Staff Report

Report To: Tom Thomson Art Gallery Advisory Committee

Report From: Aidan Ware, Director and Chief Curator

Meeting Date: May 6, 2026

Report Code: AG-26-002

Subject: May 2026 Update Report

Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report AG-26-002 respecting the May 2026 Update Report, the Tom Thomson Art Gallery Advisory Committee recommends that City Council receive the report for information purposes.

Highlights:

- On April 25, the Gallery opened two new exhibitions – a solo exhibition by Owen Sound artist Liz Zetlin and an exhibition dedicated to highlighting the artwork of regional high school students, Emergence.
- From May 14–28, the Gallery will present a student art show in the Studio and Atrium display area in partnership with Magic of Children in the Arts, featuring artworks by over 700 local students in Grades 3–6.
- Camp TOM 2026 continues to experience strong demand, with 100 campers currently registered for Summer Art Adventures. Due to ongoing interest, additional waitlist spaces are being opened. Expanded Camp TOM runs for 7 weeks in July and August.

Vision 2050 - Strategic Plan Alignment:

Strategic Plan Priority: Celebrating and Embracing Culture - Uplifting all aspects of the City's local culture, including Indigenous Peoples' cultural

histories and practices, the cultural histories and practices of all residents, and formal institutional arts and culture.

The Tom Thomson Art Gallery plays a vital role in advancing the City's Strategic Priority of Celebrating and Embracing Culture by serving as a dynamic hub for artistic expression, learning, and community connection. Through exhibitions, collections, and public programs, the Gallery uplifts cultural histories and contemporary practices, amplifies the diverse cultural voices of local and regional residents, and strengthens appreciation for formal institutional arts and culture. By stewarding significant Canadian artworks alongside community-driven initiatives, the Gallery fosters respect for cultural heritage, encourages dialogue across cultures and generations, and creates inclusive opportunities for residents and visitors to engage meaningfully with the arts. In doing so, the Tom Thomson Art Gallery contributes to a vibrant cultural ecosystem that reflects the City's shared values, deepens understanding, and enhances quality of life for all.

Previous Report/Authority:

N/A

Background:

This report provides an update on the Gallery's programming and operations, highlighting current and upcoming exhibition and engagement initiatives as well as operational items.

Visitor Engagement and Audience Reach

2026 Year to Date Attendance Summary

<u>Facility Data</u>

Visitors Counted Manually and Engaged by Gallery Staff: 1177

Exhibition Visitors via Laser Door Counters: 1669

Facility Visitors via Laser Door Counters: 2145

Data was collected and reported in accordance with the Standard Operating Procedure for attendance tracking.

Visitors counted manually are those that entered the facility and had direct engagement with staff at the front desk. The Exhibition visitor data was collected from the laser door counter at the entrance to the Gallery's

exhibition spaces. During busy periods, staff are frequently unable to connect with each person entering the facility, so the laser counters are helpful especially when comparing year-to-year trends.

March Break Activities

117 visitors participated in drop-in activities for families during March Break.

Special Projects and Community Partner Engagement

70 patrons participated in the opening reception for then Winter Exhibitions.

19 visitors attended 2 artists' talks in conjunction with Winter Exhibitions and Displays.

1116 patrons attended Jan-Mar Screenings Gallery Night at the Movies' presentations at Galaxy Cineplex Cinemas.

Gallery Visitor Demographics

(of those visitors* engaged by staff):

- 19% showed their OPEN Card
- 19% were first-time visitors
- 67% were from Owen Sound
- 17% were from Grey-Bruce-Simcoe
- 7% were from GTA
- 2% were from Kitchener-Waterloo/Guelph/Cambridge
- 2% were from London-Southwest ON
- 1% were from Hamilton-Niagara
- 1% were from Eastern Ontario
- 1% were from outside of the province
- 2% were from outside of the country
- 40% were seniors
- 45% were adults
- 15% were under 18

*does not include specialized programming

March reflected strong and growing engagement across all areas of the Gallery's operations, with consistent visitation to both the facility and exhibition spaces and a high level of meaningful interaction between visitors and front desk staff. Attendance tracking methods continue to provide a reliable picture of activity, with laser counters helping to capture peak periods when staff are unable to connect with every visitor. Seasonal

programming during March Break was well received, drawing steady participation from families and contributing to a lively and welcoming atmosphere throughout the week. Public programs and events continued to build momentum, with exhibition openings, artist talks, and film screenings fostering opportunities for connection, learning, and community participation. Partnership initiatives, in particular, demonstrated strong audience reach and sustained interest. Visitor demographics indicate a solid local base complemented by regional and broader provincial attendance, alongside a notable presence of first-time visitors. The Gallery continues to attract a balanced, multi-generational audience, with particularly strong engagement among adults and seniors, highlighting its ongoing relevance as a cultural hub for the community.

Balancing Collection Strength and National Relevance

Exhibitions

On April 25, the Gallery opened two new exhibitions:

Liz Zetlin: More Than Human – a year in my garden
Continuing to June 27

Liz Zetlin's *More Than Human* is an immersive four-channel video installation, filmed over the course of a year in her Owen Sound garden. Each projection corresponds to a season, unfolding chronologically as shifting light and colour trace the passage of time. Within these projections, the garden becomes a dynamic, entangled ecosystem—native and non-native species interwoven in dense, living textures, animals and insects flickering through the frame, and a layered soundscape blending composed rhythms with ambient local sounds. The exhibition is grounded in the concept of the "more-than-human," a term articulated by philosopher David Abram to describe the vast, animate world that exceeds human perception yet sustains it. Rather than positioning humans as separate from or dominant over nature, Abram emphasizes our embeddedness within a living, interdependent field of plants, animals, and ecological forces. In Zetlin's work, this perspective is made palpable: plants communicate through electrical impulses translated into sound, pollinators move with agency and purpose, and the garden itself emerges as a network of relations rather than a passive backdrop. The scale of the projections further destabilizes human-centered perception, rendering a moth monumental and a leaf expansive, and asking viewers to encounter them not as minor details but as vital presences within a shared world.

Liz Zetlin is an environmental artist whose work includes poetry, photography, video, installation, and site-specific nature-based collaborations. She has supported the OPEN Team pollinator projects and led the efforts for Pollinate Owen Sound.

Emergence 2026 — Local High School Art Exhibition
Continuing to June 20, 2026

Emergence showcases the creativity and perspectives of high school students from across the region, highlighting the new ideas, voices, and visions taking shape in our community. As a biennial exhibition, it celebrates the ongoing growth of young artists as they experiment, take risks, and step into their developing artistic identities.

Participating artists include: Ali Sims, Audrey Weltz, Ava Emke, Avery Moore, Bella Finlay, Brooke Crawford, Brynne Klages, Chloe Nickel, Ciara Moxam, Delilah Markland, Evelyn Rhodes, Flynn Jamieson, Jackson Conway, Kayda Smalldon, Kia MacKenzie, Kiana Hunt, Landen Bury, Layne Morrison, Leopold Baker, Marley Tone, Nadine Lorentz-Vane, Nat Francis, Nevaeh Suresh, Noa Rusnak, Reece Collins, Robyn Marshall, Royce Arnold, Serena Wolf, Sophie Kleist, Tyler Miskie, Vivian Bender, and Zahraa Alrammahi.

Continuing Exhibitions:

Forecast – January to June
Continuing to June 20, 2026

Forecast draws from the Tom Thomson Art Gallery's permanent collection to explore attentiveness to weather, atmosphere, and seasonal change. Anchored by Tom Thomson's sketches and paintings, the exhibition captures fleeting shifts in light and landscape, extending into the present through bioclimatic attunement—our bodily and emotional responsiveness to the atmosphere. Works from the Gallery's collection trace seasonal progressions across the exhibition's run, inviting visitors to engage with changing skies, light, and climate.

Education and Youth Programming as a Core Priority

March – April 2026 & Upcoming May – August Initiatives:

<u>March Break Open Studio – Free Family Art Experiences</u>

The March Break Open Studio was a strong success, welcoming visitors over five days of free, drop-in programming in the TOM Gallery spaces. The

program supported the TOM's commitment to accessible, hands-on engagement for families and visitors of all ages.

Participants engaged in a range of self-guided activities including:

- Gallery-wide art scavenger hunts
- Two exhibition-linked studio activities connected to *Harold Klunder: The Dance of Life* and *Forecast: Works from the Collection*
- Drop-in creative stations exploring exhibition themes and observational drawing

In addition to in-person programming, a social media campaign ran throughout March Break encouraging visitors to share the TOM's promotional post for a chance to win a gift basket. The initiative generated strong online engagement, increased post circulation, and helped extend the reach of the program beyond onsite visitors.

Overall, the program saw strong participation, high levels of family engagement, and meaningful interaction with current exhibitions through creative learning experiences.

<u>Exhibition Openings & Talks</u>

- April 25, 2026 – Spring Exhibition Opening Reception
  Public opening celebrating two new exhibitions: *Emergence* and *More Than Human* by Liz Zetlin.
- May 9, 2026 – Artist Talk (11am–12pm)
  Liz Zetlin will present an artist talk in the TOM Studio, offering insight into her practice and current work. Visitors are invited to attend this opportunity to hear directly from the artist.

Student Exhibition – Magic of Children in the Arts
May 15–29, 2026

The Gallery will present a student-driven art show in the Studio and Atrium display area in partnership with Magic of Children in the Arts, featuring hundreds of artworks by local students in Grades 3–6. This exhibition celebrates youth creativity and provides meaningful opportunities for community engagement with student work. Special opening reception will take place May 23 from 11am to 3pm at the TOM showcasing artwork from 6 local schools and over 700 students across Grey-Bruce.

Magic of Children in the Arts provides art workshops at local schools to enhance their art class offerings. Through support from local organizations,

government grants and personal donations they are able to provide these workshops free.

Camp TOM 2026 – Strong Registration & Summer Expansion:

Camp TOM 2026 continues to experience strong demand, with 100 campers currently registered for Summer Art Adventures. Due to ongoing interest, additional waitlist spaces are being opened and further registrations are encouraged.

- Camp TOM runs for 7 weeks in July and August
- Includes 2 PD Day Camps in June (June 5 and June 26).
- Registration has been slower for these to date, with additional promotion planned to help increase enrolment.
- Designed for children ages 8–12.
- Weekly themes inspired by Tom Thomson, contemporary artists, and seasonal exploration.
- Expanded capacity supports increased participation and accessibility.

Summer Education & Engagement Staffing

The TOM will welcome its Summer Education and Engagement team in preparation for Camp TOM and expanded programming:

- May 19, 2026 – 2 Education & Engagement students begin
- June 16, 2026 – 1 additional student joins the team

These staff will support school programming, exhibition engagement, and Camp TOM preparation ahead of the full summer season.

Upcycle TOM 2026 – Hillcrest Collaboration

Supported by a $4,000 Community Foundation Grey Bruce grant, Upcycle TOM 2026 continues its partnership with Hillcrest Elementary School and Owen Sound Waste Watchers Volunteer Organization.

The program invited students to reinterpret Tom Thomson's *Wildflowers* using recycled and upcycled materials, promoting creativity and sustainability in artmaking.

Program Schedule:

- Student Art Display: April 1–30, TOM Atrium
- Family Night: April 28 (5pm – 7pm) – the entire school community is invited to the TOM to celebrate their work. Typically, we welcome over 400 students and families this event.
- River District Storefront Display: May 1–31 – student works will be featured in local businesses.
- Extended public display and student art auction to follow.

Additional Programming & Engagement:

April 22, 2026 – TOM Talk: History of the Gallery

A TOM Talk was presented in the South Gallery for the Grey County Historical Society, focusing on the history and development of the Tom Thomson Art Gallery. The presentation highlighted founding efforts, community leadership, and milestones including the original 1967 building.

Upcoming School Tours & Workshops:

School programming remains in high demand throughout May and June, with limited availability remaining. Booked visits include:

- May 5 – Two Grade 1 classes, East Ridge Community School
- June 2 – Two Grade 2 classes, St. Basil's School
- June 3 – Grade 2 and Grade 1/2 visit, St. Basil's School
- June 9 – Grade 1 and 2 visit, St. Basil's School
- June 16 – Grade 2 and 1 visit, St. Basil's School
- June 18 – Grade 1 visit, St. Basil's School
- June 23 – Grade 2 visit, St. Basil's School

Community Events & Partnerships:

June 17, 2026 – One World Festival

The TOM will host a Community Art Project in partnership with Heather Travis as part of the One World Festival. This participatory initiative will engage visitors in collaborative art-making, celebrating creativity, connection, and shared cultural expression.

Babytime Programming

Babytime Programming continues in partnership with the Owen Sound Library, held monthly from February–June in the TOM Gallery spaces, offering storytime, songs, and creative activities for toddlers and caregivers.

Special Summer Artist Workshops – Michelle Peraza

In August, the TOM will welcome artist Michelle Peraza for two special workshops inspired by themes of identity, ecology, pollinator plants, and collaborative artmaking. Using natural materials, treebark paper, and Indigenous-made BEAM paints, participants will explore storytelling, colour, and connection to the natural world through hands-on creation.

August 14, 2026 – Camp TOM Workshop

Michelle will lead a private workshop for Camp TOM participants (ages 8–12), guiding campers through individual and collaborative artmaking activities focused on personal stories, nature observation, and creative expression.

August 15, 2026 – Public Workshop

A public workshop for ages 8+ will invite community members to participate in an inclusive, mixed-age creative experience exploring identity, nature, and collective artmaking through Michelle's contemporary artistic practice. Registration required.

Gallery Night at the Movies:

Gallery Night at the Movies concludes its 28th season this spring.

While the January film SENTIMENETAL VALUE scheduled for January 19 was cancelled due to a technical difficulty with the print, the Gallery was fortunate to rescreen this film on February 25 within the regular time slots.

This season, the Gallery implemented an informal and very simple movie-rating system for film patrons. Movie-goers were given a plastic chip to cast their vote following the film. Ballot boxes were set up with a 'thumbs-up', 'not-for-me/thumbs-down' and 'ok'. Patrons were asked to consider whether the film was well-made and thought provoking, well-acted with good production values, in conjunction with their own appreciation of the film. Attendees have been very engaged with the process, and the results have been favourable. Moreover, many patrons approached staff and volunteers indicating that while results may vary per film, the program offers world class cinema with relevant topics that cannot be seen at the theatre otherwise, and that they look forward to the program's presentations.

There will be a more fulsome electronic survey sent out later in the spring to gauge audience feedback, and to get insightful data into this audience's viewing preferences.

Planning will begin later in May for the 29th Season of Gallery Night at the Movies with date and film selections. Season Passes will go on sale in mid-August.

2027 – Celebrating a Milestone Year for Tom Thomson

Looking ahead, next year (2027) represents 150 years since Tom Thomson was born and it coincides with the Gallery's 60th anniversary. We are presently working with Algonquin Outfitters and Ontario Parks on plans to further celebrate this milestone year, with the concept of an installation at the Canoe Lake location where Thomson died. Here in Owen Sound, the Gallery's Curator is planning an exhibition that celebrates the intertwined lives and artistic dialogues of Tom Thomson, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Thoreau MacDonald, featuring a newly acquired piece from Thoreau MacDonald's estate that highlights the enduring resonance of their shared creative legacy. Tom Thomson and J. E. H. MacDonald had a close artistic and personal relationship that played a key role in shaping Thomson's development as a painter. They met in Toronto around 1912–1913 when both were working at the commercial design firm Grip Limited. MacDonald, who was already an established artist, quickly recognized Thomson's talent and encouraged him to pursue painting. He became both a mentor and a friend, introducing Thomson to other artists who would later form the Group of Seven. MacDonald was deeply affected by Thomson's death and later helped preserve and promote his legacy, ensuring that Thomson's work remained foundational to the story of Canadian art.

Collections Stewardship and Conservation Progress

Collection Relocation and Reorganization

The installation of new storage shelving has supported a reorganization of archival materials so that they can be co-located in one area. A collections volunteer is currently working on documenting the Gallery's catalogue collection with a plan to have them eventually available to the public.

Update on the three Tom Thomson Bequests

We will be meeting with Amber Harwood of Georgian Bay Conservation to attain recommendations for having the works professionally framed.

In February, Charlie Hill, former Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery of Canada, visited the Gallery to view the paintings in person. He provided a statement of authenticity to support the Gallery's application for certification through the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board

(CCPERB). The application was submitted for consideration to CCPERB for the April 1 deadline.

Fundraising and Revenue Development

The Gallery was successful in achieving a four-year operating grant spanning 2026-2029 (total funding $280,000, $70,000/year) from the Canada Council for the Arts.

The Gallery submitted the application to the Ontario Arts Council in the Visual Arts Organization category for a multi-year operating grant through the newly launched Ontario Arts Operating Fund (OAOF). The OAC operating grant for 2026 has been received.

The Gallery received $4000 from the Community Foundation Grey Bruce to support the expansion of Upcycle TOM in the community.

The Gallery was successful in receiving funding for three summer student positions from Young Canada Works totalling $18,900. These positions will be dedicated to planning and leading PD Day art camps and summer art camps.

Planning is underway for Palette to Palate 2026 and a save the date poster has been shared on social media and Artefacts. The event will celebrate regional art, food, and drink at the Gallery on Saturday, November 7. This signature fundraising event offers guests an inspired evening immersed in artwork, complemented by locally crafted food and thoughtfully paired local beverages. The experience will be further enhanced by auctions, providing attendees with the opportunity to support the Gallery while taking home some exceptional pieces and experiences.

The Fundraising Coordinator is preparing sponsorship packages to support this event, as well as other visible opportunities, including the Art Studio and education programing.

An update on the 2026/27 Calendar Campaign is contained in the attached Fundraising Team update.

Analysis and Options:

This report reflects a period of operational stability and growing public engagement, supported by consistent attendance across both facility and exhibition spaces. Programming continues to play a central role in driving visitation, with seasonal initiatives, public events, and partnership activities

attracting diverse audiences and encouraging repeat engagement. In particular, the success of film programming and collaborative initiatives demonstrates the Gallery's ability to extend its reach beyond its physical space while maintaining meaningful connections with the community.

At the same time, the Gallery is advancing a strategic balance between local relevance and broader cultural impact through its exhibitions, education programming, and collections work. New exhibitions pair regionally rooted, environmentally focused contemporary practice with youth-driven initiatives, while collection-based programming reinforces institutional identity and legacy. Education and outreach remain a clear priority, with strong demand for camps, school programs, and community partnerships indicating deep and sustained engagement with younger audiences and families. Behind the scenes, progress in collections stewardship, funding success across multiple granting bodies, and forward planning for fundraising initiatives position the Gallery for continued growth and sustainability.

Resource Alignment:

Financial Resources

A 2026 year-to-date revenue/fundraising summary is attached to this report.

A 2025 final revenue/fundraising summary is attached to this report.

Human Resources

The TOM will welcome its Summer Education and Engagement team in preparation for Camp TOM and expanded programming:

- May 19, 2026 – 2 Education & Engagement students begin
- June 16, 2026 – 1 additional student joins the team

Time and Scheduling

N/A

Technology and Infrastructure

N/A

Climate and Environmental Impacts:

There are no anticipated climate or environmental impacts.

Communication and Engagement:

This report has been posted to the City's website with the agenda in advance of the meeting.

Media advisories are issued to highlight new exhibitions and new/returning programs. The Gallery's website and social media will communicate and promote key exhibitions and programs.

Report Developed in Consultation With:

Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services
Kim Skene, Operations Coordinator
Shannon Bingeman, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections
Heather McLeese, Curator of Public Projects and Education

Attachments:

1. Attachment 1 - 2025 TTAG Revenues Raised by Category
2. Attachment 2 - 2026 TTAG Revenues Raised by Category – Year to Date 2026-03-31

Reviewed by:
Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services

Submission approved by:
Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Aidan Ware, Director and Chief Curator at aware@thomthomson.org or 519-376-1932 ext. 5001.