three Rivers, the Stratford Public Library, or the City) would take priority over other partners. Neither of these issues were seen as ‘dealbreakers’ but rather as issues that would perhaps need to be mediated between the partners’ organizations (e.g., through an MOU).

While most saw the location as very positive in terms of visibility and centrality, as well as the opportunity to develop what is currently a blighted and dangerous site into positive community use, there were some concerns raised about parking requirements and the location of a cultural asset near an active rail line (concerns about noise and vibration). These are presumably elements that can be dealt with in the design phase.

Interested parties were asked to identify what they saw as hurdles to the development of the overall Grand Trunk site – while funding (capital and operating) was seen as the major hurdle, other potential difficulties were raised as well – site supervision, security, adequate parking and ensuring that all parties to an agreement hold up to their ends of the bargain. Aside from the funding issues, these are all operational details that can be worked out as the project proceeds.

In terms of the overall management and governance of the GTR facility, of six respondents, four felt that a shared facility model would be best while two felt that a single organization should be in charge. (Note that the ‘shared facility’ model was endorsed by Stratford City Council on February 24, 2025 – see Section 3 of this report).

2.3. Interviews with Potential Key Partners (Library, YMCA, City)

TCI conducted Zoom meetings with the CEO and Chair of the Stratford Public Library as well as the Operations Manager of Health and Wellness of the YMCA of Three Rivers - Stratford regarding each organization’s initial thoughts and plans for expansion and potential partnership arrangements in the Grand Trunk site development. Also, City of Stratford representatives were consulted. The following summarizes some perspectives shared by each organization.

2.3.1. Stratford Public Library

The Stratford Public Library has recently conducted studies to examine its space requirements. The 2022 *Space Needs Study* by Lemay⁴ concluded that the SPL requires a library facility of 34,000 square feet to meet the needs of its current population. Its current facility of 12,472 square feet is undersized by 21,528 square feet. The study reviewed a number of development options to address its existing and future needs.

In September 2024, SPL authored its own report, *Stratford Library and the Grand Trunk Renewal Site: New Library Proposal*⁵ articulating again based on the Lemay study, its need for 34,000 square feet to meet current needs and 44,000 square feet to meet the community’s needs in 20 years’ time. This report outlines the Library’s preferred vision of relocating to the Grand Trunk site. The fundamental conclusion of the report was that, in partnership with the YMCA of Three Rivers and the City of

³ There is no empirical data to support this, and the perception is very likely not true. However, it does appear to exist as a perception.

⁴ <https://splibrary.ca/sites/default/files/libraryboard/splspaceneedsweb.pdf>

⁵ <https://splibrary.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/gtrandsplweb.pdf>

Stratford, this presents the best opportunity to define and enhance the Grand Trunk site as a true community resource for Stratford residents.

A library at the Grand Trunk site has significant potential. By being located alongside the YMCA of Three Rivers, there are opportunities to share space and services, in turn reducing individual footprints and operational costs.

This report also outlined SPL's space requirements together with a shared space model as outlined below:

At the Grand Trunk site, collocating alongside the YMCA and other potential partners, there are opportunities for shared facilities such as a lobby, café, meeting rooms, and washroom facilities. While a new standalone library would require upwards of 52,100 gross sq. ft., sharing such facilities reduces the anticipated library space need to approximately 40,900 gross sq. ft.

The table following from this report shows SPL's vision of its own and shared space requirements at the Grand Trunk site.

	Library Needs	Shared Space
Collections	10,035	
Core program space	2,100	
Visitor Seating	5,920	
Staff Spaces	3,380	
Logistical Spaces	2,800	200
IT & Building Infrastructure	650	1,600
Innovation Space	2,050	
Community Rooms	1,150	2,870
Retail / Café	500	1,600
Circulation Space – 30%	8,576	1,881
Total Square Feet	37,161	8,151

With 2,100 feet of programming space, the library is likely to keep this space as multipurpose and as flexible as possible, having the ability to add chairs and tables as needed and being able to store these elsewhere when the space is required to be open.

This would not be sufficiently large for several of the SACC members' ideal space requirements, nor would it possibly have the technical features required to support certain performing arts productions.

It should be noted that some larger public libraries in Canada have performing arts spaces with raked seating, including London, Halifax, Calgary and Toronto reference library.

Some perspectives shared by SPL in these discussions included:

- SPL confirmed that moving to the Grand Trunk site is its preferred future vision for expansion – the current library site is not feasible for expansion
- SPL emphasized the importance of community engagement and partnerships in the success of the overall initiative
- The library primarily has a need for its own dedicated programming space rather than occasional use of a larger space – although it would occasionally use a larger space a few times a year
- A new library at Grand Trunk could include an art gallery space
- A larger library facility will significantly reduce operating costs and increase community access

- There is a growing demand for affordable event spaces from community and cultural organizations
- SPL discussed the possibility of the library managing bookings for shared spaces with the City likely managing community venues
- The library as well as arts and cultural organizations are important contributors to the community's growth and development contributing to economic impact and labour force retention
- The public library in Tilburg, Netherlands is a conversion from a former locomotive hangar and represents a possible model for SPL

2.3.2. YMCA of Three Rivers

The following are some comments shared in TCI's interview with the respondent from the Stratford YMCA which is also seeking to expand its facility.

- The YMCA is open to partnering with various organizations to allow its planned expansion to take place
- The YMCA's existing building, constructed in 1967, needs significant renovation or replacement and additional space. The YMCA's pool and deck areas are in poor condition.
- The YMCA has an MOU with the City to explore the Grand Trunk project. The Stratford YMCA has presented initial ideas to the Grand Trunk Committee and is looking potentially at a new facility of between 50,000 to 75,000 square feet
- The Calgary YMCA has a very strong arts orientation and offers programs in visual arts, drama, choir and dance programs for everyone, from preschoolers to seniors, thus offering a potential model for the Stratford Y.
- The Calgary YMCA has two theatres, the Brookfield Residential YMCA at Seton seating approximately 170 people and the Shane Homes YMCA at Rocky Ridge which seats 250 people.
- The Calgary Library has the Patricia A. Whelan Performance Hall which has fixed seating for 330 people in a 2,400 square foot space.
- The YMCA's current budget is around \$80 million. The YMCA's partnership agreements have varied in different YMCAs in Canada. This may depend on the size of the city and the ownership of the facilities. Usually, the Y operates facilities and the municipality may contribute to the capital costs.
- The YMCA confirmed its aspiration to continue discussions with potential community partners including the SACC as it formalizes its facility plans over the next few years.

2.3.3. City of Stratford

A meeting was held as well with City of Stratford representatives Tim Wolfe (Director of Community Services), Darcy Drummond (Manager of Recreation and Marketing) and Alana Bowes (Culture, Sport and Sponsorship Coordinator). This meeting was held just prior to a Council meeting (February 24, 2025) when it was not precisely clear what Council's direction to staff would be in terms of carrying the GTR project further. Nevertheless, there was broad agreement that a performance space of this type would be an asset to the community, and that the Grand Trunk site would be a central and logical place for its location.

While it was clear in the meeting that any further assessment of the merits of the project would be dependent on the Council decision regarding if and how to proceed, there was general agreement on the following points:

- the City lacks the funds required to embrace the whole project by itself; it will need other partners to come on board to assist in realizing the entire vision;
- these other ‘capital partners’ would be the YMCA of Three Rivers, the Stratford Public Library, and very possibly the private sector;
- the likely timeframe for the development will be 3 to 5 years for the planning process to unfold, with something on the order of 10 years to full completion;
- the operational plan for management of the entire complex has yet to be determined, although it is probable that the City would play a defining role; and
- as the project progresses, it will be imperative to ensure that community need (at the future point in time when the facility is opened) is understood and articulated.

It was concluded at the end of the session that the SACC should continue to monitor the situation closely and shape its involvement as appropriate after Council indicates its preferred direction at the upcoming Council session (which is done in Section 3 of this Report).

2.4. Key Implications of Findings: Scenarios and Potential Outcomes

The surveys of potential user organizations and ‘interested parties’ revealed considerable interest in having an accessible and affordable community performing arts venue. While unsurprisingly, potential user groups were unable to specify with any precision at this point the exact parameters of their involvement in terms of frequency of use or ability to pay, the analysis does show that there is a significant degree of interest in such a facility.

As noted earlier, while there has been a consistent degree of interest in a community facility since at least 2016 (when the first investigation into this matter was undertaken by the SACC), there has been some change in the number and identity of potential user groups since then. Looking forward, it is expected that there may be further changes in the number, composition, and types of potential user groups, especially considering that the Grand Trunk development may be 5 to 10 years or more from being fully operational. Despite some potential change in the number and types of users, there will continue to be a pressing need for an affordable community venue.

3. Next Steps

3.1. Recommended Next Steps for the SACC

At the Stratford City Council meeting of February 24, 2025, municipal staff were given a directive (through a unanimous vote of Council) to pursue the ‘shared community facility’ option, which involves the municipality playing a leadership role along with leaders of partnership organizations in the design, development, operations and programming of the facility. There were five parts to the recommendation that Council approved. These are outlined in the table below, along with the potential role that the SACC might play to further progress on each.

Component of Direction Given to Staff	Potential Role that the SACC Might Play
Directive 1: Council direct staff to conduct background research on temporary and interim uses for the Grand Trunk site, including associated next steps and cost estimates, and report these findings back to Council for consideration;	A key aspect in the background discussion to this recommendation was the need to ‘animate’ the site, in order to familiarize the public with the property and instill the idea that this is the future location of the performance space or community auditorium. Small-scale concerts and events would be one way to do this, and the SACC could work with its member organizations and the ad hoc coordinating committee to brainstorm ways of doing this and develop and deliver these types of events. This would not only achieve the objective of animating the site but would also generate positive publicity for the SACC member organizations as well.
Directive 2: Council direct staff to pursue the shared community facility option as outlined in this report, which includes investment from the City in addition to funding from external sources and operational partners;	The SACC should maintain an updated list of its members who are interested in using a community auditorium component of the facility, along with an indication of the extent of their use and their willingness and ability to pay (i.e., updating the information contained in this report and providing it to the ad hoc coordinating committee on a periodic basis) – this could be a critical part of the overall planning process, recognizing that the development of the site generally, and a community auditorium in particular, is likely some years off.
Directive 3: Council direct staff to proceed with the exploration of the design, development, and operations of a shared community facility, and report back with a detailed plan outlining the project scope, a range of potential costs, and funding options for Council's consideration;	The SACC could facilitate and coordinate the provision of information on utilization and space requirements of the potential user organizations as a key input to the planning process and work closely with the YMCA of Three Rivers and Stratford Public Library in determining responsibilities for planning and programming of a performance space / auditorium.
Directive 4: Council direct staff to develop an Expression of Interest to solicit proposals for housing development on the Grand Trunk site, with a focus on the parcel known as 2D; and,	The proximity of housing to a performance space as well as other amenities such as the library and YMCA facilities would be a major ‘selling point’ for housing development. The SACC should work closely with other partners to ensure that these benefits are understood.

Component of Direction Given to Staff	Potential Role that the SACC Might Play
Directive 5: Council direct staff to develop an Expression of Interest to solicit proposals for the development and operation of a parking and mobility solution on the Grand Trunk site.	The SACC could coordinate input to this issue from its member groups that would use the community auditorium facility. Specifically, data pertaining to automobile usage and parking requirements for performance days, as well as the percentage of the audience of user groups that would (or might) come to the facility through transit options (if available). The SACC could play a useful role in representing its member organizations when parking and active transportation needs are considered both in any EOs and as the actual facility is planned?

The potential for the SACC to play this very useful role in the furthering of the overall Grand Trunk revitalization initiative gives rise to three key recommendations:

1) The SACC should articulate a strong policy position that a performance space be considered a critical element of the revitalization of the entire GTR complex. Key elements of this policy position would include:

- *a statement that a community performing arts auditorium is a critical and essential component of the community hub being developed on the Grand Trunk site and is seen to have compelling synergies with other activities occurring there.*
- *for maximum flexibility, this facility should have a capacity of between 400 and 500 seats.*
- *the primary purpose of the facility and its top priority would be use by community groups and organizations; non-community and commercial users and renters would be accorded a lower priority in terms of gaining access to the facility.*
- *a pricing strategy should be developed so that non-community and commercial use is structured to generate a surplus or profit that is then allocated to subsidizing community use; and*
- *the facility should be designed to be ‘state-of-the-art’ in terms of acoustics and other technical characteristics of the space (and in keeping with Stratford’s branding as the home of arts and culture excellence).*

2) Close liaison with the Ad Hoc Grand Trunk Renewal Committee should be established. This is essential to ensure that the SACC is positioned close to the three major players who will determine the ultimate outcome of the project: the City, the YMCA of Three Rivers and the Stratford Public Library.

3) The SACC should continue to monitor the performing arts scene in Stratford and ensure that it is representative of all community arts groups in the area. As the analysis has shown, since the original assessment of community interest in 2019, several new performing arts organizations have arrived ‘on the scene’, and it is expected that this evolution and development of arts organizations will continue in the decade to come. The SACC should see itself as continuing to be

the voice of community performing arts in Stratford and continue its advocacy and support role until the opening of the new GTR facility.

With the opening of the GTR facility, the role of the SACC will need to be re-evaluated, and the strategic direction of the organization determined at that time. As has been discussed in previous assessments, the role of the organization might morph into more of a coordinating and advisory function, working with whatever governance or Advisory Board is structured to work with the City in the administration of the GTR development. Alternatively, it could be that the SACC determines that 'its work is done', and there is no longer a need for its activities – in which case the organization could dissolve. Alternatively, it could be that there is some as-yet-undetermined role for the organization to play, that becomes apparent over the coming decade. In either case, it is apparent that there is an obvious and necessary role for the SACC during these next few years of the planning period for the GTR development.

3.2. Timing and Resource Requirements

At this critical point in the development of the Grand Trunk site, it is apparent that the SACC's role is more important than ever, to ensure that the voice of community performing arts is heard 'loud and clear' in the next few years of the planning of the Grand Trunk site. To date, the organization has existed on volunteer energies and occasional grant monies, and no change is anticipated to this basic situation. However, recognizing that the SACC will require as much if not more effort in the years ahead as has been required in the past, there are several avenues for additional and augmented resources that it should consider. These include:

- **Additional grants.** With the Council endorsement of the direction proposed by the Ad Hoc Committee, the momentum for action on the Grand Trunk site has accelerated, and the potential role of the SACC as a key supporting player validated. With the greater likelihood of a performing arts facility being part of the mix that this Council endorsement has indicated, the SACC is in a stronger position to apply for and receive grant monies for its on-going work and specific projects that may arise. This logic would relate to both government grants as well as potential foundation support. Related to this, the possibilities of partnering on grant applications (e.g., with the Stratford Public Library or the YMCA of Three Rivers, or both), which would likely augment the chances of success, should be explored.
- **City of Stratford support.** The foregoing has outlined the need for the periodic updating of the interest in and intention to use a performing arts facility by community groups. It is possible that the City could be approached to supply the relatively small resources that would be required to do this – either through using its own staff or providing the relatively modest funding that would be required. (As the project gains momentum and becomes better-known in the community it is likely that more groups would want to use the performance space component, and that the likely use would increase. This needs to be tracked and considered in the ongoing planning of the Grand Trunk site.) As well, recognizing the SACC's potential role as a key delivery partner in the implementation of the Municipal Culture Plan (MCP), City support would be a logical avenue to pursue.

- **Corporate support.** Another possibility is that with the augmented profile of the GTR project and the role of the SACC, there may be possibilities for corporate or foundation support of the organization's efforts. There are hundreds of individuals in the community who are members of the many organizations that the SACC represents, or are on the Boards of these organizations, who might represent potential avenues into corporate or foundation support. These possibilities should be investigated.
- **Solicitation of intern support.** The work to be done in the years ahead, as outlined in the previous section, could represent an ideal volunteer position for an intern or recent graduate looking for job-relevant experience. The advocacy, coordination and research work that will be required would provide a very suitable environment to gain experience and contacts that would be invaluable in the early stages of a career in the arts (and especially in Stratford). The SACC should explore this possibility with universities and community colleges in the region.
- **Leadership renewal.** To date, the leadership of the SACC has been spearheaded by a small cadre of individuals who have ably directed its initiatives with dedication and passion. Recognizing that the SACC's role and involvement in the GTR initiative will likely continue over the coming decade, it is prudent for the organization to think of succession planning and the need to develop additional leadership resources over this period. As well, as the project evolves, the needs of the organization may also change, which may require additional sets of skills at the Board level (for example, if the SACC became a charitable organization to more effectively raise funds). Again, realizing that the SACC in a sense represents organizations that in turn represent hundreds of individuals in the community, it should look to this base to groom and develop its future leadership.

In some respects, it could be seen that the Council endorsement of the GTR direction represents a new phase of activity and involvement of the SACC which will present to some extent a resource challenge for the organization. Accordingly, all the avenues for additional resource support as outlined here should be explored.

3.3. Conclusion

This assessment has shown that there continues to be significant post-pandemic growth and evolution in the community performing arts scene in Stratford, and that an affordable state-of-the-art venue will be a critical element in that sector's ongoing development. This is evidenced by numerous performing arts organizations that have indicated they would hope to use and financially contribute to such a facility.

The Grand Trunk Renewal project presents an ideal opportunity for the development of this community asset. The SACC's ongoing discussions with the YMCA of Three Rivers, the Stratford Public Library, and the City itself, all of whom would use the facility and have shown a strong willingness to continue the dialogue and work together for this common goal, should clearly continue in the planning and design of the performing arts component.

The recent unanimous Council decision to support the continued exploration of the Grand Trunk Renewal project under the 'shared community facility' option, presents a major potential role for the SACC in the implementation of this directive. This preferred option involves the municipality playing a leadership role with partner organizations in the design, development, operations and programming of the entire site revitalization project, including the community performing arts component. The SACC has a logical and important role to play in this continuing dialogue. Representing a synthesis of voices from individuals and organizations and a variety of potential users, it can bring a community-wide perspective to the table. It can actively assist in at least four of the five directions mandated by Council in its recent approval decision, and thus be a critical player in realizing its dream of an excellent and affordable community arts facility for the municipality, ultimately contributing a valuable asset that will help shape the magic that is Stratford.