

7.3 FESTIVALS PROGRAM REFRESH

Director Community, Eamonn Fennessy

Cultural Development

Officer Recommendation

That Council:

1. Note the challenges that the current festival program is experiencing and the community's desire for increased cultural activities and events in the north of the municipality;
2. Endorse the following actions in response to those challenges:
 - a) The shift of Sydney Road Street Party and Coburg Night Market from annual to biennial events, from 2026/2027.
 - b) The reallocation of the above-mentioned festival resources into a new, multi-day festival in the northern parts of the municipality, which would retain and incorporate Fawkner Festa and Glenroy Festival;
 - c) The retention of Carols by the Lake and Brunswick Music Festival as annual events; and
 - d) An exploration into supporting community events through the development of a targeted funding pool.
3. Undertake community consultation to inform the development of a new multi-day festival in the northern parts of the municipality.

REPORT

Executive Summary

Council produces a large and successful festival program which requires a refresh to ensure that festivals and cultural programs are responsive to community needs and available more equitably across the municipality, while addressing challenges of increasing extreme weather conditions and condensed delivery timeframes in a financially responsible way.

The refreshed Council program will change the scheduling of two major events, Sydney Road Street Party and Coburg Night Market to biennial, consolidating these resources to make a new festival in the north of the municipality. This new festival will run across multiple locations and days, will significantly increase Council's investment in the North, and will be informed by community consultation and participation. The new festival will include a broad range of artforms and events, and the existing Glenroy Festival and Fawkner Festa would be retained and incorporated into the new festival.

Carols by the Lake and Brunswick Music Festival will continue annually, ensuring ongoing programming in Coburg and Brunswick. In addition, establishment of a small community event funding pool will be investigated to support more community-led events to take place across the municipality.

The community will be informed of the changes to the festival program in mid-May. Following this, community engagement is planned for late May to consult community on what they would like to see, and how they would like to participate in the new Northern festival.

Previous Council Decisions

N/A

1. Policy Context

- Council Plan Item 4.8: Ensure our festival program remains financially sustainable, responsive to community needs and that opportunities to engage with events and the arts are offered equitably across the municipality, catering to diverse and changing community needs.
- 2025/2026 Council Action Plan Item 67: Refresh festival program in line with community needs.
- Arts and Culture Strategy 2023-2030 – Commitments
 - A refreshed festival program that is flexible, innovative, and more accessible across the municipality
 - Increased employment for First Nations artists
 - Increased arts and cultural programming and creative spaces in the North of the municipality
 - Increased access to spaces and funding for artists and creatives to make, collaborate and present work

2. Background

Council's festival program is a large, diverse and successful program with many legacy events. It currently incorporates Fawkner Festa, Glenroy Festival, Coburg Night Market, Carols by the Lake, Brunswick Music Festival and Sydney Road Street Party. All festivals take place between October – March.

The current program is heavily weighted towards Brunswick and Coburg. During the development of Council's Arts and Culture Strategy 2023-2030, the community called for a refreshed festival program, that was more accessible across the municipality. This need has been reiterated through the current Council Plan and Council Action Plan.

The current festival program has been impacted by extreme weather and climate change, has had limited opportunities for artists and community involvement, has faced increasing costs due to logistical requirements and has operational challenges due to the volume of festivals held in a short timeframe.

3. Issues

Festival challenges – the need for change

Geographic distribution and access to the arts

Through the Arts and Culture Strategy consultation the community expressed a desire to see a more accessible and equitable festival program across the municipality, particularly focussing on increasing programming in the north.

The desire for a refreshed festival program and more activity in the north was also heard consistently from community during the Council Plan process, and through recent community consultations.

Participation in arts and cultural activity increases social cohesion and community connections and supports wellbeing.

The Merri-bek community is socio-economically diverse, so while the creative community is thriving south of Bell Street (and becoming increasingly active in North Coburg), it is important to also recognise that access to arts and culture is often connected to location and socioeconomic background. Hadfield, Glenroy and Fawkner experience significant disadvantage; those with lower incomes and reduced access to information are also less likely to participate in arts activity. The Arts and Culture Strategy holds equity at its core to ensure that everyone in Merri-bek can participate in arts and cultural activities.

Currently less than 20 per cent of the festivals budget is spent outside of Brunswick and Coburg. Due to budget and staffing limitations, there is currently no scope to increase festivals programming in the north of the municipality without a redesign of the festival program in its entirety.

The proposed festival program refresh seeks to redistribute some resources to the north of the municipality to enable a significant annual festival and increased opportunities for participation for artists and audiences.

Extreme weather and climate change

Since November 2022, six events have been moved or significantly redesigned due to extreme weather including:

- 2022: Fawkner Festa and Coburg Night Market due to site flooding
- 2023: Carols by the Lake went ahead in extremely rainy conditions in a reduced format. Fawkner Festa was relocated due to site flooding.
- 2024: Music for the Mob was moved indoors due to extreme heat. Fawkner Festa was relocated indoors due to storms and rain.
- 2025: Fawkner Festa was cancelled after 2 hours due to extreme rain.

Sydney Road Street Party (held in early March) is also susceptible to extreme heat, with pre-event cancellation conversations held most years due to extreme forecasts.

The majority of the festival program takes place outdoors in Council parks or on roads during Spring and Summer. Once an event has been designed for a site, it is incredibly difficult to move, change or reschedule it for many logistical and contractual reasons. If an event is cancelled at late notice, Council is still liable for all payments.

Most outdoor events are reliant on the use of diesel generators.

The proposed festival program refresh features increased programming in indoor spaces, increased programming outside of the hottest months of the year and a reduced focus on single day events that cannot be remounted after cancellation. It will also reduce the use of fossil fuels and single use food and beverage packaging.

Limited opportunities for artists and community involvement

Live music currently forms the majority of the festival programming, through Brunswick Music Festival, Sydney Road Street Party, Carols by the Lake and Coburg Night Market. While we do consider other forms of performance at these events when possible, the stage program is significant.

Officers have received consistent feedback from community members about the lack of opportunities for other performing arts.

Due to the current fixed nature of the program, there are also limited opportunities for community to engage with the planning for the events or for the festival program to be responsive to community need or arising issues.

The proposed festival program refresh will enable increased multi artform programming and a more flexible program that can be responsive to community needs and feedback.

Festival timing pressures

The festival program is large and is delivered within a very short timeframe of November to March.

In addition to timing and the size of the program, in recent years the amount of compliance has also increased.

The proposed festival program refresh reduces the number of events that will require POPEs (Place of Public Entertainment occupancy permits) each season and expands the period of festival delivery to reduce risk for staff.

Festivals Refresh – Proposed Future Program

The refreshed festival program has been designed to:

- retain Merri-bek's reputation for excellent festivals and free programming;
- be responsive to community needs and arising issues and opportunities and increase community participation;
- be more available across the municipality and more flexible;
- be more climate resilient and reduce fuel emissions; and
- create more opportunities for more artists.

A New Festival for the North

A new annual festival in the north of the municipality will be created with redistributed resources from Sydney Road Street Party or Coburg Night Market. It will:

- Create more localised opportunities to experience arts and culture, taking place across multiple suburbs.
- Include and retain existing suburb-specific events, Glenroy Festival and Fawkner Festa.
- Activate non-traditional and under-utilised spaces and distribute programming across community venues including Council hubs, shopfronts, neighbourhood houses, schools etc.
- Feature multi artform programming, increasing opportunities for performers, dancers, writers, visual artists etc.
- Include significant community participation and collaboration in programming such as working groups, partnerships, and artists in residence at schools.
- Respond to consistent community feedback seeking increased activation in the northern suburbs of the municipality.
- Include programming of artists co-creating with students, residencies, live music in parks, creative activations, studio tours and workshops, exhibitions, new site-specific performances and more.
- Increase equity in arts and culture investment across the municipality.
- Enable better distribution of events across a year, alleviating staff pressure and the effects of hot weather with all events clustered in the warmer months as they are now.
- Address the threat of climate change related cancellations on festival program and carbon emissions of festival programming through increased indoor programming, use of existing power sources and flexibility to program on multiple days/times.

Some major festivals shifting to biennial delivery

Sydney Road Street Party and Coburg Night Market will be delivered biennially, a shift away from the current annual delivery schedule.

This change will enable:

- Increased and improved programming at these events when they occur.
- Festival resources and opportunities for artists, audiences and traders to be distributed more equitably across the municipality.
- Reduction of the number of events that have significant climate impact through use of single-use packaging and diesel generators.

- The festival program to have a greater focus on opportunities for artists.

Brunswick Music Festival refresh

Brunswick Music Festival will continue as an annual event and will be refreshed to include:

- Working with live music venues to ensure the festival continues to deliver visitation and economic impact.
- New and exciting free programming for the wide range of audiences that usually attend the Sydney Road Street Party.
- Increased professional development and networking opportunities for artists.
- Building deeper relationships with artists and venues, resulting in increased community-engaged programming.

Ongoing investment in community events

- Carols by the Lake will continue as an annual event.
- A new funding opportunity will be investigated to support the delivery of community-led events across the municipality, responding to feedback about the need for this type of funding, particularly as event costs increase. This would be funded within existing resources.

Planning

The development of the Northern festival will occur during 2026/2027 for the first presentation in late 2027. A Fawkner Festa will be delivered in late 2026. Coburg Night Market, Carols by the Lake and Brunswick Music Festival will go ahead as usual and Sydney Road Street Party will not go ahead in 2027.

Community impact

The refreshed festival program will have a significant positive impact on residents in currently under serviced areas of the municipality, creating a festival centred on community participation and accessibility and driving new opportunities for social connection. Community consultation will directly inform the creation of the festival, through both the upcoming consultation in May/June and into the future through partnerships and working groups.

Artists across a diverse range of artforms will also benefit, as more opportunities are created through the new festival. The refreshed program will retain opportunities for community stallholders at events throughout the program.

Climate emergency and environmental sustainability implications

The refreshed festival program seeks to reduce the impact of climate hazards and manage climate risk through increased indoor programming and increasing events presented in cooler seasons of the year. Sydney Road Street Party and Coburg Night Market produce the most emissions and waste in the current festival program. Holding them every second year will greatly reduce the use of diesel generators and single use food and beverage packaging. Introducing a multi-day event to the North will mean that even if outdoor events require cancellation, there will be other festival offerings taking place.

Economic sustainability implications

The refreshed program will have a positive economic impact on businesses in the North of the municipality. There may be some impact to businesses, particularly in Brunswick, which we seek to mitigate through new partnerships and programming at Brunswick Music Festival, and a focus on increasing the benefits of the Sydney Road Street Party every second year.

Legal and risk considerations

The key risk for the refreshed program is community resistance to the scheduling change for Sydney Road Street Party and Coburg Night Market. This has been partially mitigated by continuing to deliver these events on a biennial basis, while ensuring annual ongoing programming in Brunswick and Coburg. In addition, these risks will be mitigated through ongoing engagement with key stakeholders.

Human Rights Consideration

The implications of this report have been assessed in accordance with the requirements of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities and this report is relevant to the right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of association.

4. Community consultation and engagement

Previous engagement

- The Arts and Culture Strategy engagement in early 2023 highlighted the need for increased programming in the North of the municipality and increased opportunities for local artists.
- Recent engagement on the Public Art Policy has received many responses calling for increased arts investment in the North of the municipality.

Community Engagement Plan

- Individual meetings with most effected stakeholders, including traders' associations.
- Pop up engagements in Fawkner, Glenroy and Pascoe Vale.
- Focus group/workshop for artists and arts organisations and communities in the North.
- Briefings with Reference Groups and Advisory Committees.
- Reach into multicultural communities through community connectors.
- Online and hard copy surveys shared through an extensive communications campaign and directly with effected artists, stallholders and community members.

Affected persons rights and interests

Before making a decision that affects a person's rights, Council must identify whose rights may be directly affected and provide an opportunity for that person (or persons) to convey those views regarding the effect on their rights and consider those views.

The refreshed festival program will affect community members, artists, audiences and festival attendees.

Communications

Part 1: The changes to the program will be communicated via media releases, Council website and social media. The key message for this campaign will be:

- We are making changes to our festival program from 2026/27 with Coburg Night Market and Sydney Road Street Party changing to biennial events
- These festival resources will be reallocated to form a new, multi-day festival in the North which will incorporate and retain the current Fawkner Festa and Glenroy Festival.
- Brunswick Music Festival and Carols by the Lake will remain as annual events.
- The first Northern festival is currently proposed for September 2027.

- Community engagement will be underway to inform the design of the new event.

Part 2: Following the initial communication campaign, the community engagement process will be communicated via Council's website, social media, posters, newsletters, community organisations and via Advisory Committees and Reference Groups. Information will be translated into Merri-bek's key languages.

Key messages for the consultation are:

- That we are seeking your help in shaping new multi-day and multi-artform festival in Merri-bek's North.
- This will be resourced by making Coburg Night Market and Sydney Road Street Party biennial.
- Glenroy Festival and Fawkner Festa will continue as part of this new festival.
- The first Northern festival is currently proposed for September 2027.
- Questions will include:
 - What activities would you like to see as part of the new Northern festival (Multiple tick boxes: music, performance, exhibitions, outdoor events, children's activities, studio tours, workshops, markets, community stalls, interactive installations or performances, other)
 - What locations would you like to see activated? (Multiple tick boxes: Parks, libraries, shops, schools, community venues, alternative spaces, other)
 - What artforms are you interested in? (Multiple tick boxes: music, dance, performance, visual art, sound, digital, writing, craft and design, other)
 - How would you like to be involved? (Multiple tick boxes: audience member, participate in workshops, artist, stallholder, other)
 - Any other comments or ideas (Open text)

5. Officer Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Council officers involved in the preparation of this report have no conflict of interest in this matter.

6. Financial and Resources Implications

There is no additional resourcing required for this recommendation.

7. Implementation

- Early May: briefing of key stakeholders
- 15 May: Communications regarding changes to festival program.
- June – July: Consultation period soliciting ideas for the new Northern festival.
- 13 July: Council briefing to share community feedback on Northern festival

Attachment/s

There are no attachments for this report.