



Community Services *Staff Report*

REPORT NO: CS-2025-03

TO: Council

SUBMITTED BY: Chris Catania, Director of Community Services

PREPARED BY: Chris Catania, Director of Community Services

REVIEWED BY: Greg Clark, Acting Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: March 3, 2025

SUBJECT: Arts and Culture Master Plan Interim Report

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Report CS-202503, the 2025 Arts and Culture Master Plan Interim Report be received for information.

SUMMARY:

To provide Council with information and update on the Community Services Arts and Culture Master Plan and to inform Council on key findings and next steps for the approval of the Township of Wilmot's Arts and Culture Master Plan.

BACKGROUND:

Culture plays a crucial role in building an attractive and vibrant community. Municipalities foster local cultural development through cultural plans that focus on identifying and managing cultural resources, while ensuring that culture is prioritized in decision-making processes.

In 2024, the Township of Wilmot embarked on the development of an updated Arts and Culture Master Plan that will replace the former plan completed in 2018, which provided direction from 2019 to 2024. The new plan aims at clarifying objectives and processes for the management of

cultural resources, so that culture in Wilmot can continue to enhance quality of life, contribute to economic prosperity, and celebrate the unique characteristics of Wilmot.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the first phase of the Arts and Culture Master Plan Development, Phase 1 - Discovery, which took place from July 2024 to December 2024.

Findings will set the stage for developing a cultural plan that is community-driven and rooted in Wilmot's unique definition of culture, current trends, planning and policy, and community insights.

REPORT:

Background Research

Through the Consultant (STEP's), background information on the Township of Wilmot was gathered relevant to the development of the cultural plan. These included: Demographic and Population Trends, Economic and Labour Market, and Cultural Profile.

Overview of key takeaways from preliminary research:

- Wilmot Township's total population was estimated at 22,000 as of 2023 and is expected to increase to 25,055 by the year 2034.
- The Township's diversity is limited, with approximately 90% of the population identifying as white. Nevertheless, the current population growth is accompanied by a gradual increase in ethnic diversity, a trend which is set to continue as the population grows.
- The mean income levels in the Township of Wilmot, specifically in areas like New Hamburg and Baden, reflect a relatively affluent population, with a median household income of approximately \$120,400 after tax household income annually.
- The Township is bordered by the large urban centres of Waterloo, Kitchener and Cambridge and by Perth County, which encompasses municipalities such as Stratford and St. Mary's. This direct proximity influences Wilmot's demographic profile, with residents working in large neighbouring economic centres but residing in Wilmot. It also impacts local cultural participation trends, as Wilmot residents have nearby access to cultural offerings presented in neighbouring municipalities.
- Agriculture and manufacturing are leading local industries. These non-arts and services-related sectors shape how culture is perceived, produced and consumed by people living in and visiting Wilmot.

Extensive Community Outreach, Stakeholder Consultation and Engagement

A specialized project management team consisting of STEP's and Community Services staff have worked with the consulting team to lead and facilitate the Arts and Culture Masterplan

update. A multi-faceted community engagement process was employed to provide options for Council, staff, user groups, community leaders, participants, and residents to share their insights and interest in the development of the Arts and Culture Plan.

The goals of engagement were to identify:

- The current governance and decision-making framework
- An asset map of Wilmot's cultural assets
- Strengths, challenges and opportunities for the Wilmot cultural sector
- A shared vision for Wilmot's arts and culture

The following three (3) key stakeholder groups were engaged for the development of the Arts and Culture Plan:

- Mayor, Council & Township Staff
- Cultural resource managers (i.e., businesses, organizations, event organizers, etc.)
- Members of the public (i.e., local residents, workforce members, and students)

Process for Community Engagement

Through a series of diverse and inclusive engagement activities, the Township has gathered feedback from over 230 participants to inform the development of the update to the Arts and Culture Master Plan. This engagement included 19 in-depth stakeholder interviews, a community survey, pop-up events, and interactive activities such as Memory Mapping and Visual Voting. These initiatives provided opportunities for residents and key stakeholders to share their insights on Wilmot's cultural strengths, challenges, and future opportunities. By incorporating input from a wide range of voices, these efforts ensure that the Master Plan reflects the vibrant and evolving needs of the community.

Interim Report & Key Findings

Defining Culture in Wilmot

Overwhelmingly, feedback highlighted Wilmot's rural and agricultural characteristics, and the small community feel. Regularly mentioned terms and items included "agricultural", "hardworking", "small town feeling", "tight-knit community", "friendly", "farming", "local food". Participants also praised "locally owned, one-of-a-kind shops" and artisans, and spoke highly of local agricultural productions. These aspects were felt to contribute to a high quality of life and a sense of strong community well-being.

Notably, conversations showed that residents harbored strong local or settlement associations, with a more limited cultural identification with the Township: participants focused on the area of which they were residents rather than on the Township as a whole, and in several cases, participants were unsure if a specific settlement area was part of the Township or not.

In addition, key cultural assets emerged from conversations with engaged community members:

- Heritage assets, especially the New Hamburg Heritage Conservation District, Castle Kilbride, buildings and places such as the New Hamburg Water Wheel and Puddicombe House;
- The parks and trails system;
- Large-scale annual events;
- The local intangible heritage – encompassing non-physical cultural elements such as traditions, practices, knowledge, and values – includes Mennonite heritage, agricultural traditions, music, and communal stories.

Wilmot Cultural Resources

The research and engagement resulted in the identification of 211 cultural resources. Cultural resources are understood as a place or item where Wilmot's culture is reflected or produced. There are two large types of cultural resources:

- Tangible Cultural Resources are physical spaces such as venues, gallery spaces, events, or places of worship;
- Intangible Cultural Resources include traditions, rituals, and stories that define a community's unique identity and sense of place.

Items were selected in accordance with the local definition of culture. As such, in addition to assets such as museums, notable local shops, agricultural resources, and events have been included.

The Interim Report creates a benchmark with respect to how the Township is currently meeting the arts and cultural needs of its residents. It includes quantitative results of the current inventory of assets, demographics, and growth projections. It is further informed by qualitative information through stakeholder engagement, policy alignment, trends and best practices, and sound planning principles.

At this stage, the Interim Report does not contain any specific recommendations, rather helps identify gaps currently and how those gaps could be addressed. The report also identifies certain strengths the Township is already positioned to meet over the ensuing years that include existing natural and heritage assets, special events and strong presence of local talent (artists/musicians). However, through various stakeholder engagements, further opportunities emerged that included; feasibility of a dedicated cultural facility, access to Township halls, expansion of programming beyond Castel Kilbride, enhanced municipal coordination with third party stakeholders, municipal financial and operational resourcing, awareness of existing programming, transportation and increase recognition and support for indigenous culture.

Culture was seen as an essential tool to support community cohesion, helping bridge gaps between different groups. These observations will further inform themes and recommendations in the final Arts and Culture Master Plan.

Next Steps

Staff are in the next phase of the project that entail framework development, draft priorities and implementation of a roadmap towards a Draft Master Plan. This includes further promoting to the community through various communication channels key findings. Community Services and STEPs will make a presentation to Council this Spring, responding to any action items arising to date and draft recommendations. This will include further stakeholder engagement on recommendations and any necessary refinements before a final report to Council recommending adoption of the Community Services Arts and Culture Master Plan.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE TOWNSHIP OF WILMOT STRATEGIC PLAN:

Healthy Community

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Choose an item.

N/A

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Township of Wilmot Arts and Culture Master Plan Interim Report