
Subject: 2024 Niagara Children's Water Festival Update

Report To: Public Works Committee

Report date: Tuesday, April 9, 2024

Recommendations

1. That Report PW 7-2024 **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to provide information about the Niagara Children's Water Festival and to demonstrate its effectiveness and value as requested by Council during the 2024 budget process.
- The Festival is a collaborative event held over four days at Brock University with different elementary schools from across Niagara attending each day; approximately 3,200 students and 1,000 parents, teachers and volunteers are registered to participate in 2024. Demand by teachers to attend the Festival is always higher than event capacity.
- The Festival, to be held April 30 – May 3, 2024, invites students in grade four to participate in a variety of hands-on water-themed activities facilitated by volunteer subject matter experts. The Festival activity centres are designed to meet the Festival objectives and are aligned with the Ontario curriculum.
- The Festival was first established in 2002 in partnership between Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, Niagara Region, City of St. Catharines and Ontario Power Generation. Brock University joined as a partner in 2020.

Financial Considerations

Niagara Region has provided funding for the Festival each year it has been hosted in-person since its inception in 2002. The Festival is funded from the water-wastewater rate budget and is drawn from the Information and Promotions account which was approved by Council at \$104,105 for 2024 to support all division-wide related programs, services and materials. The expected gross cost of the Festival in 2024 is \$89,300. Staff actively seek out sponsorships and grants to offset the Region's share of the cost. In 2023 the Region's share of the Festival cost was \$57,868. Brock University also provides an in-kind sponsorship (for the 2024 Festival - \$37,608 + HST) for Festival site and coordination services not reflected in the budget. The Festival also receives funding from other sources as follows:

Funding Source (2024)	Amount
Niagara Region	Est. \$50,000-\$55,000 in 2024 \$57,868 (2023)
City of St. Catharines	\$10,000
Ontario Power Generation	\$5,000
District School Board of Niagara and Niagara Catholic District School Board	\$16,152.23 (in kind) (student transportation)
TD Friends of the Environment Fund	\$5,000
Sponsorship Program, in 2024 includes financial support from: Associated Engineering, City of Niagara Falls, City of Welland, GM BluePlan, Hamilton-Oshawa Port Authority, Invasive Species Centre, Niagara Parks Commission, Oxy Vinyl, RJ Burnside, WSP Global, and many other in-kind sponsors.	\$11,249

This funding supports Festival operational expenses such as tent rentals, security equipment and services, health and safety, equipment, custodial services, service providers, development and improvement of activity centres, promotions and marketing, and partial transportation costs. The full budget expenditures are reported annually to Council via a Summary report.

In addition to the Festival expenditures, the Information and Promotions budget supports all other water-wastewater education and outreach activities including the Water Wagon program equipment and materials (not including staffing), outreach booths, participation in events like Earth Week, tours and open houses of facilities and supporting education campaigns such as for promotions about source water protection, proper disposal of fats, oils and grease.

Analysis

The Festival works to achieve its purpose and objectives as outlined below through the organization of an event that engages students, teachers, parents, community partners, organizations and staff in a shared experience celebrating water as a valuable resource and intrinsically ties to the work of our water-wastewater services divisions and our service partners. The Festival has a stated mission to challenge participants to consider the importance of wise water-use, water safety, water science, and water stewardship, as well as raise awareness about key water and wastewater services provided to communities using a fun, safe, and engaging format.

The stated purpose and objectives of the Festival per its Steering Committee Terms of Reference are:

- To engage Niagara region students in interactive activity centres that align with the committee's mission and are developed to complement the Ontario curriculum
- To change the behavior of students, teachers, and volunteers by teaching them to be more conscientious of their water use and understanding of water resources and services
- For the benefits of the Festival to be demonstrated through new behaviours and choices in the classroom, in their homes, and in the wider community

The Festival also contributes to the following divisional and organizational objectives:

- Helps meet our obligation for education under our Source Water Protection Plan
- Helps meet our obligation for educating the public under our Drinking Water Quality Management System
- Enhances the Region's public reputation through positive engagement with the community
- Engages students of elementary, high school, college and university ages in learning about careers in water, in general, and in operations and maintenance at Niagara Region specifically, contributing to future recruitment and retention of top talent
- Contributes to employee engagement and well-being and helps build a sense of pride and teamwork in the work of water and wastewater staff at the Region
- Builds positive relationships with key partners that are required for effective operations including local area municipalities, the NPCA and the Ministry of Energy, Conservation and Parks
- Nurtures a sense of shared responsibility for our water resources and water infrastructure amongst our local water service partners.

The Festival takes place over four days with different schools from across Niagara attending each day. The Festival runs a total of 30 activity centres with each participating class spending a full day rotating through a set schedule of 10 of the hands-on activities. The activity centres are based on five (5) pillars of learning: Water Science, Water Technology, Water Conservation, Water Protection, and Water Attitude. Examples of these activities include how to repair a watermain break, the benefits of tap vs. bottled water, water and wastewater treatment processes, the impact of improper disposal of fats, oils and greases, a fire truck activity hosted by local fire services and Indigenous storytelling. Activity centres are hosted by experts from our partners and involved organizations, including Region water-wastewater staff, community organizations and businesses, Ministry of Energy Conservation and Parks, and local area municipalities. In addition, the Festival recruits over 200 volunteers to help deliver the event. The activity centres are a combination of indoor and outdoor activities with the indoor activities hosted within Brock facilities and the outdoor activities in tents set up along Brock's soccer field. Activity centres, facilities, transportation and class schedules are designed to be inclusive and accommodating to meet the needs of all students attending the Festival.

The Festival provides the opportunity for several Niagara Region divisions to engage thousands of people in our community about our work in key areas of public education in a short period of time. These divisions include Water-Wastewater, Waste Management, Public Health, DEI/Indigenous Relations and Climate Change teams.

Approximately 23 Children's Water Festivals are hosted across Ontario, including festivals hosted by the municipalities of Hamilton, Halton, Peel and York Regions.

In the 2023 follow-up survey conducted for teachers and volunteers, teachers rated satisfaction in various categories at an average of 92% (4.6 out of 5), and volunteers at an average of 88% (4.4 out of 5) demonstrating participants find value in the event and find the experience to be positive. Teachers noted they observed students retained learning through behaviour changes following the event. Festival volunteers and sponsors continue to express that this event makes a difference to their own promotional and engagement activities, evidenced by the ongoing participation for over 20 years.

Alternatives Reviewed

An alternative to delivering the Festival is for Niagara Region to discontinue being a Festival partner and withdraw funding support. While the cancellation of the Water

Festival would save funds, Niagara Region would lose the opportunity to achieve its education and outreach objectives and may receive a negative public reaction to withdrawing from a long-standing and well received event coordinated with Regional service partners and community organizations.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

Effective Region

- The Festival supports Council's priority to be an Effective Region by partnering with numerous Regional departments (Water-Wastewater, Waste Management, Public Health, DEI/Indigenous Relations) as well as local area municipalities, agencies and organizations to deliver activity centres as well as maximizing partnerships to garner volunteers, services, in-kind donations and funding to operate the Festival.

Green and Resilient Region

- As part of a Green & Resilient Region this event fosters attitudes of stewardship and sustainability of water resources within our community with the goal to influence future behaviours that will support and protect sustainability for our future water and wastewater resources and infrastructure.

Equitable Region

- The Festival supports Council's Equitable Region through the design and planning of the Festival as an inclusive event that accommodates the needs of all participants. This includes removing financial barriers to participation through funding the event which allows it to be free for participants.

Other Pertinent Reports

- [PW 43-2023 Children's Water Festival](https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=50280174-8c6e-4d8c-8f6e-53a5cec5340f&Agenda=Agenda&lang=English&Item=17&Tab=attachments)
(<https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=50280174-8c6e-4d8c-8f6e-53a5cec5340f&Agenda=Agenda&lang=English&Item=17&Tab=attachments>)

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