Art Gallery of Northumberland Community Engagement Report

July 25

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A. Executive Summary

The Art Gallery of Northumberland (AGN) initiated this Community Engagement project with a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to assess community interest in and support for AGN activities. This information gathering is intended to position the AGN for future success in artistic, programmatic and outreach activities, as well as to make the case for sustainable support going forward. It follows a period of financial and operational challenges that led to a temporary closure in 2015. Long-term financial stability continues to be a concern of the Board of Directors.

Through this project, the AGN has an opportunity to "re-set" public perceptions and build awareness and support. The project has also provided valuable information to support evidence-based decision making (for future strategic planning and visioning, operational planning, and governance renewal) and sustainable fund development led by the Board. Finally, it will help the AGN be well positioned for a municipal cultural planning initiative slated for 2018.

The AGN was founded in 1960. It is the only public gallery in Northumberland County. With free admission, the AGN provides the community with access to art and related cultural programs for enjoyment and educational purposes. In addition to exhibitions, the AGN maintains a permanent collection, presents school and community programming, and contributes to cultural asset development and dissemination through the publication of catalogues. Its mandate is to serve the whole County.

While solid attendance figures year over year (5100 gallery visitors in the past year alone) demonstrate continued strong community interest in the AGN, recent challenges have seen a withdrawal of funding from some supporters. Other pressures also exist. The AGN, like many institutions, must plan for projected population growth and aging demographics. At the same time, it seeks to engage the many schools and community organizations serving children and youth. Key challenges include the need for more volunteers (both hours and skills), and securing sustainable funding over the long term.

The AGN's leadership team believes that the AGN is poised to lead the cultural revitalization of the community by providing accessible arts based opportunities. Sound planning based on current, accurate information—including stakeholder perceptions, programming/service gaps, and community assets—will position the AGN to be a leader in the sector and create sustainable growth.

Increasingly, non-profit and public-sector organizations both desire, and are expected, to periodically engage with stakeholders. This is especially important during times of transition and/or challenges. An authentic stakeholder engagement process is one that genuinely seeks input and allows for those invested in the success of an organization to provide ideas, input, and feedback.

A variety of AGN stakeholder groups were engaged, including:

- Board and Staff members
- Artists
- Community partner organizations
- Community members
- Volunteers
- Donors
- Funders

Engagement strategies used to solicit input included **focus groups, community town halls, an online survey**, and **key informant interviews** with current and potential funders and donors.

The key informant interviews (Phase II of the project) took place by phone following community engagement activities. The purpose of the interviews was narrow in scope: to obtain information from current and potential funders and donors, to ascertain their perceptions of the AGN, interest in supporting the AGN financially, and other pertinent information relating to fundraising feasibility.

Stakeholder responses and commentary are provided in the Report in both summary and detailed form. The survey data includes many thoughtful comments, which are shown verbatim.

Engagement themes identified included:

- The AGN's Mandate/Vision/Governance
- Community Impact/Awareness/Support
- Permanent Collection
- Exhibitions
- Facility
- Communications and Marketing
- Local Arts Scenes; and
- Fundraising

Through this process, the AGN contracted with Laridae Communications Inc. ("the Consultant") to gather information based on comprehensive community engagement. As such, the themes and data are presented without specific strategies or recommendations of the sort that would typically accompany strategic planning and operational reviews. Nonetheless, it is clear to the Consultants that the Board continues to face structural, and therefore chronic, sustainability issues that must be addressed if the AGN is to remain viable over the long term. The current level of funding will not sustain permanent staffing at a level adequate to the organization's aspirations for programs and operations. This is a serious capacity issue, which can be addressed through a number of options. These include attracting long-term commitments from funders and donors (and increasing the funder/donor base) and considering other business models, such as joining with other galleries and/or operating as part of municipal government operations, as other cultural institutions in the region do. The good news is that the AGN has many passionate supporters (artists and others). That goodwill and broad support can be tapped when strategic decisions are made and communicated to the broader community.

B. Introduction

The Art Gallery of Northumberland (AGN) received an Ontario Trillium Foundation seed grant to support an engagement project assessing community interest in and support for AGN activities. This information gathering is meant to position the AGN for future success in planning programs and outreach activities, as well as in making the case for support going forward. The initiative follows a period in which the AGN faced significant financial challenges, which have affected its ability to operate. This project affords the opportunity to "re-set" the public perception of the AGN and create greater awareness and support, as well as providing information to support evidence-based decision making and sustainable fund development. It also will help the AGN prepare for a municipal cultural planning initiative slated for 2018.

Following a competitive RFP process, Laridae Communications, Inc. was retained to carry out this project, guided by the AGN's Director, with input from the Board executive. The findings of this report will be presented to the Board, with a discussion of options and potential next steps.

Thoughtful, inclusive community engagement yields important benefits as the AGN seeks to attract new audiences, retain current audiences, and develop future programming aligned with its mandate. The information gained from broad community engagement will position the Board well for future strategic and operational planning, as well as fundraising and marketing campaigns that may follow strategic visioning work.

In addition to community engagement activities, the project included calls to 25 current and potential funders and donors to assess their perceptions of the AGN and interest in funding or donating to AGN programs.

A variety of stakeholder groups were engaged, including:

- AGN Board and Staff members
- Artists
- Community partner organizations
- Community members
- Volunteers
- Donors
- Funders

Engagement strategies used to solicit input included **focus groups, community town halls, an online survey**, and **key informant interviews**.

What follows is an overview of the themes, ideas, compliments, and concerns identified by each stakeholder group and/or method of engagement.

C. Background

The AGN was founded in 1960 and is the only public gallery in Northumberland County. With free admission, the AGN provides the community with access to art and related programs for enjoyment and educational purposes. In addition to exhibitions, the AGN maintains a permanent collection, presents school and community programming, and contributes to cultural asset development and dissemination through the publication of catalogues.

While solid attendance figures year over year (5100 gallery visitors in the past year alone) demonstrate continued strong community interest in the AGN, some recent challenges have included the withdrawal of funding from some supporters, and a temporary closure in 2015. The AGN, like many institutions, must plan for projected population growth and aging demographics. At the same time, it seeks to engage the many schools and community

organizations serving children and youth. Key challenges include the need for more volunteers (both hours and skills), and securing sustainable funding over the long term.

The AGN's leadership believes that the AGN is poised to lead the cultural revitalization of the community by providing accessible arts based opportunities. Sound planning based on current, accurate information—including stakeholder perceptions, programming/service gaps, and community assets—will position the AGN to be a leader in the sector and create sustainable growth.

Art Gallery of Northumberland's Mandate

The mandate of the Art Gallery of Northumberland is to promote and provide access to art and related programs as a community gallery for the enjoyment and education of the people of Northumberland County.

We exist to serve all of Northumberland County as a public gallery. We present intellectually stimulating exhibitions and programming, as well as maintain a permanent collection of visual arts. Along with exhibitions we fulfill our mandate through educational activities which encourage active dialogue between the Gallery audience and the visual arts; including lectures, films, workshops, artist talks and tours.

Student educational programs are provided both in the Gallery and in the classroom. Special programs for secondary school students have been developed in collaboration with community schools and teachers.

D. Engagement

D.1 Overview

Increasingly, non-profit and public-sector organizations both desire, and are expected, to periodically "check in" with those stakeholders who interact with them most often. This is especially important during times of transition and/or challenge. An authentic engagement process is one that genuinely seeks input and allows for those invested in the success of an organization to provide ideas, input, and feedback. Properly done, stakeholder engagement is in no way an abdication or devolution of leadership—it's the opposite. Leaders who reach out and seek the input of the people delivering or receiving services every day are far more likely to craft future strategic directions and develop programming that will resonate with those they serve.

D.2 Who did the AGN reach out to, and how?

The engagement sessions and opportunities were promoted by email, press release, newspaper advertisements, social media, personal invitation, and word of mouth. The AGN invited the following audiences to participate in the engagement:

- Artists
- Community Leaders
- Community partner organizations (e.g., galleries and museums)
- Funders
- Donors
- Volunteers
- Community members

D.2.b) In-person Focus Groups

Focus groups were held for two audiences: Artists and Community Leaders/Stakeholders. Each focus group was facilitated with the audience's distinct roles, needs, and topics in mind. The participants were engaged in conversation during the focus groups, and a comfortable rapport was perceived over the course of the process

D.2.c) Community Town Halls

Three public town hall events were held to engage the broader community. Through a guided conversation (tailored to the number of participants), valuable comments and input were collected, with much positive feedback provided.

- Port Hope (June 3rd)
- Cobourg (June 6th)
- Warkworth (June 8th)

D.2.d) Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews are qualitative in-depth interviews with individuals considered knowledgeable about the community, the organization and/or the sector. The purpose of these interviews, generally, is to collect detailed information from experts who—with their particular knowledge, experience, and understanding—may provide insight on challenges, opportunities and potential solutions.

For this project, the key informant interviews took place following community engagement activities, as Phase II of the project. The purpose of the interviews was narrower in scope: to obtain information from current and potential funders and donors, to ascertain their perceptions of the AGN, interest in supporting the AGN financially, and other pertinent information relating to fundraising feasibility. A list of 40 organizations and individuals was provided by the AGN, from which the 25 planned contacts were made.

D.2.e) Online Survey

A confidential online survey was conducted, available to the above noted stakeholder groups, and the whole community (all of Northumberland County). Anonymity was guaranteed to encourage participants to be open and honest in their responses. The survey was promoted by email to the AGN's newsletter list, as well as through social media and at in-person engagement events.

D.2.f) Purpose of the Survey and In-person Engagement

The survey and in-person sessions (focus groups and community town halls) had two general purposes:

- To **engage stakeholders** by gathering input, ideas, and suggestions, and including them in the AGN's planning processes in a direct and meaningful way; and

- To **educate stakeholders** about the work of the AGN and generally promote the public art gallery's mission and vision to the community (as a positive legacy of the planning process)

E. AGN Stakeholder Engagement

An online survey, focus group sessions, and community meetings were held to engage stakeholders in the project.

- The survey was open for five weeks, from May 22 - June 26, 2017.
- The number of respondents to the survey was 123.
- The number of focus group participants was 11.
- The number of individuals attending community town halls was 53, plus board members and staff, who welcomed attendees.

E.1 In-Person Engagement Schedule

Date	Audience/ Location
June 6th	Artists (Cobourg—Focus Group)
June 6th	Community Leaders/Stakeholders (Cobourg—Focus Group)
June 3rd	Community Members (Port Hope—Town Hall)
June 6th	Community Members (Cobourg—Town Hall)
June 8th	Community Members (Warkworth—Town Hall)

Thematic summaries of the focus group and town hall commentary follow below. While two of the town halls were lightly attended, the third was full, and at all three events there were enthusiastic, thoughtful, and in-depth conversations. Topics that came up during informal discussions at each location included appreciation for the cultural asset that the AGN has been and will continue to be, given its unique permanent collection, and compliments about several recent exhibitions. There was recognition, as well, that the staff and board have coped with significant resource constraints, and what has been accomplished thus far can be attributed to their dedication to art and to the AGN.

E.2 Focus Group Themes and Detailed Summary

Focus group discussions raised similar themes and were grounded in broad support for the AGN's mandate and potential. There were many positive suggestions, as well as constructive criticisms, which are organized by focus group and theme below.

E.2.1 Community Leader/Stakeholder Focus Group

Permanent Collection

- Appreciation was expressed for the AGN's permanent collection, which has "national significance," given that paintings by the Group of Seven are included. It should be promoted more.
- The permanent collection could grow "if there was space, capacity, and faith in the AGN's vision." Partnerships with other museums would also be helpful.
- There is potential to build a legacy through prominent artists with local connections, such as Peter Doig—not unlike what Kleinburg did with the Group of Seven. While the physical space would need to change (major investments needed) to acquire or borrow artwork of that calibre, it would be a legacy for him and for the area.
- Participants would like to see more of the permanent collection, which is stored in the archives. "Let it out."

Exhibitions

- Participants praised recent exhibitions, with particular appreciation for *Northumberland Went to War* and *Rug Hooking*. It was noted that the Colborne Art Gallery mounted two exhibitions connected with the AGN's, and the visitor response was "astounding."
- There is support for more touring exhibitions with works from the permanent collection (with necessary insurance, etc.)
- Both the *War* and *Rug Hooking* exhibitions showed diversity (not just "pictures on a wall") and therefore broadened the audience. It's necessary to appeal to diverse interests.
- A specific criticism made—with general agreement of focus group participants—was that the labels stuck on the wall next to artworks should look more professional (on black backing and printed, not hand-written).
- It was suggested that the AGN mount shows of relevance to other townships in the County, which could be promoted by video, gaining buy-in from municipalities and groups. For example, there's a Mayor's award for a juried art show in Colborne, in its fifth year. The municipality supports it by paying hydro and giving it space.
- Another idea was to have an AGN event at the Cobourg Community Centre (which can have art shows, photography displays)—for more visibility.

Facility

- Barriers to community outreach include the physical restrictions of the AGN location (sign restrictions, no street-level presence, elevator, entrance through gift shop).
- Issues related to the building (not meeting gallery accreditation standards) tie into the AGN needing a strategic plan. If the plan is to stay in the current location, then certain activities and programs will flow from that.

AGN Mandate/Vision/Governance

- Participants identified that the AGN needs a clear niche and a vision for the future. Will it be primarily an institution of the town or the county, or something else? (It was noted that most of the funding is provided by the Town of Cobourg. What is the AGN's relationship to the County?) Strategic planning/visioning is needed now, as well as a governance review.
- Some questioned why the current mandate is to serve all of Northumberland County, when there is no ongoing funding from the County.
- The issue of whether the AGN should focus on local, regional, national, or international art attracted a wide range of views. Although many people feel local art and artists should be supported, there was no consensus on the issue. It may be necessary to strike a balance (both for exhibitions and acquiring art); this will be an ongoing conversation.
- Recent "extra" AGN activities, such as the bus trip to see the AGO Georgia O'Keefe exhibition, attracted favorable comments.
- Representatives of other local museums expressed an interest in working more closely with the AGN, combining forces, especially regarding tourism marketing. There's a regional group in Quinte that could be a model for collaboration. Other local institutions/organizations include the Cobourg Museum Foundation, Sifton Cook House, and Marie Dressler.
- It was suggested that the Board of Directors should implement three-year terms, with overlapping terms to ensure continuity.
- Participants agreed that achieving financial sustainability is a top priority for the AGN. Any new ideas (e.g. a new building) require benefactors. It was noted that the Cameco relationship is new, and there could be other, similar opportunities for corporate support/sponsorship. Fundraising is a challenge in Cobourg, when most philanthropic giving goes to the hospital, Rotary Club, and the United Way. There is fierce competition for funds left over.
- To attract and retain funders and donors, the AGN will need to be able to demonstrate that there is a strong governance model in place, a strategic plan, and a sound business plan. This is important for current funders, too. The AGN needs to be able to demonstrate community impact, and how it contributes to drawing visitors (and anything built for tourists also benefits local residents).
- It was acknowledged that the AGN has been operating on an extremely tight budget. Appreciation was expressed for what the staff has been able to accomplish to date, given the resource constraints.
- Reputational concerns were expressed, considering that past incidents (re permanent collection) are still playing out, because the public may not be confident of the AGN's long-term financial viability or management. People won't donate art if they are unsure about the institution's future.

Community Impact/Awareness/Support

- Participants believe that the AGN's impact/awareness could be much greater, both in town and throughout the region.
- *Northumberland Went to War* (funded by the County, with the requirement to reach out to the region) had a big positive impact and drew attention to the AGN. Traveling shows give the AGN and Northumberland "a name."
- Some participants felt that the AGN should keep in mind that "country people want a connection to their lives" in small-town Ontario. Shows need to connect, even if they are non-traditional. "This is not Toronto." Others disagreed with this, noting that the importance of works in the permanent collection could draw visitors from Toronto and appeal to community pride.
- Some felt that the impact was not as great as it could be because some of the collection is scattered (hung on various municipal building walls), and the collection is not being promoted or discovered as much as it could be.
- If the AGN were a central attraction to visitors in Cobourg, it would have an impact on tourism. With more marketing, there is lots of potential for this kind of growth. The Township representative expressed interest in helping with this, and a desire to see promotional efforts more closely integrated with other attractions at Victoria Hall and elsewhere—the Old Bailey courtroom, concert hall, the beach, and more. For example, the 1927 libel trial of Sir Arthur Currie happened in Victoria Hall, and there will be a theatre production and a gala in November to re-enact the celebration held here at the end of WWI. They will be bringing people in on buses; there's lots of opportunity to work together.
- It was noted that many people feel intimidated going into galleries. There's a perception that art is not for the average person. Ordinary people need to encounter art, without having to know about art.
- The AGN used to have a large group (100+) of active volunteers, but that was about 15 years ago. Currently, they have about 20, which is not enough people to help promote the gallery and support operations. One participant suggested that the AGN should start a docent program.
- Participants recognize an ongoing shift in population in Cobourg, with many people from the city moving in, as well as a lot of professional artists. This has (potentially) positive implications for fundraising, as well as gallery attendance.
- There is significant interest in increased AGN programming aimed at children/students. The Y child care centres (17 locations) serve 800 children; they seek opportunities to expand kids' knowledge of the arts through field trips and programs, and would be interested in more AGN programs. The Cameco room (for children) is a major positive development—it will be well used.
- Geography is a limiting factor for attracting visitors from the County and beyond, especially in winter. It was acknowledged by participants that to be most successful (in terms of drawing attendance from visitors), shows should be mounted in summer. Some said that it is not clear how more distant County residents view the AGN—it is a long way to drive.

Communications and Marketing

- There was general agreement that "the AGN is a well-kept secret," and that a better job can be done to reach out to the community and get people into the AGN. More people need to know about the "treasures in the collection." The AGN needs to "share the good news" more.

- One participant, an experienced curator and gallery manager, said, "It just takes a bit of deep thinking to bring more people in." Once they are in, they will be hooked, as long as there are "friendly faces" to engage them.
- Packaging events/products/memberships with other institutions would help raise money (value proposition needs to be clear).
- Many suggestions were made to improving marketing, such as: better signage inside and outside Victoria Hall, a dedicated AGN board with posters, improving the website, and collaboration with the concert hall for marketing efforts (e.g., market a pre-concert visit to the AGN, and be open for those hours).
- One participant said that the current brochure looks nice. Appreciation was also expressed for the efforts of the new Assistant (Caitlyn Hoskin) to raise the AGN's profile via social media, as well as her other duties.
- The gift shops are seen as attractive, and they should be promoted more.

Active Local Arts Scene

- Representatives of local art clubs want to see more focus on local, amateur art. Small town people like to see "their own" being displayed. For example, the high school show brings in more visitors than others, and it's the same for local artists.
- There is an active arts scene in Cobourg, with many clubs (e.g., fibre arts) and shows, including some juried shows. The Cobourg Art Club currently has 40 paintings on display at the mill; they've filled an empty storefront, and have been asked for art by the Children's Aid Society.
- Appreciation for arts and culture is rising in the community. The upcoming Cultural Master Plan is an incredible opportunity.
- There was an arts council in Northumberland County once, but it was disbanded.
- The active arts scene in Warkworth was cited, including the group "Spirit of the Hills," which also includes writers. A suggestion was to do something similar at the AGN, as there is a large poetry group in Cobourg.
- The AGN should reach out to other galleries and arts groups to find out what's happening and coordinate event dates, so as not to compete (this is how the arts council first started).

Takeaway Reflections

- Participants said they were leaving with a very positive feeling about the AGN. One woman said she learned that the AGN has a library, with books that can be borrowed (several didn't know this). Others expressed appreciation for how the focus group had been facilitated.
- One participant said, "I'm glad this thing will get rolling … It's worth plugging away. Do what you can within the means, until we get better recognized. And then take stock."
- Another participant said she appreciated the passion and dedication of those running the AGN. She was especially excited about the new kids' area.

E.2.2 Artist Focus Group

Permanent Collection

- A suggestion for a relatively inexpensive exhibition would be to invite emerging curators into the vault, allowing them to hang shows that draw on the permanent collection. Related to this, it was observed that paying CARFAC fees (while right and necessary) raises expenses. Using the existing collection could lower costs, as no fees would be due to non-living artists. Curation fees for such a show could range from $500-$1000.
- Another idea was to let the winner of the juried show, or perhaps students, curate a show from the permanent collection.
- Participants were pleased that the AGN has "preserved the collection;" now they would like the AGN to ensure that part of it is always on display, perhaps in the smaller room.

Exhibitions

- Participants praised the quality of shows that the AGN has mounted since re-opening—they are "much better."
- The best example was the *Rug Hooking* show ("fabulous"), which offered something for everybody (historical, aesthetic, and "how was it made?" interests all satisfied). Participants strongly support satellite shows like this (it traveled across the County). Some suggested traveling even further, but acknowledged that it would be costly to do that.
- "I love that the annual juried show is continuing," one artist noted, saying that she believes the standards and quality have gone up (others agreed with this point).
- A suggestion about the juried shows was to give artists feedback regardless of acceptance. (It was acknowledged that this is labour-intensive, but it would be valuable to artists, help them learn from the process.)
- The right balance of shows was discussed—some artists participating in the discussion are not fans, although they acknowledged that a panel of jurors was better than a solo juror. Currently, the juried show is one of eight annual shows, and most participants said that was an acceptable balance. It was noted that students could submit to the juried show in their own category now (rather than having a separate student show).
- One suggestion was to make another show (of the 8) more accessible to local artists—providing another slot, for four or so artists, maybe those with strong support from the juried showing, and to perhaps have it displayed in the smaller room. It could be a collaborative show, or have a theme. It was felt that this would broaden audiences, bring new segments of the community in, as well as benefiting the artists involved.

Facility

- It was noted that when the library was being built, almost 20 years ago, there was plan to build a new gallery by the library (and donations were taken for it), but that part of the project did not proceed. One participant said bluntly that the municipality had reneged on its promise.
- The idea of moving should be revisited. It might take ten years; start now.

AGN Mandate/Vision/Governance

- The artists participating in the focus group believe that part of the mandate of the AGN is/should be support for artists.
- Comments on long-term sustainability included a call for the AGN to apply for more grants and do more fundraising, thereby increasing the operating budget. It was noted that the Events Committee has been tasked with raising $26,000 and is currently looking for ideas on how best to meet the target.

Community Impact/Awareness/Support

- Participants said: While there are many in the community who are knowledgeable and interested in art, there needs to be an effort to make the AGN more accessible to others in the community, who might feel intimidated about visiting.
- One participant noted the variety of shows—from the permanent collection, a "very high quality" show of members of the Royal Academy, a young abstract painter with his first solo show, and the First Nations show on truth and reconciliation, which attracted many visitors. While the diversity of this approach was praised, the downside is, potentially, that the AGN isn't honing in on one identifiable thing.
- Participants weren't sure about how curation was done—whether the director curated exhibitions, or guest curators were brought in (it's the latter).
- There was a lot of discussion about the mission of a public gallery. Participants noted that two missions were most important: education, and welcoming the public. Visitors who come through the doors should be warmly welcomed—especially non-traditional audiences, such as youth. Artists also need encouragement to approach the gallery, which can be intimidating.
- It was felt that the gift shop is an asset, with very high quality work, and that it has improved significantly. The artists' work on commission is "much better than before." A benefit for people buying at the gift shop is that there is no tax.
- Participants were pleased to see the AGN beginning to draw a wider demographic. The donation to build the Kids' Corner and efforts to bring visitors in for Canada Day were cited as examples.
- Suggestions for building relationships with artists include hosting a central registry for all artists in the County, on the website so that people can search, link, and see images (the AGN acting as a "neutral agency"). The County tried to do this, but it became out of date. The region needs an artist database. (It was noted that the defunct Northumberland Arts Council once had a website, where artist resumes were posted). "It's a way for the gallery to support local artists, and vice versa."
- More traveling exhibits (where local site conditions allow it) would give the AGN (and local artists, potentially) more exposure in the region. Colborne Hall and Warkworth were mentioned as good locations for this. An upcoming exhibit in the old newspaper building on King Street (part of an empty storefronts program) is another example. Artists could be "represented more in the community, in conjunction with music or other events."
- One participant expressed a desire to see the AGN show more varied art. For example, the AGN now focuses on 2D visual art. More diversity in the types of art (different techniques, 3D, and installation art—broadening the focus from framed paintings) would attract new audiences.
- Similarly, there was a call for an exterior installation or event (taking over a park?), perhaps involved with nature or the environment. More diverse art, mixed with "something else" to disrupt fixed categories like painting and sculpture.

- While participants were hopeful that the AGN will be eligible for more opportunities in the future, they pointed at past events as a lingering problem. "The reputation and credibility of this gallery was so undermined … there was terrible damage done …"
- Participants advocated for more collaboration with other arts organizations, increasing contacts.

Communications and Marketing

- How to welcome the public/communicate the AGN's presence was a question that dominated the discussion. Making the location more accessible is key to making art available to more people. Many suggestions and comments were made, including:
    - The first choice of participants is a new building (with climate control and other standards met, so the AGN could obtain better shows). Failing that, more visibility in and around Victoria Hall was the focus of comments.
    - Moving the AGN to the ground floor (and mayor's office to the 3rd) would make it more accessible to the public and be good for tourism. It is the same amount of space. (It was also noted that the 2nd floor is devoted to the Concert Hall.)
    - The current building (big, historical façade) says: "dusty old paintings." Nothing conveys concepts such as abstract art, or Indigenous, or rug hooking. It was felt that there is little to entice people in, and that the building itself is imposing.
    - Restrictions on outside banners limit the marketing the AGN can do (although others noted that banners were attached to the building at least a few years ago). Easels on the sidewalk are allowed. If the current building is to remain the site of the AGN, more street presence (e.g. signage) would help public awareness and increase the appeal ("inviting," "playful," etc.)
    - There should be a sign for the AGN gift shop in municipal offices.
    - Easels in the lobby and similar "teaser displays" would convey the message: You're almost there.
- Participants raised examples of inviting marketing done in other cities, e.g., Colborne Gallery, and in Kitchener (involving an artist in residence working in the area where people came in to pay their bills—since Victoria Hall is also used for municipal functions, this is a relevant example).
- One participant noted that they liked the new website. Others echoed the importance of the AGN having a strong digital presence, especially given the 3rd-floor location.
- It was suggested that, in addition to using the website to link to artists, the AGN could also link to area art galleries. This should not be seen as a competitive thing. There could even be an art gallery tour, Sunday drive information, etc. There's a need for a repository of information, a printable map, and someone to coordinate the effort. (There was some discussion of tourism funding for this, e.g. through RTO8.)
- A similar tourism-related suggestion was to connect with County bus tours—encourage them to do a bus tour of artist's galleries (contact for this: Corie Arthur).
- Social media promotion should be used more to amplify what's happening at the AGN. It is necessary to reach a younger demographic and keep them informed and in a "continual conversation—not just once a year." (Recent improvements in this area, attributed to Caitlyn, were praised.)
- Some participants are already on the AGN's email list; others were not aware of it. Artists should be asked to share news/events with their networks.
- Suggestions for more vibrant promotion included:
    - "Go on TV"—show pieces of art, attract people. "Art has a strong magnetic power to attract people."
    - Poster or rack card in venues around town. (It was noted that there used to be such materials at the library.)

    - Getting community radio to have artist's talks (someone noted that this may be in the works already).
- Suggestions for engaging more with the community included:
    - At least once a year, there should be a festival or something unique—surprise people with a display of something they "never thought of as art."
    - It was noted that the Cobourg Waterfront Festival (free) used to have art hung on snow fences, but it has grown so large, and is now about bringing in tourists. The artists who display work come from all over the province.
- The AGN should strive to "put art in the way of people more," showing different kinds of art in new and surprising venues.

Local Artists

- Artists would like more professional development opportunities from their relationship with the AGN. "It would be wonderful if the AGN could support artists in furthering our careers—everything from how to write a good artist statement to other professional development or workshops."
- Other suggestions included an artist advisory committee and mentoring relationships through the AGN. Building community, and a network of artists, was felt to be deeply needed. Now, they are fragmented. It was noted that the studio tour has shrunk geographically and become fragmented: Trent Hills has its own, Cramahe has its own, and most of the County studio tour is now in Port Hope and the north. The AGN could play a needed role in connecting local and regional artists.
- There was a call to incorporate more local art into the AGN's offerings. Participants asked, as artists, what is our connection? "I've been in juried shows and have had smaller gallery shows, but I see the AGN as unreachable for me." The perception is that the AGN exhibits "either long-dead artists, or people at top of their career—nothing in-between."
- It was suggested that more dialogue is needed between the AGN and artists.

Takeaway Reflections

- The AGN needs to continue to build on the good things happening (stay active and do more; don't retrench).
- "It's encouraging that we're here at all—that the Gallery wants to engage public in this way. That speaks volumes."
- The AGN clearly needs stable financial resources. Connecting with other galleries and arts organizations, collaborating more, will attract funding. Being seen as a central hub leads to grants.

E.3. Community Town Halls: Themes

Strengths of AGN

Participants named many attributes that they considered to be strengths, including:

- Good permanent collection, depth of collection (large enough to build exhibitions from)
- Diverse, inclusive, and high-calibre exhibitions:
    - Recent curating (excellent, diversity, regions)

    - Rug hooking exhibit: best attendance, appealed to broad base
- Openness to sharing
- Online inventory
- Central location, beautiful building
- Volunteer corps
- Gift shop
- Quality/lighting/openness
- Lecture series—Andrew Gregs, TCS
- New youth organization
- Outreach to the AGO
- Openness to community input, being "consultative", holding focus groups (new)
- Professionalism—grouping of space
- Art/Exhibit openings
- AGN Newsletter (for members)
- Use of social media (new)
- Strong curators
- Longevity (of AGN being open)
- Gallery space (physically growing)
- Local/jury shows and exhibits
- Passion of art from community (new and old members)
- Volunteer database
- Willingness to reinvent
- Reputation across Northumberland/art community (respected)
- Entry: donation based
- Gala dinners/use of event space
- Opening receptions are festive and well attended
- Group shows bring diverse group

Permanent Collection and Exhibitions

- Participants called for the AGN to be inclusive in different ways, e.g., in the definition of art (paintings versus other forms, such as digital, mixed media, etc.), culturally, and in terms of demographics.
- There were calls for more experiential and experimental art, with target audiences, such as seniors, youth, and adults. Some said that the gallery catered to traditionalists and should focus more on contemporary art.
- It was noted that exhibitions should follow best practices in the field.
- For some artists, the AGN allows them to show exhibits outside of Toronto. One negative perception of artists in the County is that they don't get the footprint or critical dialogue when having an exhibition in Cobourg vs. Toronto or Peterborough. Northumberland isn't drawing people from outside of Northumberland.
- For the First Nations show, there was a huge number of students walking through. A program had been set up that was age appropriate (6 years old to high school students). Kids came from beyond Cobourg for that.
- There was some debate about the need for a curatorial vision, and showing more local art versus attracting artists of national and international prominence.

Facility

- One suggestion was to add a wine bar to the gallery space.
- Another facility-related suggestion was to revitalize the Port Hope gallery store (gear inventory to exhibitions, spruce up the space), as it represents the AGN in the community.
- The most frequent comment relating to the facility was the need for (and constraints around, because of heritage designation) more visible AGN signage.
- Gallery standards came up in the discussion frequently. To get a traveling show, or borrow one from another museum or gallery, you have to meet standards. Victoria Hall isn't built to current building codes; it doesn't meet the requirements to borrow art from any good gallery. This is not just a theoretical issue. The AGN wanted to borrow from the National Gallery for *Northumberland Went to War*, but it couldn't, as none of the requirements could be met. Standards address things like having a separate HVAC system, and the ability to receive, repack, and insure art.
- The idea of moving to a different space was raised, which some supported, while others wanted to stay and renovate. The idea of turning Victoria Hall into a cultural centre was raised.
- Another limitation of the current space: There is no space for studio programming, which would be in demand and could help the AGN get grants. They have looked into renting studio space, but the cost is prohibitive.

AGN Mandate/Vision/Governance

- Having a dedicated Board, with members willing to continue to serve through a contentious period, was seen by many as a positive. It was acknowledged that the new Board is still dealing with challenging issues, such as resource constraints.
- Others noted the need for Board renewal, stating that Board fatigue is evident. Serving on the Board is a big commitment.
- Also important, for some, is a lingering issue of trust. Board renewal (through new members) would help the organization "move on" from the past and demonstrate accountability.
- Some felt that the governance structures of the AGN are in need of review and new governance policies put in place to ensure there are limits on the powers of the Director, for example, and to ensure accountability.
- Governance training was also suggested to improve understanding of the roles and responsibilities of Boards (fiduciary responsibility of Board members), running effective Board meetings, preparing reports, etc.
- Board composition: some feel that representation is needed from the County (Warkworth and Hastings were mentioned), both on the Board and on committees. At the Warkworth town hall, there was strong support for a governance review, as well as establishing a regional Board committee.
- Board composition should also take into account experience and skills needed, such as professional fundraisers and communicators.
- The AGN needs to have a greater presence in the smaller communities, through exhibitions as well as art displayed in libraries and other community spaces.
- The theme of County outreach was not uniformly endorsed. Some questioned why the AGN was trying to reach the whole County when funding was not provided at that level to support it. Although it (county-wide service) is in the AGN's mandate, some said that the mandate should be revisited.
- Leadership: In addition to comments on Board leadership, there were calls for the Director position to be filled on a permanent basis as soon as possible. One participant stated that the AGN leadership needed to be charismatic and comfortable speaking out on all issues.

Community Impact/Awareness/Support

- Increasing the hours of exhibits would support increased visibility.
- Outreach: there were calls for programming appealing to youth, and a bigger outreach effort to the whole County (i.e., it's not just Cobourg's art gallery). This means more partnerships throughout Northumberland County.
- Some attendees mentioned the distance driving from Warkworth and other towns to Cobourg—transportation is a barrier.
- Visibility at the street level is a concern—signage/directional signs needed.
- Participants identified a need for more volunteers, as well as a volunteer coordinator and membership coordinator.
- Artists would value support from the AGN/Director operating as mentor, providing guidance in grant writing, career development, etc.
- To reach more students, it was suggested that the AGN improve relationships with school boards and link to curricula. There were calls for a greater focus on youth, and more education partnerships.
- There is room for growth. The AGN needs more staff. These are messages that were heard frequently.
- Some advice for improvement: Focus on this community and how to serve it, e.g., more outreach to students.
- "The AGN has so much to offer, but seems insular."
- Ideas for broader community engagement include:
    - Sponsor student competitions, engage students in art activities.
    - More programming in the evening or on weekends.
    - Bring activities outside the gallery, eg art classes in the communities.
    - "Bring events out to the community, e.g., pop ups."
    - Given the older demographic, there was a call to focus on programs for seniors.
    - Improve the speakers program, which some saw as haphazard.
    - Offer more than visual art, such as musical art, dance, performance art.
    - Some said that more risks have to be taken, or else the AGN will be seen as boring (there was a discussion of whether the funder would object to some of the ideas raised).
    - Concerts in the gallery.
    - Put the permanent collection on display in the Kraft building—"it's huge." This idea was also raised with respect to gala/fundraising possibilities.
    - It was noted that the DBIA is giving empty storefronts to arts groups. AGN has one (just installed lights), which is drawing attention.
    - Start an art rental program.
    - Engage artists by asking for their ideas (but not for art donations, when most are struggling to make a living).
    - Working with tourism agencies and the Chamber of Commerce to let visitors/new residents know about the AGN.
- The need for more ongoing community involvement was raised. "We need to let our members know that things have turned around here. And we need them to support the gallery or we're not going to have one (financially, and by volunteering). The Gallery has struggled enough. People need to step up."
- There should be a volunteer coordinator position, with recruitment of volunteers as a priority.
- Programs at the AGN can help expose communities to other cultures. One participant said she works part of the year in India and is interested in how to incorporate and include and invite cultural groups that are

now the majority in cities like Toronto. Experiential tourism is also important. She is interested in textiles, culture, etc. – public outreach. Family based activities are equally important.
- The same participant noted that there is an amazing piece of public art in the park, a work in progress. How does a public gallery deal with public art?

Communications and Marketing

- Participants called for improved communications and marketing. More and "louder" marketing would bring the AGN greater awareness. At present, there are 40,000 people within 10 km of the gallery, but "few know us."
- The AGN has an online presence, but it's modest. It should be easy to find out the exhibitions/hours/location/contact information.
- There were calls for the AGN to do a better job promoting itself beyond the arts community. Distribution of AGN promotional materials should be broader than a newsletter for members. Mass mailings, wider distribution were suggested to reach the general public.
- There is no evidence of electronic or digital art. The AGN appears to be rooted in the traditional, and low-tech. Some perceive this as a lack of excitement. It was suggested that the AGN "up the techy-ness a little bit."
- The recent problems are well known, but less well known is that the AGN has gone through a "cure". (Speaker referenced an essay criticizing the AGN in Watershed magazine—and that no rebuttal published yet.) Comments focused on the need for the AGN to be transparent and let the community know what happened, and what has changed—how such problems will not happen again because safeguards have been put in place. Throughout the engagement events, there were calls for the AGN to communicate change and ask for support in the form of funds and volunteers.
- Some participants called for the AGN to publicize the benefits of volunteering for the AGN, and to ensure that volunteers are recognized and receive benefits (such as discounts at the gallery shop).
- Similarly, a membership coordinator would ensure that members receive regular communications and membership could be promoted better to the community. Several comments focused on the fact that there is low awareness of membership (costs, benefits), and that memberships have lapsed without any contact from the AGN, which inadvertently conveys an attitude of indifference. Better management of this aspect would increase engagement and loyalty from the community.

Fundraising

- Recognizing the need to dramatically increase funding, it was suggested that the AGN have a professionally managed fund development program. The Board needs a fund development strategy, not one-off fundraising events.
- The AGN needs to secure more funding and more diversified sources of funding (federal/provincial/municipal) and for sponsorships to be sustainable, and to grow. Several times during the discussions, the lack of funding came up as a response to suggestions.

Priorities for the AGN

When asked, in small group discussions, to list what the AGN's top priorities should be moving forward, the following items emerged:

- Leadership (elements of leadership mentioned included: a compelling vision, the need to hire a skilled Director [permanent hire], and Board composition and experience)
- Marketing and Communications (be more visible, raise profile, increase social media use, and use consistent branding)
- Be more inclusive (outreach to whole community, with some saying whole County, and broaden variety of exhibitions) and innovative
- Sustainable fund development
- Partnerships (via presentations to service clubs, collaborations)
- Increased attendance

Takeaway Reflections

At the end of the town hall, attendees were asked to sum up what they were "taking away" from the evening. The responses were upbeat, as shown by the following selection of comments:

- Respect
- Hope that we'll succeed through connection with the community, showing passion for what we have here; that people will appreciate the value
- Encouraged so many have shown up
- New understanding
- Awareness and hope
- A welcoming community
- Optimism
- Engagement and opportunity
- Potential
- A lot of people care
- Getting more ideas
- Courage for the future
- Community and heart
- Optimism
- Hard work
- Hope for the future
- Transitioning ideas
- Appreciation for everyone coming out to contribute
- This art gallery is worth saving
- Partnerships
- An ice jam facing spring breakup
- Commitment
- A real passion for art
- Possibilities
- Where do we go from here? This night.
- Up
- Explosion

E. 4 Notable Quotations

"The AGN is still a hidden gem."

"A lot of history that the ordinary person can connect with" [on *Northumberland Went to War* exhibition].

"We need to look at this building. Without signage, standing in the lobby, visitors think, 'am I supposed to be here?'"

"Stop thinking small. Recognize what we have and promote it."

"There's so much potential here."

"Once people are in, they'll be convinced. It's just a matter of getting them in."

"I'm excited to see what's next."

"Caitlyn is here now and has all these [social media and communications] skills. She's made a difference."

"I would like to see the permanent collection more often—keep some of it displayed all the time. It seems like so long since I've seen those paintings."

"The art gallery should be a safe, welcoming place, and inspiring. We need to open it up. Every single person in Cobourg should come in, but for that to happen, they have to know about it and feel welcome."

"The AGN needs leadership with vision so strong it is dripping with colour and flavour. The vision has to be so acute that we can't stand not to be there."

"The Board needs to figure out their identity. What makes the AGN special? Identification with Cobourg as an interesting place?"

"Share the state of the gallery's finances with donors and members. Be open, not mysterious. Trust your audience."

"The way to improve engagement is to become more present, tactile and experiential."

"I want to see the AGN move from survival mode to sustainable and thriving."

E.5 Overview of Survey Responses

- 123 people took the survey. Relationships of respondents to the AGN included Visitors/Interested Residents (50%), Members (41%), Artists (27%), Staff (3%), Board members (9%), Donors (16%), Representatives of other community organizations (3%), and Other (16%). (Respondents were allowed to include more than one choice; therefore, the total exceeds 100%.) Most respondents (69%) live in Cobourg, with the rest living in Port Hope (13%), Warkwork (1.9%), and elsewhere. The majority of respondents (53%) said they were 65 or older, while 37% fell in the 45-65 age range and 10% were in the 26-45 age range.

- Overall, community awareness of and support for the AGN is high, with 90.2% of respondents saying they "understand" (44.7%) or "somewhat understand" (45.5%) what the AGN does. A large majority (86.2%) believes that the AGN is important to arts and culture in the community, with 60.2% saying the AGN is "very important."

- A large majority (81.6%) of respondents had visited the AGN in the last six months, with 50.5% saying they had visited in the last month. This indicates familiarity and a high level of engagement with the AGN's offerings to the public.

- Overall impressions of the AGN are slightly positive, with the majority (53.2%) choosing "Good" and 15.3% choosing "Excellent". On the negative side, 18.9% chose "Fair", and 5.4% chose "Poor". Similar mid-range results were found in questions relating to how engaging AGN activities are for the community, the AGN's support for artists, the facility, and satisfaction levels with specific programs. There is room for improvement here, and a solid base of support on which to build.

- In response to a question about the most important potential roles of the AGN, the top four choices were:
    - Stimulating, expanding, promoting local arts and culture (78%)
    - Showcasing regional artists (56%)
    - Educating (lectures & workshops) (53%)
    - Showcasing national artists (31%)

Detailed survey response data is found in the Appendix.

F. Funder/Donor Calls

Phase II of the project targeted revenue and funding feasibility. Key informant interviews were conducted with government, corporate, and individual stakeholders to gauge the number of potential funders and the level of funding available through sponsorships, grants, and donations. This information will be input for the Board's decision making regarding a fund development plan.

- Over a two-week period in July, key informant interviews were conducted, including with public and corporate funders/sponsors and individual donors identified by the AGN.
- In addition, an in-person meeting was held June 19th with representatives of the Town of Cobourg, the AGN's principal public funder.

The organization was able to provide a list of over 40 potential organizations and some individuals. These included current funding organizations/sponsors/donors (13) and potential sponsors/donors (30). While it has been acknowledged that relationships in this area are not currently a strength (no warm contacts were provided), several key funders and potential donors agreed to be interviewed for this project. As per the project scope, 25 contacts were made, with interview length and depth depending on the nature of the relationship with the AGN and, where applicable, the type of organization/program.

Where the organizations maintain centralized corporate sponsorship policies and require online applications (as opposed to through local offices or stores)—which is the case for all the banks, Wal-Mart, and several other organizations contacted—information was compiled and provided in Appendix B.

While each conversation took its own course, depending on the participant's level of knowledge about the AGN and willingness to share their views, the Questions asked covered:

- Attitudes Toward Organization
- Fundraising Feasibility
- Willingness to Give/Invest

The following themes and comments emerged from those conversations.

- Current public (municipal) funders **value the AGN and what it offers to the community**. They believe it has great potential as a community asset, which could further benefit both local residents and visitors. "We see it as a national asset, a jewel."

- As part of an integrated arts-related tourism marketing effort, the AGN could contribute significantly to the **economic development** of the region. (Some current and potential funding sources come via economic development/tourism organizations/departments, e.g., RTO8 is a potential regional funding partner, with interests in experiential tourism and matching funds available for marketing events.)

- In order to continue investing funds in the AGN, funders **need to have confidence in the vision, strategies, and governance** of the AGN. Some concerns were expressed about this, so attention should be paid to strengthening these areas and demonstrating improvement in grant proposals and requests.

- One example mentioned as an area for improvement is the current practice of running deficits for exhibitions and other operational decisions. Budgets should show at least a break-even position, and there should be a plan for attaining long-term sustainability. Planning needs to match resources, or else more resources need to be brought in to support desired programming before it is put in place.

- **Partnerships** with other organizations (non-profit and private sector) and with other funders are more important to funders than ever. They show broad community support and innovation. It is also necessary to have a plan that includes benefits to the community and how impact will be measured.