

To: Economic and Development Services Committee

From: Anthony Ambra, P.Eng., Commissioner,
Economic and Development Services Department

Report Number: ED-26-30

Date of Report: April 29, 2026

Date of Meeting: May 4, 2026

Subject: 2026 Oshawa Culture Counts Awards

Ward: All Wards

File: 03-05

1.0 Purpose

The purpose of this Report is to present recommendations provided by the sub-committee of the Cultural Leadership Council (“C.L.C.”) for the 2026 Oshawa Culture Counts Awards.

Attachment 1 provides the Council approved procedure and selection criteria for the Oshawa Culture Counts Awards.

Attachment 2 lists the Council endorsed Culture Counts Award recipients from 2018 – 2025.

Confidential Attachment 3 contains the nominations and the recommendations from the sub-committee of the C.L.C. for the Economic and Development Services Committee to consider for the 2026 Oshawa Culture Counts Awards.

2.0 Recommendation

That the Economic and Development Services Committee recommend to City Council:

1. That, pursuant to report ED-26-30 dated April 29, 2026, Nominee Number 2 listed in Confidential Attachment 3 of the Oshawa Culture Counts Professional Artist nominations presented in Report ED-26-30 be selected as the winner of the 2026 Oshawa Culture Counts Professional Artist Award.
2. That, pursuant to report ED-26-30 dated April 29, 2026, Nominee Number 1 listed in Confidential Attachment 3 of the Oshawa Culture Counts Emerging Artists nominations presented in Report ED-26-30 be selected as the winner of the 2026 Oshawa Culture Counts Emerging Artist Award.

3. That, pursuant to report ED-26-30 dated April 29, 2026 Nominee Number 1 listed in Confidential Attachment 3 of the Innovation and Creation Champion Award nominations presented in Report ED-26-30 be selected as the winner of the 2026 Innovation and Creation Champion Award.

3.0 Input From Other Sources

The following have been consulted in the preparation of this Report:

- C.L.C.

4.0 Analysis

4.1 Background on Culture Counts Awards and Current Selection Process

The Culture Counts Awards were created in 2017 through CS-17-82 to celebrate and honour the creative and cultural achievements of the arts, culture and heritage community. This celebration and promotion builds capacity in the cultural sector by identifying and showcasing exemplary work and allows for Oshawa to be broadly positioned as a leader in creative and cultural initiatives.

In its meeting on June 24, 2019, City Council approved Report CS-19-81 which provided a proposal to streamline the process of multiple awards, including the Oshawa Culture Counts Awards.

Report ED-23-102 recommended further refinements to the selection process. The selection process approved in Report ED-23-102 is as follows:

- A sub-committee of the C.L.C. will review and evaluate the nominations received and make a recommendation for each award to the Economic and Development Services Committee.
- The Economic and Development Services Committee will review the recommendations of the sub-committee of the C.L.C. and make a recommendation to City Council.
- City Council will approve the award winners.

In its meeting on January 27, 2026, through Report CNCL-26-01, City Council approved consolidating the City's various award programs into a single, unified awards program branded as the Oshawa Community Awards, which includes streamlining the awards with coordinated communication and delivery.

Awards are presented at a special Meeting of Council. Each Culture Counts Award recipient is awarded with a certificate and an honorarium.

Only one nomination is awarded per category. In the event that the C.L.C. subcommittee deems a second nomination to be of relevant distinction, the subcommittee will have the ability to recommend one Honourable Mention per category.

4.2 2026 Nominations and Options

Confidential Attachment 3 contains the nominations for the 2026 Oshawa Culture Counts Awards and the recommendation from the subcommittee of the C.L.C. for the Economic and Development Services Committee to consider.

5.0 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications resulting from the recommendations contained in this Report. The cost of administering the Culture Counts Award honorariums can be accommodated through the existing Business and Economic Development Services operating budget.

6.0 Relationship to the Oshawa Strategic Plan

This Report responds to the Oshawa Strategic Plan Priority Area:

“Innovate: Vibrant Culture and Economy” with the goal to attract and promote a vibrant artistic and cultural economy.



Hailey Wright, BA Hons, Director,
Business and Economic Development Services



Anthony Ambra, P.Eng., Commissioner,
Economic and Development Services Department

Culture Counts Awards Criteria and Selection Process

1.0 Background

In February 2014, City Council approved the Culture Counts: Oshawa's Arts, Culture and Heritage Plan. Developed through in-depth community and stakeholder consultation, the plan provides Oshawa City Council, City staff and the community with a set of strategies and action items to strengthen and encourage growth in the sector.

The fourth strategic direction entitled “Build a Strong, Vital and Connected Arts, Culture and Heritage Sector,” recommends “the creation of a civic arts, culture and heritage award program.”

Each year, the City of Oshawa presents three awards to community members. This awards program is called the Oshawa Culture Counts Awards in acknowledgment of the plan that suggested their creation. As of 2026, the Culture Counts Awards became part of the Oshawa Community Awards program.

2.0 Award Categories

2.1 Culture Counts Professional Artist Award

This award recognizes an established artist of any arts discipline (including performing, visual, cinematic, design, architecture and literary arts) who has demonstrated creativity, originality, professional maturity and artistic leadership in the community.

The following criteria will be used to select award recipients:

- Artistic merit/interest
- Critical acknowledgments of the artist’s work (i.e., exhibition/performance opportunities, publications, reviews, articles, etc.)
- Recognition by local arts community

2.2 Culture Counts Emerging Artist Award

This award recognizes an artist in the early stages of their career in any arts discipline (includes performing, visual, cinematic, design, architecture and literary arts) who is both skilled and determined to advance their artistic capabilities. This individual understands the value of their gift within the community, and leverages these skills to inspire and enrich the lives of fellow citizens.

The individual must be between 12 to 30 years **or** have begun their artistic practice within the past five years.

The following criteria will be used to select award recipients:

- Artistic merit/interest
- Evidence of commitment to artistic practice
- Career path in artistic discipline
- Critical acknowledgments of the artist's work (i.e., exhibition/performance opportunities, publications, reviews, articles, etc.)
- Recognition by local arts community

2.3 Innovation and Creation Champion Award

This award honours an individual, collective and/or organization in the creative and cultural industries who has created or enhanced an event, product, program or partnership in the past year. In addition, the award recognizes work that is unique, transformative, and positive in its impact on arts, culture and heritage in Oshawa.

The following criteria will be used to select the award recipient:

- The level of creativity and innovation of the event, product, program or partnership
- The community impact of the event, product, program or partnership
- Notable achievements relevant to the event, product, program or partnership

3.0 General Eligibility for Awards

- Applicants and nominees must be current or former residents of the City of Oshawa, work in the City of Oshawa, or collaborate with an Oshawa-based organization
- An applicant or nominee may be the recipient of only one award per year
- City of Oshawa staff are not eligible for an award, but may nominate individuals
- An individual cannot be nominated posthumously

4.0 Selection Process and Timeline

All eligible nominations are received by the Business and Economic Development Services Branch and undergo a two-step jury process. First, an internal review by staff to determine eligibility of the applicants is conducted. Secondly, an external review by a sub-committee of the C.L.C. determines to what degree the nominees meet the criteria of the awards and recommends recipients to the Economic and Development Services Committee.

The selection review and recommendation process for 2026 involves the following general timeline, which incorporates the recommendation for a consolidated awards program approved through CNCL-26-01:

February:

- Launch of Awards Programs

March:

- Nominations deadline and all submissions by the public are due.
- C.L.C. sub-committee recommends the Culture Counts Awards recipients to the Economic and Development Services Committee.

May:

- The Economic and Development Services Committee recommends Culture Counts Awards recipients to Council.

June:

- Recognition of all awards recipients at a special Meeting of Council.

As outlined in Report CS-17-82:

“Nominations will be reviewed by a sub-committee of the Cultural Leadership Council. This peer review process will enable specialists and experts to evaluate the nominations and determine the appropriate recipient.

Only one nomination will be awarded per category. In the event that the C.L.C. subcommittee deems a second nomination to be of relevant distinction, the sub-committee will have the ability to award one Honourable Mention per category.”

In future years, as directed through CNCL-26-01, staff will work to consolidate the timing of the Oshawa Community Awards to align the nomination and award dates. Below is the timing:

1. Nominations open – September
2. Nominations close – December
3. Committee and Council approval of award recipients – First Quarter
4. Award ceremony – Second Quarter

Oshawa Culture Counts Award Program

1.0 Previous Recipients

1.1 Oshawa Culture Counts Professional Artist

- Keisha “Keysha Freshh” Fanfair (2025)

Keisha “Keysha Freshh” Fanfair is a Juno Award Nominated Canadian rapper and one of the leading voices in Canada’s hip-hop scene. Keisha has been performing for 27 years and recording music professionally since the age of 14. Keisha is known for her sharp lyricism and bold storytelling; she blends her Caribbean roots with her urban upbringing. She has earned widespread recognition for her authenticity, tackling topics of empowerment, identity and resilience in her music.

- Amy Shackleton (2024)

Amy Shackleton is an Oshawa-based artist who earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts from York University in 2008. Her artworks have been exhibited across North America and are held in public collections including the Town of Cobourg, Museum of Dufferin, Colart Collection and Facebook Canada. Within Oshawa, her work has been shown in partnership with The Robert McLaughlin Gallery at the Oshawa Centre in 2020 and at South Oshawa Community Centre. As a skilled urban landscape painter, Amy’s paintings portray hypothetical futures that show the harsh reality of climate change but offer a glimpse of hope by imagining a future where humanity and nature co-exist. Amy’s inventive technique, described as “drip painting with a twist”, has earned her a huge social media following.

- Susan Campbell (2023)

Susan Campbell is an Oshawa-based interdisciplinary artist. She obtained a Masters of Fine Arts, Media and Design from Ontario College of Art and Design University (“O.C.A.D.”) after extensive studies in design and digital media in Ireland. Susan now teaches art and design at O.C.A.D. and at Durham College. Her artwork investigates signs and patterns of urban intensification as played out on development sites, parking lots and sidewalks. Susan has exhibited her artwork across Canada and internationally.

- Margaret Rodgers (2022)

Margaret Rodgers has been a leader in the contemporary art community of Durham since the 1990s. Margaret was a founder of The IRIS Group, taught at Durham and Centennial Colleges, was Director/Curator of Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, exhibited at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery and is a published author including books and articles for visual art journals.

- Marissa Sweet (2021)

Marissa Sweet is an elected member of the Society of Canadian Artists and Ontario Society of Artists who integrates the principles of Feng Shui into her artwork. Marissa facilitates art workshops in the Durham Region and at her home studio. In 2019, she was one of the 18 selected artists to participate in the inaugural Landscape Artist of the Year Canada TV show on CBC and Makeful TV.

- Dani Crosby (2020)

Dani Crosby is an artist, commercial illustrator, art instructor and community collaborator. Dani teaches at Durham College in the Fine Arts Department and has participated in various group exhibitions including at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, the Station Gallery and The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

- Grant Cole (2019)

Grant Cole graduated from the University of Toronto's Architecture Program and is a visual and conceptual artist. Through his work as a Branding Design Specialist and his participation in regional exhibitions, festivals, academic enterprises, etc., Grant has contributed significantly to the landscape of visual arts in Oshawa.

- Ron Lambert (2018)

Ron Lambert was a student of Painter's Eleven member Alexandra Luke as an eight year old, studied with A.Y. Jackson as a teenager, and trained under American artist Hans Hoffman in his early 20s. He returned to painting later in life and in 2014 was an invited guest for Space Invaders. He had solo exhibitions at Visual Arts Mississauga and the Kent Farndale Gallery in Port Perry. Lambert's work can be found in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario and The Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

1.2 Oshawa Culture Counts Emerging Artist

- Danielle Alexander (2025)

Danielle Alexander is a graduating visual arts student, completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree at York University. She is president of her university's Visual Arts Student Association as well as employed part-time as a print media studio assistant. She received ten awards at York for her art, community service and academic achievement. In high school, Danielle was awarded for her special dedication to the visual arts and the natural environment. She was a Canadian Art Inspiration Contest finalist with the Art Institute of Canada in 2021, and she won the Joseph Drapell Award for Artistic and Academic Excellence, York University in 2023.

- Emily Rocha (2024)

Emily Rocha is a soprano who has performed across the globe. Emily joined the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio for the 2024-2025 season. In

2021, Emily earned her Honours Bachelors of Music of the University of Toronto Voice Performance program and in 2023 she earned her Masters of Music degree of the University of Toronto's Opera School. She has offered dazzling performances in "M. Choufleuri restera chez lui le...", "Disobedience", "A Tale of Two Cities", "Die Zauberflöte", "Le Nozze di Figaro", "Don Giovanni" and "The Tender Land". In a workshop for the new opera "Melancholia" (Karlsson, Vavrek), premiered in the fall of 2023 at the Kungliga Operan, she sang excerpts as Justine. Emily was a District Winner in the Metropolitan Opera Eric and Dominique Laffont Competition (Tulsa District), and 2nd Prize Winner at COC Centre Stage: Ensemble Studio Competition 2023 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. She has also won an Encouragement Award at the Metropolitan Opera Eric and Dominique Laffont Competition 2023 (Illinois District), the 2023 UTSO Concerto Competition with Mahler's Rückert-Lieder, 1st Prize in the Toronto Mozart Competition and U of T's prestigious Ivan Alexandor Chorney Opera Scholarship (2022).

- Kalista Wilson (2024)

Kalista Wilson is a singer, actress, model and a full-time university student. In 2020, she was recognized as a Juno Nominee as a member of Girl Pow-R. Her involvement as the national anthem singer for the Toronto Raptors, as well as the Toronto Marlies and the Toronto Football Club, has made her a familiar face at major sporting events. She also proudly served as the anthem singer for her hometown team, the Oshawa Generals, and as the anthem singer for the City of Oshawa's Canada Day celebrations. Kalista regularly donates her time and incredible voice to local charities and causes, including The Concert to Feed the Need Durham (2019- 2023). Kalista's acting career has included lead roles and guest appearances in TV shows and movies on prominent networks such as CTV, Family Channel, the Oprah Winfrey Network and CBC Gem.

- Diana Nadia Lawryshyn (2023)

Diana Nadia Lawryshyn is a Ukrainian-Canadian multi-disciplinary artist from Oshawa. Diana is a multi-instrumentalist and composer, blending traditional and modern technological methods. She attended Queen's University, where she obtained her undergraduate degree in music, education and visual art. She is continuing her studies of the arts at the University of Toronto. Her works have been featured at The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, the Station Gallery and Kingston's Storefront Gallery.

- Bolu Adefemi (2022)

Bolu Adefemi is a Canadian singer/songwriter based in Oshawa who emerged as an important new artist. Her internationally acclaimed song "Make It Right", is a powerful call to action about social injustices.

- Leequette Santiago (2021)

Leequette Santiago was a student at Durham College and Lakeridge Health Centre, while studying and attending a placement, Leequette taught fine art

classes at Michael's. One of Leequette's artworks was chosen for the Lakeview Park 100th Anniversary Banner Program.

- Meaghan Kehoe (2020)

Meaghan Kehoe has created over 40 murals that can be enjoyed in Starbucks cafes across southern Ontario as well as in other commercial and private spaces like Food Basics and Brickworks Cider House. She was a member of the Oshawa Art in the Park working group in 2018.

- Joaquin Manay (2019)

Joaquin Manay is an emerging vocal and visual artist having worked as an exhibiting artist, instructor and performer. He has exhibited at Unity Charity, Art Gallery of Ontario, the Station Gallery, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Turn-Around Project, Rodman Hall Art Centre, Beatbox Canada, Durham Art Gallery and the City of Oshawa.

- Crown Lands (Cody Bowles and Kevin Comeau) (2018)

Formed in 2015, Crown Lands, brings classic psych-rock into the modern music landscape. They are renowned for their energetic live-shows. As a product of Oshawa, Crown Lands reflect the city's culture in their music. After releasing their Mantra EP in 2016 they set off on tour. In 2018, they signed with APA Booking agency.

1.3 Innovation and Creation Champion Award

- Oshawa Museum (2025)

In November 2024, the Oshawa Museum launched its centennial project, "Untold Oshawa: An Expanded History". This project represents over six years of dedicated research, writing and design. "Untold Oshawa" examines stories that have not been included in previous books on Oshawa's history. Within "Untold Oshawa" there are stories of some of Oshawa's early settlers from marginalized communities, a look into the impact of labour unions in Oshawa on the experiences of children who emigrated without family and early efforts to breakdown gender barriers. "Untold Oshawa" also documents important moments for the Chinese community in Oshawa, the environmental impact of local industry and more.

- Oshawa Tourism (2024)

Oshawa Tourism introduced the blockbuster event Convergence in 2023, which transformed downtown Oshawa into a vibrant hub of entertainment and celebration. This event was created in collaboration with local artists and businesses. This free, family extravaganza unfolded across two dynamic stages – one dedicated to emerging artists, showcasing the incredible talent here in Oshawa, and another featuring established bands, headlined by The Strumbellas. Along with musical performances, there was something for everyone – a wrestling ring, vendor markets, food trucks and art exhibitions.

The goal of Convergence was to bring together 5,000 people for a day of shared joy and camaraderie. All expectations were exceeded, and more than 15,000 attendees were drawn in. The event supported local restaurants and businesses with an influx of visitors to Oshawa's downtown.

- Anushka and Arushi Bhattacharjee (2023)

Anushka Bhattacharjee, 10 years old, and Arushi Bhattacharjee, seven years old, at the time they received the award, are published authors from Oshawa. Anushka's love of reading at a very early age led to her becoming a young author. Anushka published her first book, "My Magic Mirror" at eight years old and won the Readers' Favorite Gold Award. Inspired by her sister, Arushi started writing her own book when she was five years old. Her book, "T-Rex Trouble!!!" is a first place Firebird Book Award winner. The Bhattacharjee sisters hope to inspire many young readers to become authors by visiting local schools.

- Oshawa Museum (2022)

In the fall of 2021, the Oshawa Museum developed a video project, highlighting the rich Hanukkah celebrations as told by members of Oshawa's Jewish community. The Oshawa Museum partnered with Empty Cup Media to film and produce a 'microdoc', "Traditions & Celebrations: The Story of Oshawa's Jewish Community".

- Bawaajigewin Aboriginal Community Circle (2021)

The Bawaajigewin Aboriginal Community Circle was developed through numerous community partnerships and consultations in the Durham Region. Their mandate is to build a strong sense of community, awareness and cultural pride by empowering Indigenous voices, supporting family and community development, and celebrating the diversity of their knowledge, perspectives and teachings.

- Oshawa Public Libraries (2020)

Oshawa Public Libraries partners with several local organizations and groups to promote the arts in Oshawa. Each year it partners with The Robert McLaughlin Gallery and the Oshawa Seniors Community Centre to hold a Seniors Art Contest as well as a Short Story Contest. In 2019, the Library's Writer in Residence for 2019, provided workshops on how to get published, and one-on-one sessions for novice writers.

- Laura Suchan (2019)

As Executive Director, Laura Suchan led the Oshawa Museum through three decades of progress, supporting the staff and encouraging participation and engagement in the heritage sector. This has raised the profile of the Oshawa Museum and the work the museum does in the community and beyond.

- Mary Krohnert and the LivingRoom Community Art Studio (2018)

Mary Krohnert is the founder and Executive Director for The LivingRoom Community Art Studio, a registered non-profit that provides a safe space where people from all walks of life can gather and express themselves and connect with others through the experience of art making, skill sharing and dialogue at no or little cost. Mary played a key role in the creation of the City of Oshawa's Art Park, the "Tell Us About Your Tattoo" exhibition and the "Handmade with Heart" Holiday Marketplace, and more.