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OUR OPINION

A full exam, not triage

Several of London's major arts and cultural groups have been lurching for years from crisis to bailout with no apparent long-term solutions in sight.

Financial problems among the Grand Theatre, Orchestra London, art gallery, Big Band Festival, children's museum and sundry other grant seekers have seldom been fixed in any enduring way. These potholes have been patched, only to re-emerge in a year or so.

As in the decision this week to lend (let's be honest here -- give) \$110,000 to Orchestra London to limp through this year, city hall's role has been viewed as that of a milch cow. Instead, city taxpayers should wear the hat of patron.

City hall is overdue for a fundamental re-examination of the health and future of this vital component of city life and the role taxpayers play in it. We must somehow get beyond triage.

Fortunately, the city fully understands it must ensure affordable and available arts, culture and recreation beyond what is offered by the private sector. A broad range of artistic and cultural experience is integral to urban living and it comes with a price.

But unlike the new market, the proposed new central library, new arena-entertainment complex, even \$500 million in new sewers, the culture scene has not captured the imagination.

The time is now. The future of the arts must become the new top priority for city hall.

An aggressive new approach is needed, whether in the form of a public inquiry or task force to explore a new direction for London in arts and culture.

In all likelihood, such an effort will reveal city taxpayers are inadequate supporters of the arts. There are already signs London is a stingy giver compared to certain other cities. More spending, not less, may be needed.

But a better notion is needed of the overall environment, a sense of shifting tastes and expectations. Such an examination may show, for example, that traditional and capital-intensive ventures such as the Grand or the orchestra have inadequate support or little future to warrant the level of subsidies -- or it might show just the opposite. Should non-artistic positions be merged? For that matter, London has an eclectic mix of small and specialized groups, everything from Daughters of Ishtar and Goatshead Morris dance

groups to London Fibre Artists and the Royal Canadian College of Organists. Should they get more support than the biggies?

Until London steps away from fighting these annual fires, it will never know.