

Arts groups push for the reinstatement of the BC Fairs, Festivals and Events Fund

The Province, which has provided nearly \$80 million since 2021, is reviewing the program, while fests warn of challenges and cutbacks if it's lost

BY GAIL JOHNSON

Gail Johnson is cofounder and associate editor of Stir. She is a Vancouver-based journalist who has earned local and national nominations and awards for her work. She is a certified Gladue Report writer via Indigenous Perspectives Society in partnership with Royal Roads University and is a member of a judging panel for top Vancouver restaurants.

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ARTS GROUPS THROUGHOUT BC are advocating for the reinstatement of the BC Fairs, Festivals and Events Fund (the BCFFE Fund).

Launched in response to COVID-19 in 2021, the BCFFE Fund helped community event organizations recover from ongoing challenges related to cost increases, reduced revenue and sponsorships, rising costs of equipment and services, and severe weather events. The BCFFE Fund provided up to about 20 percent of an organization's total event budget, up to a maximum of \$250,000 per event. Funds could be used to cover a range of operational expenses.

The fund's website notes that the intake for 2024 is now closed, and there is no mention of 2025. Spencer Chandra Herbert, Minister of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, says the fund, like other such programs, is under review.

Herbert notes that the BCFFE Fund was intended as a one-time grant to support the restart of events impacted by public-health orders and restrictions related to COVID-19.

“The Province has provided nearly \$80 million since 2021 through the Fairs, Festivals and Events fund to support events rebuild, attract people back to B.C. communities, and contribute to local economies,” Herbert tells Stir. “This support was also provided to build community confidence and well-being and stimulate the economy at a time people were starting to return to in-person events.

“All ministries are reviewing existing programs in 2025 and the focus of the review will be ensuring that public dollars are used to ensure programs remain relevant, are efficient, protect services, and grow the economy,” Herbert adds. “For instance, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport will be looking at how the Tourism Event Program [TEP] can continue to support key events in communities throughout the province.”

For the last three years, the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival has relied on the program. PuSh states it has been able to bring 81 productions to more than 33,000 people over the last four years as a result. The organization wants to put pressure on the provincial government to fight for what it calls “essential” funding. PuSh is reaching out to supporters for advocacy, urging them to contact Herbert, Premier David Eby, and their local MLA. (It is offering an email template of what people can write to those government representatives.)

Inflationary pressures have hit the arts sector hard, according to the PuSh Festival. In its recent mailout to supporters, it said that the costs of travel, insurance, freight, and staffing have increased from 12 to 40 percent since 2022. PuSh’s base ticket price hasn’t increased in that time as it tries to keep the festival affordable. While ticket sales are up, it’s not enough. “And we’re not alone,” PuSh stated. “Nearly every arts organization in BC is relying on these funds.”

“PuSh is seeing better box office returns and overall attendance in 2025 than we have since 2017, but even this can’t compensate for inflationary pressures we’re under,” Keltie Forsyth, director of operations for the PuSh Festival, and Gabrielle Martin, PuSh artistic director, note in a joint email to Stir. “BCFFE has been a major contributor in underwriting these increased costs over the last three years, and we will have to program a significantly smaller festival in 2026 without the support of this program or one like it. Coming out of our 20th anniversary, we’re in a strong position in our programming and in our community, but the reality is that all arts and culture in the province will suffer if the program is not renewed. The result will be less events, less culture, and less art available for residents of BC.”



Vancouver International Jazz Festival. Photo by Bruce McPherson.

Nina Horvath, executive director of the Vancouver International Jazz Festival, says her organization has received the BCFFE funding since its inception in 2021.

“Thanks in part to the fund’s support, we have been able to support the livelihood of hundreds of local artists and arts workers, and bring free, accessible community performances to thousands of British Columbians,” Horvath tells Stir. “Without its return this year, we have had to budget for a reduced festival footprint, bringing less music to our community and less support to artists. The [BC]FFE also represents one of the only significant increases in provincial funding to the arts since 2017. Without its continuation, I worry that many organizations will be forced to reduce their capacity and their ability to positively impact communities.”

Michelle Demers Shaevitz, artistic director of the Mission Folk Music Festival, says that funding sources like the BCFFE grant ensure that its programming remains accessible and affordable and allow the organization to focus on its mission of cultural enrichment and community engagement.

“Public grants and funding enable the festival to sustain volunteer programs, pay staff, and offer fair compensation to artists, many of whom might not otherwise have the financial means to participate,” Shaevitz says. “Without public funding, the Mission Folk Music Festival would face challenges in maintaining its inclusivity, cultural impact, and financial sustainability. Public investment in the arts enriches communities and provides long-term social and economic benefits. Simply stated, we need the Festival, Fairs, and Events funds to continue. If this funding doesn’t come through, our cultural, social, and economic impacts are diminished, and it becomes that much harder to produce our calibre of event in the face of rising costs and reduced budgets.”



Vancouver Folk Music Festival.

Fiona Black, artistic director of Vancouver Folk Music Festival, says she had a video call with Herbert on February 6, describing him as a “true arts advocate and an ally”.

“It’s great to have him in our corner, fighting to get funding for our festivals and events,” Black tells Stir. “I know he gets it; there’s no need to sell him on the importance of the arts to our city, our province, our world. There’s never been a stronger need in the world, in fact.

“The staff and board of the Vancouver Folk Music Festival are working really hard to pull off another amazing festival this summer,” she adds. “The increasing cost of everything is certainly challenging and we’re operating in a very fluid environment it seems. Part of our focus is diversifying our revenue sources to make us more resilient to the current times and more sustainable for the future. If the BCFFE funding does not come through, we’ll face challenges for sure and what our community can do to help ensure our survival is make a donation, become a monthly donor, no amount is too big or too small.”