

July 5, 2023

Mayor and Council
City of Vernon
3400 30th Street, Vernon, B.C., V1T 5E6

Re: City of Vernon facility booking process

Your Worship and Council

The Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce wishes to comment on the booking process for City of Vernon facilities both from the perspective of rental fees and service levels.

Between May 29 and June 16, 2023, the Chamber circulated a survey to members and non-members seeking their experiences when it comes to the process to inquire, book and use a facility managed and/or owned by the City of Vernon. The definition of a facility included arenas, parks, sports fields, parking lots and other amenities.

It was clear through the responses that significant issues exist not only around the cost of renting taxpayer-owned facilities but also the level of service regarding communications, contract timelines and the condition of facilities.

These facilities are community assets but unfortunately their usage is not efficiently utilized for sports tournaments, trade shows, concerts, conventions, or other events because of the difficulties in the booking processes, cost to use the facilities and the lack of maintenance in certain venues. The difficulties, cost, and lack of maintenance translates into missed opportunities for local non-profits and businesses seeking revenue sources, while it diminishes Vernon's reputation as a destination for visitors or new residents and investors seeking a vibrant and active community. Events not held and vacant spaces result in lost revenues for many businesses outside of the individual venue in the form of restaurant patronage, vacant hotel, motel and other accommodations thus the City misses the Municipal & Regional District Tax Program (MRDT) revenue plus the lost bookings. The region is then not viewed as an excellent location to live, work, play and invest. We acknowledge the City of Vernon is reviewing user fees, however, user fees are just one aspect of the issue. Improvements are also needed to responsiveness, customer service, processes, and maintenance.

Among the organizations that completed the survey was the Vernon Farmers' Market (VFM). They recently received a threefold fee increase by the City of Vernon.

"The Vernon Farmers' Market (VFM) utilizes an empty parking lot, two weekday mornings for six months of the year. The increased rental costs are potentially detrimental to our non-profit organization, which could impact access to local food and food security," stated the VFM's survey response.

"We were told that we were negotiating a lease with the city for our annual rental fees, and have multiple times been dictated to that 'this is the cost,' which isn't the definition of a negotiation. We have also been denied delegation before council."

Our Chamber wants to know why fees have increased significantly for a vacant parking lot that does not receive any services or support from City of Vernon staff when the VFM is underway. Our concern is the escalating user fee will negatively impact the non-profit organization's ability to operate as vendors depart because higher user costs are passed on to them. Not only will that harm small-scale entrepreneurs in the community, but it will also

reduce food security at a time when it is increasingly important. The Vernon Farmers Market is also popular with visitors to Vernon as demonstrated by the City of Vernon's tourism department hosting a booth at the market.

In April, the Greater Vernon Chamber was setting up for its third Community Expo at Kal Tire North when it was discovered, the evening before the event, that another event was using the entire north parking lot for the weekend. The matter was ultimately resolved, but at no point had we received communication that the parking lot was unavailable for our vendors, or the thousands of residents expected to attend Expo. A lack of parking could have been disastrous and had we not become aware of the double-booking the evening before our event, it likely would have resulted in refunding over \$30,000 in vendor fees and sponsorship. This situation also created hardship for the organization that had booked the parking lot.

Some survey respondents did indicate they are satisfied with rental fees and the level of service provided by the City when booking a facility. Many users also stated they would consider renting a City of Vernon facility in the future. However, in most cases, such as arenas and parks, City facilities are the only option.

Non-profit organizations provide meaningful social contributions to our community and often hold events that are economically significant. Funtastic, for example, has an economic impact of over \$4 million annually which benefits hotels, restaurants and retail, and sustains employment. Rather than the City of Vernon charging a fair market rate, it is charging a surplus of fees to these organizations to subsidize the City's budget shortfalls in other areas. A fundamental shift needs to occur, with the City viewing non-profit organized events as a benefit to the community and not just its budget. Lower fees and increased service levels will result in more events that benefit everyone, including the City's budget through additional bookings and concession and beverage sales.

Our Chamber believes the current booking system is hampering any positive impact. We recognize that city staff hired a third party consultant to review fees but recommend City of Vernon council also take the following steps:

- Immediately establish a task force to review customer service levels and booking fees while focusing on the high cost of venues and how increased usage through reduced fees may reduce lost bookings and increase net revenues for those venues, the City and the Community. The task force should include representation from council and a diverse selection of user groups that plan and host events.
- Create a term of reference for the task force that includes, but not limited to, comparable data from other communities, economic development strategies involving events, and whether the booking process should remain within the recreation department or shift to another department.
- Establish a budget for the task force and ensure access to City of Vernon staff and consultants for administrative and technical support.
- Establish a timeline in which the task force presents a report and recommendations to council for consideration, and that the report be presented in an open council meeting.

We urge council to consider this matter with extreme importance and timeliness.

Thank you for your time.

Yours truly,



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President
Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce
Workandinvestvernon.ca