

# COUNCIL REQUEST FOR DECISION

**MEETING DATE:** March 24, 2025

**SUBMITTED BY:** Toscha Turner, Manager, Cultural Development

**PREPARED BY:** Toscha Turner, Manager, Cultural Development

**REPORT TITLE:** Dr. Woods' House – Museum Operating Governance Model

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 3, 2025, Council received a presentation on sustainable heritage solutions for Dr. Woods' House Museum. To move forward with implementation, budget planning, and interdepartmental coordination, Administration is now seeking a Council decision on the preferred operating model.

Based on extensive research, sector benchmarking, financial analysis, and public engagement, the recommended model is the Unified Heritage Operator Model (a hybrid municipal-third-party partnership), which balances financial sustainability, community engagement, and governance flexibility.

Administration requests that Council pass a motion selecting an operating / governance model, ensuring the museum's long-term viability and enabling transition planning to commence.

## RECOMMENDATION

That Council allocate \$45,000 from the Operating Reserve to fund the development of a transition and operating plan for Dr. Woods' House Museum, including costing and other resource implications, utilizing the *(insert selected option here)* governance model.

That Council direct Administration to submit an Unfunded Service Level Adjustment for the transition to and operations of the Dr. Woods' House Museum for Council's consideration during the 2026 budget process.

## COUNCIL HISTORY

- **1983 – Museum Establishment**

Dr. Woods' House opened as a museum under a License of Use and Occupation agreement with the Leduc and District Historical Society (LDHS). The City of Leduc owned the property and supported LDHS in its operations, forming an early partnership to preserve local heritage.

- **2008 – Heritage Designation**

Recognizing its historical and architectural significance, Council designated Dr. Woods' House as a Municipal Historic Resource (Bylaw No. 690-2007). This formal protection affirmed the City's commitment to preserving the site for future generations.

- **2022 – Increased City Support**

LDHS faced operational and capacity challenges, prompting the City to provide additional support. This included assistance with collections care and facility maintenance as museum operations became increasingly difficult for a volunteer-led organization.

- **November 6, 2023 – Transition Plan and Funding**

LDHS announced it would cease operations at Dr. Woods' House, transferring stewardship of the collection to the City. In response, Council approved \$70,000 in one-time funding for:

- **Collections management** (inventory, cataloguing, preservation).
- **Operational assessment** of the museum's future use.

This funding acknowledged the City's new responsibility for the collection and the need to evaluate sustainable operating models.

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- **Mid-2024 – Collection Transfer Formalized**

By July 2024, the Collection Gifting Agreement was finalized, legally transferring ownership of over 15,000 artifacts to the City. The museum remained temporarily closed to the public to allow for inventory, cataloguing, and planning.

- **December 9, 2024 – Progress Update**

Administration reported to Council that the collection was three times larger than estimated (over 15,000 items, rather than the expected 5,000). Staffing shortages and delays in the transfer process had slowed progress, and initial funds were nearly exhausted. Council was advised that:

- Attic inventory was nearly complete, but 10,000 artifacts remained uncatalogued.
- Additional resources and clear direction were needed to preserve the collection and determine the museum's future.

Council provided feedback affirming the importance of the project, setting the stage for upcoming decisions.

- **January 15, 2025 – PRC Board Review (First Discussion)**

The Parks, Recreation & Culture (PRC) Board received a presentation on Dr. Woods' House Future Options from EM Museum Consulting. Given the complexity of the decision, the Board opted to deliberate further before making a recommendation. They committed to having a recommendation for Council at the March 18, 2025 Board Meeting.

- **February 19, 2025 – PRC Board Review (Second Discussion)**

The PRC Board reconvened to review the consultant's report in depth. Members identified follow-up questions, which Administration addressed via email, ensuring they had the necessary information to refine their recommendation.

- **March 3, 2025 – Council Decision Point**

Council unanimously passed the following motion: *"That Administration bring forward a Request for Decision report regarding the Dr. Woods' House that includes museum operating model options, as presented by EM Museum Consulting on March 3, 2025, and a recommendation from the Parks, Recreation & Culture Board."*

- **March 19, 2025 – PRC Board Review (Final Discussion)**

The PRC Board made the following recommendation considering the findings of EM Museum Consulting and Administration's responses: *"That the Parks, Recreation & Culture Board recommend Council select **Unified Heritage Operator** as the operating / governance model for Dr. Woods' House Museum; and that a transition plan and Service Level Adjustment be created to help inform Council's final decision during the 2026 budget process."*

### BACKGROUND / RATIONALE

Dr. Woods' House Museum is a designated Municipal Historic Resource and a key heritage asset in Leduc. The stewardship transfer from the Leduc and District Historical Society to the City in 2023 placed the responsibility for determining the museum's future directly with Council. Recognizing the challenges faced by small museums—including volunteer shortages, shifting public engagement trends, and funding constraints—Administration commissioned EM Museum Consulting to conduct an in-depth feasibility study and operational analysis.

The study explored **five governance models**:

1. Municipal Oversight – *City-run museum*
2. Third-Party Non-Profit – *Independent heritage society operation*
3. Third-Party For-Profit – *Commercial operation*
4. Municipal-Contractor Partnership – *Contracted service provider*
5. Unified Heritage Operator – *A hybrid municipal-third-party partnership*

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### Key Findings

- Hybrid models provide the best balance of financial sustainability and operational viability.
- The **Unified Heritage Operator Model** scored highest in alignment with Leduc's strategic priorities, scalability, and cost efficiency.
- Public funding is a critical component of sustainability, but diversification of revenue sources (rentals, partnerships, programming) can increase resilience.
- Effective governance structures—such as a Part 9 Company—can optimize municipal oversight while leveraging community and private sector engagement.

### STRATEGIC / RELEVANT PLANS ALIGNMENT

The recommended operating model for Dr. Woods' House has been developed to align with the City's strategic priorities, existing cultural/heritage plans, and broader community goals:

- **City of Leduc 2023–2026 Strategic Plan:** Council's strategic vision explicitly calls for vibrant culture and heritage preservation. In particular, Goal 1 (Quality of Life) includes a strategy to "*focus on the enhancement of arts and culture and the preservation of heritage.*" Operating Dr. Woods' House as a museum aligns with this goal by ensuring long-term heritage stewardship and providing accessible public programming. The model also reinforces the Strategic Plan's emphasis on public engagement and volunteerism (Strategies 1.1.1 and 1.1.6), fostering community involvement and civic pride in Leduc's heritage.
- **Cultural Development Strategy (2021–2025):** This strategy emphasizes sustainable heritage management and recommends the creation of a Leduc Heritage Authority to guide governance and stewardship. The recommended Unified Heritage Operator Model aligns with this vision by integrating museum best practices, professional oversight, and strong partnerships to build capacity for heritage preservation in Leduc. It positions Dr. Woods' House as a cornerstone for cultural identity and historical interpretation, ensuring that the museum's operation is not an isolated endeavor but part of a broader strategy to "*ensure Leduc's heritage grows and flourishes as a foundation of community life.*"
- **Municipal Heritage Policies & Commitments:** As a designated Municipal Historic Resource (Bylaw No. 690-2007), Dr. Woods' House is legally protected under municipal heritage policies. The recommended model honors this commitment by ensuring the site remains actively used and maintained rather than left vacant or repurposed in ways that diminish its historical integrity. Additionally, the governance structure will ensure any modifications, uses, or operations align with best practices in heritage conservation and municipal heritage standards.
- **Broader Community Goals:** Extensive public consultation and stakeholder engagement confirm that Leduc's community consistently voices support for preserving local history, providing educational opportunities, and enhancing civic identity. By choosing an operating model that keeps the museum open and inviting, Council is supporting these grassroots goals. The recommended model supports Leduc's "*People Building Community*" philosophy by encouraging collaborations with schools, tourism initiatives, and cultural organizations. This community-centric approach not only aligns with broad social goals (like lifelong learning, youth engagement, and downtown vitality) but also ensures the museum's offerings remain relevant and supported by those who call Leduc home.

### NEXT STEPS & IMPLEMENTATION

If Council selects an operating model, the following steps will commence:

- **Q2 2025:** Develop a service level adjustment and transition framework.
- **Q4 2025:** Present the service level adjustment and transition framework to new incoming Council.

## ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

### ADMINISTRATION:

- Significant interdepartmental collaboration required across Cultural Development, Facilities, and Community Services.
- Decision will influence budget planning, staffing requirements, and capital planning.
- Heritage Coordinator recruitment timeline may need to align with Council's decision.

### RISK ANALYSIS: FINANCIAL / LEGAL:

- **Financial Risk:** Without an operating model, facility maintenance and collections management remain unfunded beyond existing allocations.
- **Operational Risk:** Without a decision, operational uncertainty continues, delaying public access and potential revenue opportunities.
- **Legal Considerations:** City remains responsible for asset preservation, regulatory compliance, and municipal heritage obligations.
- **Mitigation:** The recommended hybrid model reduces financial risk by leveraging external partnerships while maintaining municipal oversight.

### IMPLEMENTATION / COMMUNICATIONS:

A structured implementation timeline will ensure transparency, maintain momentum, and engage key stakeholders—including Council, City departments, LDHS members, and the public. Given the high interest in this project, clear communication will be essential for managing expectations and responsibilities., and secure stakeholder buy-in at each step.

### ALTERNATIVES:

1. That Council defer the decision to a later date, requesting additional information before selecting an operating model.
2. That Council direct Administration to investigate alternative governance models beyond those presented in the consultant's report.
3. That Council discontinue Dr. Woods' House as a museum and direct Administration to explore alternative uses or potential asset divestment.

## ATTACHMENTS

Final Report – Sustainable Solutions for Leduc's Heritage Landscape (EM Museum Consulting), March 3, 2025

- **NOTE:** All four detailed reports - *Heritage Trends and Benchmarking Report*, *What We Heard Engagement & Consultation Report*, *Operational Model Analysis Report*, and *Sustainable Solutions for Leduc's Heritage Landscape* – are available on the City website under, "Exploring the future of heritage management in Leduc."

Council Presentation – Leduc Heritage, March 24, 2025