

Mercer Island PROS

Recreation, Arts, and Culture

Chapter 7

The City's recreation, arts, and culture programs enhance physical and mental health, provide educational value, build social connectedness, and are highly valued by the community. Recreation, arts, and culture programming assume many forms such as classes, athletics, camps, gymnasium, drop-in programs, performances, special events, social groups, and more. The City is fortunate to host these activities in a variety of indoor and outdoor venues, including the Mercer Island Community and Event Center (MICEC), which is a critical facility to the Recreation Division's delivery of services. This facility provides active recreational space, community gathering opportunities, and serves as a local and regional venue for private events, meetings, and athletic rentals.

RECREATION AND ARTS TRENDS

Various resources have been assembled and summarized to offer a comprehensive overview of current recreation trends, market demands, and agency comparisons. The following national and state data highlights some of the current trends in recreation and arts and may frame future considerations in program and activity development. Additional trend data is provided in Appendix I.

- 77% of respondents to the American Engagement with Parks Survey indicate that having a high-quality park, playground, public open space, or recreation center nearby is an essential factor in deciding where they want to live. ⁽¹⁾
- Nearly all (93%) of park and recreation agencies provide recreation programs and services. The top five most commonly offered programs include holiday or other special events (65%), educational programs (59%), group exercise (59%), fitness programs (58%), and day or summer camps (57%). ⁽²⁾
- Just over half of Americans ages 6 and older participated in outdoor recreation at least once in 2019, the highest participation rate in five years. (Note: This trend may be higher in 2020 and 2021 given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.) The number of outings per participant declined, however, in 2019 continuing a decade-long trend and resulting in fewer total recreational outings. ⁽³⁾
- Youth aged 6 to 17 were active outside far less in 2019 than in previous years; the average number of outings per child dropped 15% between 2012 and 2019. ⁽³⁾
- Nearly all park and recreation providers in the U.S. experienced declines in revenue in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as May 2020, most providers had to close facilities temporarily in accordance with health and safety directives. Nearly half of the providers also furloughed or laid off staff due to the funding and facility impacts of the pandemic. ⁽⁴⁾

- When it comes to costs and revenues, the percentage of costs recovered depends on the type of organization. On average, respondents to the 2020 Managed Recreation Industry survey said they recovered nearly 50% of their operating costs. Only a few facilities reported that they covered more than 75% of their operating costs via revenue. For public organizations, 45% of costs are recovered, up slightly from 42% in 2019. ⁽⁴⁾
- Research from the US Bureau of Economic Analysis shows that arts and culture drive 4.2% of the US gross domestic product (GDP), generating \$736.6 Billion in 2015. In Washington State, this sector beats the national GDP, providing 7.8% of the State's GDP. Both in Washington and nationally, arts and culture surpass construction and education services in contribution to GDP. ⁽⁵⁾
- 28% of the nation's approximately 4,500 Local Arts Agencies (LAAs) are government agencies, departments, programs, facilities, or other associations. Of those LAAs, 80% are affiliated with municipalities. LAAs promote, support, and develop the arts at the local level, ensuring a vital presence for arts and culture throughout America's communities. ⁽⁶⁾
- 84% of LAAs present their own cultural programming to their community. These programs include after-school arts education programs, public art, free concerts in the park, exhibitions, heritage and preservation efforts, festivals, and special events. ⁽⁶⁾
- 53% of LAAs said the general public's perceived value of the arts has increased since the onset of the pandemic. ⁽⁶⁾
- The pandemic disproportionately impacted the cultural sector. It will be among the last sectors to fully reopen, in part due to social distancing requirements. ⁽⁷⁾
- After eight consecutive years of increases, the average size of the LAAs budget (income/revenue) declined 10.0% in 2020 and is anticipated to decline another 10.6% in 2021. ⁽⁸⁾
- People who say their neighborhood has easy access to quality arts and cultural activities tend to be more satisfied, identify more with local lifestyle and culture, and invest more time and resources in their communities. ⁽⁹⁾
- Arts activities increase residents' interest in getting involved in local issues and projects. 86% of civic engagement participants want to be involved in future projects. After their involvement, people living where projects occurred were more than twice as likely to be civically engaged as those whose blocks did not have projects. ⁽¹⁰⁾

Sources: (to be footnoted)

(1) American Engagement with Parks Survey (Need date)

(2) 2020 NRPA Agency Performance Review

(3) 2020 Outdoor Participation Report

(4) 2020 State of the Industry Report

(5) US Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2015

(6) AFTA 2020 LAA Profile http://surveys.americansforthearts.org/r/391676_60549cd4741a42.54488835

(7) ArtsWA <https://www.arts.wa.gov/wa-covid-recovery-survey/>

(8) AFTA LAA COVID-19 Impacts

https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/2Pager_ImpactOfCOVIDPandemicOnLAAs_Wit hBudgetHistory.pdf

(9) Knight Foundation Community Ties survey [Community-Ties-Final-pg.pdf \(knightfoundation.org\)](#). Builds off Soul of Community Longitudinal Study (2008-2010) conducted by the Knight Foundation found key drivers of community attachment to be social offerings, openness, and aesthetics. <https://knightfoundation.org/sotc/overall-findings/>

(10) Nicodemus, A., Engh, R., & Mascaro, C. (2016). Adding it Up: 52 Projects by 30+ Artists in 4 Neighborhoods. Metris Arts

Recreation Reset Strategy

The City of Mercer Island's recreation and arts and culture programs were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as facilities were closed, revenues declined, and staffing was reduced in March 2020. The City's leadership took the opportunity during the pandemic to think strategically about how to "reset" the Recreation Division for a successful future. The pause in the provision of most services led to the development of a new strategic approach for delivering recreation, arts, culture, special events, and MICEC programs and services. The adopted Reset Strategy, which is included as Appendix E, provides guidance for the purposeful allocation or investment of City resources into recreation and arts & culture programs and services. The Reset Strategy also guides the long-term work and offerings of the Recreation Division, targeting resources and efforts toward:

- Service and program offerings that are aligned with community values and goals.
- Financial sustainability that ensures stewardship and accessibility that benefits all.
- A purposefully planned balance between community investment and individual benefits.

As the City moves forward with implementing the Reset Strategy, it will focus on balancing competing needs and priorities, and determining the best way to maximize or optimize benefits using limited resources. The Reset Strategy's cost recovery framework (where some programs receive a greater share of tax dollars, and some programs subsidize others) will help the City be deliberate about offering services where it is the best or most appropriate and concentrate support toward core services and programs of the Recreation Division. Core and desirable services are defined below.

Social Good or Public Good Core Services

These programs and services are those that may benefit all members of the community, are typically offered through tax support (rather than user/participant fees), and may focus on health, safety, equity, or access. These programs and services will receive the greatest share of community investment.

Business Sustainability Core Services

These programs and services produce revenue for the City that covers some of the indirect costs of programs or reduces the need for tax support for other programs. These programs and services are designed to meet the market's needs and are offered with market rates in mind.

These programs typically benefit individuals or specific groups. They are financially supported by the beneficiaries of the service.

Desirable Services

Many programs and services could be labeled as desirable, and this categorization includes those programs and services that simply do not fall into either the social/public good core or the business sustainability core. Desirable programs offered by the City should meet these criteria:

- The program is likely to generate sufficient revenues to offset its costs and meet cost recovery targets.
- Hosting the program at a City facility will not adversely affect the City's ability to offer social/public good or business sustainability core services.
- High demand exists.
- The program will serve a large population or significant, identified community need.

Recreation and Arts Programs

The City has, in the past and will continue to offer in the future, a wide range of programs and activities to diverse participants in a multitude of settings. This commitment is consistent with residents' stated desire for the City to offer programs for various ages and abilities. As the Reset Strategy is implemented, the Recreation Division will initially focus on providing programs and services categorized as "core" and expand offerings in response to community needs and as resources allow. The strongest demand for recreation programs has been for:

- Youth summer camps.
- Drop-in sports, such as pickleball.
- Field and gymnasium rentals for sports programs and leagues.
- Meeting and event room rentals.
- Organized, instructor-led fitness programs.

In addition to advocating for popular, recurring programs, residents have expressed interest in the City offering more of the following:

- Outdoor classes and activities.
- Aquatics programming such as swimming, water safety, and boating.
- Educational classes.

Going forward, recreation staff will pilot new programs to explore the demand for trends such as e-sports, intergenerational activities, and engagement with the outdoors. As an island community the demand is high for water-oriented activities, and the Recreation staff will pursue enhanced programming opportunities at the City's waterfront locations. There is strong community support for the City to avoid duplication of services and to partner with other providers as a way to satisfy demand, enrich the variety of offerings, and efficiently use City resources.

Recreation Facilities

The City of Mercer Island hosts recreation and arts and culture programs in its parks and in several municipal buildings, most notably the Mercer Island Community and Event Center (MICEC). The day-to-day management, ongoing maintenance, and long-term reinvestment in these facilities are crucial to the success of the City's programs. Additionally, efficient scheduling and use of the facilities help to ensure that cost recovery, diversity, equity and inclusion, program lifespan vitality, and other goals are met. The City should continue to coordinate with the other facility providers on Mercer Island, such as the Mercer Island School District, the Boys & Girls Club, Mary Wayte Pool, and the Stroum Jewish Community Center, among others, on program offerings and scheduling.

When residents were asked to state how they would prioritize the use of MICEC space, they indicated the following were top priorities:

- Activities for youth
- Activities for seniors
- Adaptive or therapeutic recreation
- Fitness programs,
- After school or school break programs.

Additionally, there is strong support for the MICEC to serve as a gathering place for spontaneous play and socialization, one-time activities, and special events, and to showcase local art. The City can leverage the facility as an event center by maximizing private use on evenings and weekends. Also, the future use and function of the North Annex at the MICEC should be guided by a focused master planning effort to examine the community needs and program options suited for that space while also identifying options to replace the aging infrastructure.

Special Events

The Recreation Division is responsible for the overall coordination of community and special events. These public events provide gathering opportunities, celebrations, inspiration, remembrance, activation of Town Center and city parks, entertainment, and education. Special events draw the community together and also attract off-Island visitors. Some recurring, multi-day community events of the recent past included Summer Celebration, Mostly Music in the Park, Friday Night Films, Leap for Green, Shakespeare in the Park, and Illuminate MI. The City has also hosted or supported numerous one-time or single-day events.

Community gathering and special events should continue to be an area of emphasis; however, the overall number and breadth of City-sponsored special events should be carefully managed to align with the availability of resources and impacts to general park and facility use. Upcoming policy and budget deliberations will guide the City in the number and extent of the special events through the allocation of dedicated resources. A structured approach will help the City manage the growth of these popular offerings; ensure high-quality, adequately resourced events; and enlist community sponsorships, partnerships, and support.

Opportunities to connect and embrace life are clearly crucial to Mercer Island residents, particularly as the community emerges from the global pandemic. Recent surveys showed strong community support for spending “some tax dollars on a few special events open to all community members,” a desire for more “community events for those without children,” and an interest in “performing arts such as community theater or concerts.”

Arts and Culture

The City of Mercer Island embraces the critical role it plays in supporting and sustaining the community’s rich and diverse cultural and arts identity. This responsibility is upheld largely through the ongoing work of the Recreation Division and Arts Council, which is more fully described in the City’s Comprehensive Arts and Culture Plan (adopted in November 2018 and provided in Appendix F).

As the City’s official Local Arts Agency (LAA), the Arts Council strives to:

- Advocate for the arts, artists, and arts organizations on Mercer Island.
- Stimulate and promote community awareness, education, and enjoyment of the fine arts.
- Support performing, visual, and literary arts programs, projects, and events.

These goals have been advanced through a range of one-time and ongoing activities, including oversight of the City’s public art collection, the Mercer Island Gallery, and the Greta Hackett Outdoor Sculpture Gallery; advocating for art experiences such as special programs and classes, concerts, film series, dances, and theater performances; fostering community art creation projects; and convening and cooperating with other arts organizations.

The Comprehensive Arts and Culture Plan describes a vision of assimilating “positive art experiences into everyday life for all community members” and areas of policy focus and actions to take to achieve that vision. The plan also names two barriers to achieving the vision: (1) a lack of coordinated cooperation among Mercer Island arts groups, and (2) a lack of space for arts activities and performances. The plan encourages enhancing alliances in the local arts community to improve availability of arts and culture resources and the ability to fulfill community needs.

The City’s PROS Plan community surveys reflect similar themes and is in alignment with the Arts and Culture Plan findings. Community members voiced a desire for the City to “explore partnerships” as a way to deliver program, event and facility-based “opportunities for all.” Community members see the City as playing a critical role in facilitating access to the diversity of arts and culture opportunities, regardless of whether or not the City is the primary provider of an event, activity, or facility.

As the City implements the Recreation Reset Strategy, it is redefining expectations for allocating City resources and the outcomes sought from using those resources. Work plans for the Arts Council, the Parks and Recreation Commission, and City staff identify the policies that need to be developed or

updated to enhance alignment with the Reset Strategy and implement program, events, and other experiences. The City will conscientiously target its arts and culture work efforts and devote energy to evaluating performance on named objectives.

Arts and Culture Programming

The Recreation Division and its community partners deliver arts and culture programming, with support from the Arts Council and community volunteers. Arts and culture opportunities have included visual arts classes and exhibits, dance performances and instruction, concerts, summer camps with various arts themes, and special events. As with the approach to other recreation programs, the City endeavors to provide a broad array of public art and community arts and culture programs encompassing literary arts, performing arts, educational topics, history, and diverse cultures accessible to people of all ages and abilities. Programming varies yearly based on demand, input from the Arts Council and community members, special occasions, availability of resources, and new opportunities.

Arts Venues & Assets

The City conducts arts and culture programs and events at the MICEC. The facility includes the Mercer Island Gallery, a dance room, an outdoor covered terrace, a gymnasium, classrooms, and a large event space. The City maintains a public art collection of more than 65 two- and three-dimensional works, which can be found in public parks and rights-of-way, municipal buildings, and at the Greta Hackett Outdoor Sculpture Gallery. Outdoor venues for arts and culture opportunities include the City's parks and an amphitheater. Other resources and assets include the City's 1% for the Art fund, which supports the public art collection, and digital tools like the Public Art Story Map and STQRY.

The City's arts and culture programming, venues and assets are augmented by those provided by Mercer Island arts organizations. A list of these critically essential partners and resources can be found in the Comprehensive Arts and Culture Plan (Appendix F).

FUTURE PROGRAMMING DIRECTIONS

Implementation of the Recreation Reset Strategy will take a few years and will require ongoing collaboration between staff, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Arts Council, the City Council, and the community. Phased implementation of the Reset Strategy was designed in response to the stipulations in the cost recovery and resource allocation philosophy, community input, and the near-term uncertainties of the pandemic.

The Reset Strategy is not designed to simply restart everything at once but to improve outcomes and align offerings to an overall community investment and prioritization structure. Program offerings will be considered based on several factors, including an assessment of trends and program life cycle stages, competition and duplication within the community, desired program outcomes, partnership and

cooperation possibilities, the commitment level of potential participants, availability of resources, and consistency with the cost recovery and resource allocation philosophy.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, it is an exciting time in the Recreation Division as programming and services resume with a robust business framework, in alignment with community priorities, and with an eye towards the future.