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Groundswell

Looking Forward Feasibility Study

A Resource Hub for Small Music Organizations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of a stabilization effort in a post-covid, inflationary economic environment, Looking Forward maps out a path for the creation of a resource hub that provides administrative resources for small classical/jazz music organizations. This collaboration will help organizations become more resilient and efficient in a rapidly changing world, allowing arts leaders to focus their limited energy on artistic excellence and community engagement.

- **The Concept:**
 - Create a shared resource hub to provide administrative support for very small (1 to 2 staff) music organizations to help stabilize and sustain organizations through the efficiency
- **The Problem:**
 - Small organizations face burnout as they attempt to fulfill a breadth of specialized requirements – from accounting to marketing, human resources, contract negotiation and performance production.
- **The Solution:**
 - Shared-services cooperative model providing accounting, admin, marketing, and performance-specific support – enabling improved focus on artistic excellence and community engagement.
- **Key Findings:**
 - Following a robust consultation period, this study shows that there is sufficient support for a resource hub to be feasible, but requires commitment from organizations and requires further financial resources to aid in launching the new entity.

THE PROCESS

- The work was initiated by Executive Director of GroundSwell, Heather Lewis who engaged Relish Ideas to lead a research, consultation and feasibility study.
- The GroundSwell board of directors formed an ad hoc committee to provide oversight and feedback for the work, meeting three times throughout the process.
- Individual meetings were held with experts:
 - **Mahri White, Executive Director, ArtSpace Inc.**
 - Experienced with past accounting service offered through ArtSpace
 - ArtSpace is home to many arts organizations and with a mandate to aid in the administration of arts organization Mahri validated support for housing the new hub
 - **Thom Sparling, Executive Director, Creative Manitoba**
 - Experienced in providing resources to a broad spectrum of arts organizations
 - Launched a web-based resource hub in fall 2025
 - Sought definition of existing hub goals to be mindful of not replicating existing resource tools and functions
 - **Bill Elliott, Acting Director & CFO, Winnipeg Art Gallery**
 - Financial and leadership experience with administering small and large organizations
 - **Nick Slonovsky, Legal Clinic for the Arts, U of M**
 - Expert in legal structures and personal advocate for arts and culture
- Community consultation included:
 - One **survey** was conducted through Survey Monkey to 88 small to medium sized band, coral, classical and jazz organizations with 10% response rate
 - One **focus group** was conducted at ArtSpace with five potential hub members
 - Individuals not able to attend the focus group were met with on an individual basis
- Environmental scan:
 - Investigated arts hub models in Canada, US and Europe

THE COOPERATIVE MODEL – MEMBERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

A cooperative is a democratic structure – member-owned – that helps address a concern raised repeatedly throughout consultations; the need to preserve organizational independence while sharing administrative functions. Participants were clear that artistic programming and organizational identity must remain autonomous while administrative supports become collective.

The co-operative model naturally reinforces this separation by positioning the hub as a service organization owned by members rather than a centralized governing body.

- **Why a Cooperative?:**
 - Based on the survey, focus group and one-on-one consultations, there is strong and consistent support for the resource hub to operate as a **not-for-profit co-operative**, rather than a traditional incorporated non-profit.
 - Participants expressed unanimous preference for a co-operative model due to its democratic governance, service orientation and stronger accountability to participating organizations.
 - Unlike a traditional non-profit corporation, where governance can become disconnected from service users over time, a co-operative embeds accountability into the organization itself.
- **Legal Definition and Purpose of a cooperative:**
 - In Canadian law, a co-operative is designed to exist for the mutual benefit of its members, rather than for private profit.
 - A non-profit co-operative can be established specifically to provide shared services, reduce costs and pool expertise among member organizations.
 - A co-operative structure responds directly to challenges of the organizations because it is inherently designed for **shared problem-solving and collective service delivery**.
- **Membership Structure:**
 - Participating organizations become members with voting rights, creating a structure where the hub remains focused on member needs and practical outcomes.
 - Focus group participants expressed concern that a standard non-profit model could eventually drift from its mission or replicate the fragmentation already experienced in the sector.
- **Governance Framework:**

- **One-member, one-vote governance** – regardless of organizational size, this ensures equitable influence among small and large organizations alike
- **Mission discipline** – the co-operative remaining focused on delivering practical member services
- **Collaborative ownership** – reducing perceptions of one organization controlling resources
- **Shared investment and accountability** – increases commitment from participating members
- **Charitable Status: Do NOT Prioritize Charitable Status at Launch**
 - The recommendation is to establish the co-operative first as a non-profit co-operative and delay charitable registration to a later time or phase (unless a clear long-term financial case emerges during start-up)
 - Under Canadian charitable law, organizations must exist primarily for recognized charitable purposes such as:
 - advancement of education
 - relief of poverty
 - advancement of religion
 - other recognized community benefit purposes
 - A hub focused on shared administration, bookkeeping, marketing and organizational efficiency may struggle to qualify as charitable because its primary beneficiaries are member organizations rather than the public.
 - The research itself highlighted a belief among participants that funders are likely to view the hub model positively because it moves the sector from “competitive scarcity to collaborative abundance”
 - Non profit without charity status provides greater agility to adapt services and revenue generation as the hub learns what members actually need
 - As a non-profit many funding sources are already accessible without charitable status, including:
 - arts councils
 - cultural sector development grants
 - labour-force and workforce development programs
 - innovation and shared services grants
 - community economic development funding
 - digital transformation and capacity-building streams

Action Item #1:

To maximize sustainability and grant eligibility, the hub should be incorporated as a **provincial non-profit co-operative in Manitoba.**

The recommended structure is a **multi-stakeholder service co-operative** with **member organizations as the core voting body.**

Membership Categories

Research showed that members having varying levels of needs which may be accommodated through varying levels of membership benefits with varying costs.

1. Founding Organizational Members (Voting; Paid)

Small and medium arts organizations accessing hub services.

Examples:

- concert presenters
- festivals
- youth music organizations
- opera, choral, chamber and contemporary music organizations

Each member organization receives:

- One vote regardless of size
- Access to shared services
- Participation in annual planning and fee setting
- Eligibility to elect board representation
- Accessing a full defined list of benefits (TBD)

2. Affiliate / Supporting Members (Non-Voting or Limited Voting)

Organizations that support the ecosystem but may not use services directly. An affiliate membership allows for communication and engagement without responsibility of payment or deriving direct benefits.

Examples:

- larger anchor institutions
- sector organizations
- education partners
- arts service organizations

These members may provide expertise, sponsorship, mentorship or in-kind support.

3. Professional Service Members (Optional & Non-Voting)

Independent contractors or professionals providing services through the hub. Formalizing membership creates commitment and community.

Examples:

- bookkeepers
- grant writers
- designers
- production technicians
- fundraising specialists

This creates a pathway to build a trusted service network while strengthening employment stability for arts administrators – a key aspiration identified in the research.

Governance Recommendation

A **small skills-based board elected by members** is recommended rather than a large representative board. Board directors do not need to be members of the collective and we recommend they not be members to ensure a business minded, unbiased board keeps the organization focused on service delivery. This also reduces the burden on the members who should be able to focused entirely upon their main jobs and derive benefit from the co-op's services.

- Bylaws will outline terms (suggested 1-3)
- 3-5 elected member representatives
 - 1 financial/accounting representative
 - 1 governance/legal representative
 - 1 sector innovation or fundraising expert
 - 1 marketing expert

The recommended composition balances democratic accountability with operational competency and avoids creating another overly burdensome volunteer structure – a concern voiced repeatedly in the research.

ACTION ITEM #2

Engage a marketing firm to provide a list of names. Because the co-op has a marketing purpose and must layer with member brands, there should be careful consideration of how the co-op (which is completely unique entity in the Manitoba landscape) brand and reputation will be contextualized. The firm will:

- Suggest names, conducting a name search in the registry to ensure availability
- Develop logo and brand guidelines for use and member use
- Build a website with event calendar and member profiles

ACTION ITEM #3

Engage legal aid to provide a step-by-step process which will require the founding organizations to execute start-up activities such as:

- Draft bylaws – the internal operating manual
- Address provision for any surplus funds to be reinvested in the co-op
- Complete articles of incorporation
- Apply for tax number for non-profit status

REVENUE MODEL

The research strongly supported a **tiered membership model supplemented with fee-for-service options**. Participants preferred predictable annual costs over fully transactional pricing.

A. Base Membership Fee (Predictable Revenue)

Provides access to:

- software discounts
- community of practice
- training/professional development
- shared templates and systems

- office/storage access where applicable

B. Service Bundles or A La Carte Fees (Earned Revenue)

For:

- bookkeeping
- marketing campaigns
- grant support
- event production assistance
- technical services

This hybrid approach positions the co-operative as both **grant-ready and increasingly self-sustaining over time.**

ACTION ITEM #4

Conduct a business plan for the start-up activities, SWOT assessment, and conduct a revenue model for future phases of development, such as:

- **Fee for service opportunities** (cost recovery plus small margin) for charitable arts & culture orgs
 - Bookkeeping service (outside of founding members)
 - Charitable tax receipts
 - Financial reviews (possibly full audits) to meet grant requirements
 - AGM coordination
- **Fundraising:**
 - Sponsorship & donor cultivation programs
 - Grant writing
 - CADAC (Canadian Arts Data) reporting
- **Marketing engine:**
 - Audience development (future phased shared CRM)
 - Shared box office/ticketing platforms.
- **Performance & Production Aids:**
 - Music library management and sheet music licensing (SOCAN/CMRRA).
 - Coordinated instrument moving/tuning (pianos, harpsichords, percussion).
 - Contracting union musicians (AFM/CFM compliance).

Member Benefits

In addition to being part of a community of like minded peers, key administrative services will be covered by either the membership fee or a la carte items.

- **ArtSpace will provide office and administrative home for the co-op, as well as benefits for founding members include complementary use of:**
 - Boardroom
 - Photocopier
 - [to be finalized]
- **Financial & Accounting:**
 - Layer Next account bookkeeping service
 - QuickBooks
- **Operational fees:**
 - Canva
 - MailChimp
 - SurveyMonkey
 - Slack (free) version for communications
- **Marketing & Audience Development:**
 - Founding member of Co-op with profile on website
 - Featured events in the website

ACTION ITEM #5

Once registered as a non-profit co-operative, the members will hold its first meeting to elect a board of directors, voting on the bylaws by which the co-operative will govern itself, addressing:

- Membership fees (suggested \$1,000 to \$2,000)
- A la carte service fees (suggested \$200)
- Earnings (suggested all earning be directed to the internal growth of member services)

OPERATIONAL PLAN

The board will hire on contract a manager who will lead the board through a business planning process for year 1 with forecasted business development for years 2 and 3:

From a fiscal perspective, expenses will be prioritized to have a big impact and controlled costs. Commit to services related to bookkeeping and marketing solutions as the core member benefits for launch take the following factors into consideration:

- Members already allocate budget for bookkeeping so reallocating those funds for the membership fee which provides the service makes good fiscal sense
- Focusing on marketing services (event calendar) that can increase tickets sales is highly desirable

- Service supports that have NO HARD COSTS but support admin/grant and performance/production aids can be deployed in year 1

Future phases:

- Refine business planning services for admin/grant and performance production to right size the membership fees against any hard costs associated with these supports

ACTION ITEM #6

During the launch period (2026-2027) work will be completed by Looking Forward sponsor, GroundSwell, coordinating the founding organizations and establishing operations of the hub.

- Lead the founding member organizations through a name/brand and website exercise
- Carry out the registration of the organization
- Support start up activities that may include things such as insurance, technology purchases for the office
- Set up the office for the manager
- Lead the founding members through its inaugural membership meeting ensuring a slate of board of directors is presented for election
- Lead the board through the strategic or business plan

Year 1:

- a paid staff person (could be an Executive Director or Manager) should be hired on a contract basis to support the board and fulfil member benefits
- The staff person will contract workers to fulfill any aspect they are unable to do themselves while the hub monitors actual expenses, revenues and workflows
- Business planning will map out the second phase of operations

FINANCIAL FEASIBILITY & BUSINESS MODEL

- **Revenue Model:**
 - Member Dues/Service Fees: (e.g., flat monthly retainer vs. pay-per-use for accounting/marketing).
 - Tiered Pricing: Scaled based on the member organization's annual budget.
 - Earned Revenue: Commissions on shared ticketing or public workshops.
- **Capital Costs:** Start-up expenses (legal fees for co-op incorporation, software onboarding, initial marketing).

- **3-Year Operating Projections:** Projected revenue vs. expenses (Staffing, Tech, Insurance, Legal).
- **Break-Even Analysis:** At how many member organizations does the hub become self-sustaining without external operational grants?

RISK ASSESSMENT & MITIGATION

- Member organizations fear losing their unique brand/identity in a shared marketing pool.
 - Mitigation: Strict brand firewalls and customized marketing strategies per member).
- Capacity overload during peak concert seasons (e.g., December/Spring).
 - Mitigation: Freelance intake staff onboarded for peak periods.
- Financial instability of member organizations affecting co-op dues.
 - Mitigation: Building a stabilization reserve fund into the hub's budget.

Implementation Timeline (Phased Roadmap)

- **Phase 1: Legal & Incorporation (Months 1-3):** Drafting co-op bylaws, incorporating, establishing the foundational board.
- **Phase 2: Infrastructure & Hiring (Months 4-6):** Securing software, hiring core hub staff, onboarding pilot members.
- **Phase 3: Pilot Launch (Months 7-12):** Delivering core services (Accounting & Admin) to a small test group of 3-4 organizations.
- **Phase 4: Full Scale & Expansion (Year 2+):** Onboarding remaining members and launching advanced performance/marketing aids.

Conclusion & Recommendations

- A definitive statement on feasibility based on the evidence.
- Next steps and a formal call to the granting body for the next stage of funding (e.g., seed capital or launch funding).