

CITY OF NANAIMO

BUSINESS CASE - Luminous Paths Festival

CURRENT OVERVIEW

Luminous Paths: Nanaimo's 150 & Beyond was launched in 2025 as a signature winter arts festival marking 150 years of Incorporation for the City of Nanaimo. Developed, curated, and delivered by the Culture & Special Events section under Parks, Recreation, and Culture (PRC), the festival highlighted the diversity, strength, and resilience of the arts and culture community with light-based art installations, live performances, and community programming at Maffeo Sutton Park.

Luminous Paths animated Nanaimo's downtown during a typically quiet season, attracted thousands of attendees, featured work from 18 artists and 28 community and business partners, and emphasized inclusion, accessibility, and placemaking. Supported by a Canadian Heritage's BCAH grant, *Luminous Paths* demonstrated the strong potential of arts-led events and programming to foster civic pride, promote economic activity, and encourage cultural and community engagement. The festival not only highlighted Nanaimo's dynamic cultural scene but also captivated the local community, fostering a deeper connection to the city's rich artistic practices and heritage, while significantly raising awareness and appreciation for its diverse cultural landscape. The overwhelmingly positive response demonstrated that with the right investment and vision, the City can create meaningful, accessible, and celebratory programming that unites residents across generations and cultures, underscoring an opportunity to build on the event's success as a recurring initiative.

The Creative City Network of Canada highlighted the success of *Luminous Paths* by presenting it with their 2025 Creative City Impact Award for Cultural Events. This national award recognizes a Canadian municipality for demonstrating visionary leadership by initiating, creating, and producing a distinctive cultural event or by empowering and supporting a community initiative that led to an exceptional cultural event. The Creative City Impact Awards recognize and showcase exceptional municipal efforts from the last two years that foster creativity, inclusivity, and cultural vibrancy.

BUSINESS ISSUE

While *Luminous Paths* was conceived as a one-time 150th event, the festival's success suggests a strong case for making it a recurring initiative. Without ongoing support, the City risks:

- Loss of cultural and economic momentum built through the 2025 festival
- Opportunities to animate public spaces, promote economic activity, and encourage cultural and community engagement during the quieter winter season
- A chance to fulfill strategic goals related to inclusion, equity, and reconciliation, through sustained and regular creative initiatives
- The ability to respond to growing public demand for accessible, vibrant arts programming and cultural experiences. One-time events do not satisfy long-term public expectation or align with the City's strategic goals
- Increased visibility and recognition of Nanaimo's creative sector

There is currently no dedicated funding or framework to deliver the *Luminous Paths* festival again, despite high public and community partner interest.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Luminous Paths animates a downtown Nanaimo public park into a month-long celebration of light, art, land, and community. Temporary art installations and cultural programming reimagine public space, creating an immersive placemaking experience that inspires connection and optimism. The festival opens and closes with large-scale events and features artists and cultural partners through performances, talks, tours, and programming across local venues. *Luminous Paths* illuminates the future for our city, celebrating today's creative spirit and inspiring what's to come.

Establishing *Luminous Paths* as an annual festival will:

- Strengthen Nanaimo's identity as a creative, inclusive, and culturally vibrant city
- Support goals from the City Plan related to cultural development, social connection, and the vitality of Nanaimo's downtown
- Foster local pride, belonging, and social cohesion through accessible cultural celebration
- Provide artists and cultural and community groups consistent opportunity for visibility and income
- Attract a diverse audience, fostering a deeper connection to the City's cultural legacy and encouraging community pride
- Increase winter tourism and the seasonal economy while revitalizing underutilized public spaces
- Demonstrate commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, Truth & Reconciliation, and community wellbeing goals by providing accessible public programming

OPTIONS

Option #1: Establish a recurring annual *Luminous Paths* winter arts festival beginning in 2026 with a budget of \$86,000.

Luminous Paths would be an annual recurring winter arts festival planned to the same scale as the recent 2025 winter festival. Grant and sponsorship opportunities will be pursued to reduce City funding required for the festival.

Benefits:

- Sustains and builds on 2025 success, cultural and community momentum, and public enthusiasm
- Increases economic activity during winter 'off-season'
- Provides reliable year-round engagement for artists, creatives, and cultural organizations
- Aligns with reconciliation, equity, and inclusion commitments and strategic goals
- Supports long-term planning and partnership opportunities
- Beneficial activation of public space, supporting safety, vibrancy, and year-round use of public amenities

Weaknesses:

- Permanent increase to the annual operating budget.

Financial Analysis:

- The annual winter arts festival's projected 2026 cost is \$86,000, with subsequent years adjusted for inflation, which will cover expenditures including programming, production, contracted services, and staffing.
- Staff will pursue grant funding and sponsorship opportunities which would reduce City funding required for the festival. At present, staff have confirmed sponsorship funding totaling \$12,500

which will reduce City funding for the 2026 festival. A benefit in kind of \$2,500 has also been confirmed which will increase the base budget of the event covering extra activities.

- The current impact to 2026 property taxes would be \$73,500, with subsequent years' budgeted at full projected cost until sponsorships or grants are confirmed.

Option #2: Establish a recurring annual *Luminous Paths* winter arts festival beginning in 2026 with a budget of \$50,000.

Luminous Paths would be an annual recurring winter arts festival planned initially at a smaller scale than the recent 2025 festival with the intent on scaling up the event with financial support received either through grants or sponsorship opportunities.

Benefits:

- Same benefits as option 1.
- Opportunity to scale up the event with any grant or sponsorship funds received.
- Less of an impact to the operating budget compared to option 1.

Weaknesses:

- Permanent increase to operating budget due to requiring annual funding and sustained staff capacity.
- Varying event size each year adds challenges to planning an annual event and may limit sponsorship interest.

Financial Analysis:

- The annual winter arts festival is anticipated to cost \$50,000 in 2026 and \$51,000 in 2027 which will cover programming, production, contracted services, artist fees and festival staffing but on a smaller scale than option 1.
- Staff will pursue grant funding and sponsorship opportunities to assist with funding a larger scale event. At present, staff have confirmed sponsorship funding for the 2026 festival totaling \$12,500 as well as a benefit in kind of \$2,500 for extra activities which will scale up the event budget from \$50,000 to \$65,000.
- The impact to 2026 property taxes would be \$50,000 plus inflation for subsequent years and sponsorships or grant funding received would not reduce funding from property taxes.

Option #3: Establish a recurring biennial *Luminous Paths* winter arts festival beginning in 2026 with a budget of \$86,000.

Luminous Paths would be a recurring winter arts festival planned to the same scale as the recent 2025 festival but only occurring once every two years. Grant and sponsorship opportunities will be pursued to reduce City funding required for the festival.

Benefits:

- Reduces operational, financial and staffing burden
- Provides time to secure partnerships, funding, and plan high-quality programming

Weaknesses:

- Loss of continuity and momentum between years
- Public and community partner interest may decline without yearly continuity

Financial Analysis:

- The biennial winter arts festival's projected 2026 cost is \$86,000, with subsequent years adjusted for inflation, which will cover expenditures including programming, production, contracted services, and staffing.
- Staff will pursue grant funding and sponsorship opportunities which would reduce City funding required for the festival. At present, staff have confirmed sponsorship funding totaling \$12,500 which will reduce City funding for the 2026 festival. A benefit in kind of \$2,500 has also been confirmed which will increase the base budget of the event covering extra activities.
- The current impact to 2026 property taxes would be \$73,500, with subsequent years' budgeted at full projected cost until sponsorships or grants are confirmed.

Option #4: Status Quo. No continuation of festival.

Benefits:

- No increase in operating budget or staffing demands

Weaknesses:

- Loss of public goodwill and cultural/economic impact and opportunity
- Missed opportunity to further City priorities as they relate to reconciliation, diversity, equity, and inclusion
- No return on investment in branding and partnerships
- Loss of sponsorships acquired to date

RECOMMENDATION

Option #1 is recommended.