
STAN ROGERS

FOLK FESTIVAL:

Cultural Policy Hub
Case Study
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Building resilience to the threat of climate change

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Taking place in a community of 1,200 people three hours away from Halifax, the annual Stan Rogers Folk Festival (“Stanfest”) welcomes over 30 artists from around the world who perform for an audience of 10,000 people. The festival’s coastal setting is a draw for attendees; but it has also made the festival vulnerable to the unpredictable and disruptive impacts of extreme weather events resulting from climate change.

Stanfest is no stranger to environmental disruption. Over a period of nine years between 2014 and 2023, the festival has had to cancel events and even scrap entire editions due to “rain outs,” a heatwave, a hurricane and the COVID-19 pandemic. These disruptions have put considerable operational and financial strain on an organization that faces many of the same challenges and vulnerabilities that other not-for-profit arts and culture organizations in Canada face.

In order to build resilience to the systemic and environmental challenges they’ve faced, Stanfest’s organizers have been transforming their model over the past ten years. In this case study, the Cultural Policy Hub explores the challenges Stan Rogers Folk Festival faces as a rural not-for-profit festival and how the festival has adapted to embed resilience to climate impacts into its strategy and operations. This case study is based on an interview with Stanfest’s Executive Director, Artistic Director and Founding Member Troy Greencorn. It concludes with insights from Stanfest for art leaders and also for government policymakers and funders.

Key facts about Stan Rogers Folk Festival

Type: Registered charity | Music festival

Location: Canso, Nova Scotia

Budget: \$800K to \$900K

Staff: 2 full-time and 2 part-time employees year-round, 2-3 event staff around the time of the festival, over 600 volunteers

Audience: around 10,000 tickets per year

1996–2014: Growth, economic development and chronic precarity

In the mid 1990s, the town of Canso, NS, was facing a severe economic crisis after a factory closure had put approximately 700 people out of work, representing more than half of the town’s roughly 1,200 residents. The town was in desperate need of an economic stimulus, which came in an unexpected form: the Town of Canso’s Economic Development Officer, Troy Greencorn, decided to establish a folk music festival.

“Perhaps more than almost any festival in the country, the Stan Rogers Folk Festival was created with a clear economic development objective. Culture was the vehicle, but economic survival was the motivation.” – Troy Greencorn

A unique event in the region, the new Stan Rogers Folk Festival (“Stanfest”) immediately met an audience thanks to support from the Nova Scotia Minister of Tourism and Culture. The festival became a major contributor to the growth of tourism in Eastern Nova Scotia, and its second edition received the 1998 Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia’s Festival & Event Award. Other towns in the region capitalized on the festival’s success and aligned their own events to the festival’s dates to encourage visitors to attend and stay in the area longer.

Overall, Stanfest's growth brought real economic benefits to the area. In 2023, Stanfest partnered with the Province of Nova Scotia on a formal economic impact study, which showed that the festival generated \$1.4 million in direct spending annually and \$3 million in economic impact for the host community, the surrounding region and the province.

But from its beginnings, Stanfest faced many challenges due to its unique location. Canso is situated in a remote coastal area surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean on three sides, which makes it susceptible to highly variable and unpredictable weather. The festival takes place in this small rural community and the town's population grows by nearly 9 times over the course of the festival. Because of this, providing typical touristic accommodation for audience members was always a challenge, which led to Stanfest becoming a camping festival; this limited its audience growth to some extent.

Like other not-for-profit music festivals of its kind, Stanfest enjoyed considerable success over its first 20 years, and generally operated close to break even. But in the past decade, Executive Director Troy Greencorn started to observe a recurring pattern that was impacting Stanfest and similar festivals: a bad weather year would cause a deficit, followed by a few good years where deficits were reduced, which in turn were followed by one or two bad weather years where deficits accumulated again. Those deficits had a direct impact on cash flow, often forcing Stanfest to begin a new fiscal year while still covering costs from the previous year. According to Greencorn, "a defining reality was financial precarity."

2014–2023: Climate change as a new existential threat

The first time that Stanfest organizers felt the impacts of climate change was on July 2, 2014, when organizers were forced to cancel the entire festival with just two days' notice due to a hurricane warning: Canso was to be Hurricane Arthur's point of arrival on land. At that point, hundreds of people had already arrived in the community, artists were in transit and the site build—which had taken about a month's work—was complete. All of Stanfest's expenses were sunk costs, with a hole in the budget of \$500,000.

"What do we do about refunds? And at that moment you're thinking about, how do we [as an organization] survive this? But you're also thinking, how do we take care of our patrons, because that's part of surviving this." – Troy Greencorn

The team quickly made the decision to offer refunds, but also proposed two alternatives to their patrons: defer their ticket to the following year, or donate the ticket fee they paid to support the festival's recovery. Nearly 70% of attendees either donated or deferred. Festivals from across the country and abroad such as Edmonton Folk Festival and Vancouver Island Folk Festival contacted Stanfest's organizers to offer words of encouragement and advice. On Prince Edward Island, Garrison Hill Entertainment hosted two concerts to offset the money that had been spent to bring musicians to the region from overseas. With support from key funders, festivals and the folk music community, Stanfest launched a fundraising campaign online, which raised \$30,000, covering around a third of the sunken costs. The team also organized a fundraising concert in Halifax on August 20, 2014 with some of the artists that had been set to

perform in early July: proceeds from ticket sales all went to the recovery effort. Thanks to this solidarity, Stanfest was able to survive with enough resources to resume the festival the following year.

In the years that followed, the festival continued to face weather-related disruptions. During its 20th edition in 2017, the festival was marked by three days of hard rain, forcing some stages to close and concerts to be moved to indoor venues in Canso. This also meant campers had to endure the harsh weather, which was disruptive for some festivalgoers and vendors. The following year, in 2018, organizers moved the festival from late June to late July to avoid heavy rains, but they were then faced with a severe heatwave. The festival was cancelled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and gradually recovered under a modified program in 2021 and 2022.

Stanfest organizers hoped 2023 would be the year of a full-scale comeback, even extending the festival schedule by one day. But on July 21, 2023, on the second day of the festival, an entire summer's worth of rain fell on Nova Scotia in a few hours, causing a series of flash floods that killed eight people across the province. Extreme weather was once again “both an operational and financial risk,” with emergency funding or short-term borrowing required to keep the festival running and to protect audience members.

Strong community bonds and the festival's economic significance as one of the largest festivals in the province made that support possible, but it was clear to Stanfest's organizers that “climate impacts were coming quicker and more severe[ly] than expected.”

The severity of the impacts of climate change became clearer near the end of 2023 following a meeting of the Western Roots Artistic Directors, a network of artistic directors for folk and Americana music festivals in Western Canada and beyond. The network had on average experienced two or three “climate anomalies”—from rain, wind, hail or forest fires—each year, but there were over twenty in 2023. According to Greencorn, Stanfest's team came out of these conversations recognizing that “massive and rapid change” was necessary.

“Climate change didn't create the vulnerability, but it dramatically intensified it.”
 – Troy Greencorn

2023–Present: Climate adaptability at the core of Stanfest's new strategy

Stanfest's transformation process began in 2023 with a full inventory of their site and community, followed by a risk analysis to identify which areas were most vulnerable. The team treated its volunteers and its community members as sources of local expertise; through consultation and engagement, they identified that the new weather events they were facing would require significant changes to the landscape of the site and surrounding public infrastructure to improve drainage. These major changes were well beyond what Stanfest organizers could accomplish with the resources at their disposal.

Greencorn and Artistic Director Steve MacIntyre concluded that to become more resilient, the festival needed to move away from uncovered stages or traditional festival tents. “Standard tents provide some protection from sun and rain, but they do not keep audiences warm, dry or safe during severe weather” emphasises Greencorn. “High winds can shut stages down entirely. Heavy rain increases electrical risk and quickly turns both the grounds and interiors into unsafe environments.”

Greencorn and MacIntyre examined models from other festivals around the world and decided to develop a hybrid approach, with some events held outdoors and others hosted indoors at local venues. This so-called “small-halls model” allowed Stanfest to move performances into community venues that could reliably operate during wind and rain events. It also gave them the opportunity to extend the festival’s duration: the festival grew from four days to seven, with three days of distributed performances across communities within an hour of the main site (“the Stanfest roadshow”). Since daily attendance growth was constrained, lengthening the duration of a visitor’s stay became a way to bolster revenues and increase economic impact.

Greencorn explains that while most new communities, organizations and venues that became partners of Stanfest “were very happy to be included,” others “took longer to see the mutual benefit of being a partner, not just a rental venue.” Stanfest’s team took the time to build trust in the relationships with these partners through “personal visits, zoom calls and developing a standardized partner/venue manual to ensure responsibilities [were] clear.”

Stanfest embedded climate adaptation into its strategic plan at both the board and staff level, then brought their 30 crew leaders together in a summit format six weeks before the 2024 festival.¹ Greencorn describes that through breakout sessions, crew leaders “asked questions, challenged assumptions and suggested improvements.” The summit was reconvened again in 2025, and Stanfest’s directors intend to make it an annual occurrence to gather knowledge and feedback from their community. This additional engagement is seen as “a great strategy for a mature festival like Stanfest” according to Greencorn, who adds: “we did need to grow our staff slightly to handle the extra work, but it was time to make that change.”

Trusting in community members’ expertise and developing deeper relationships with other towns is crucial to Stanfest’s continued success. The festival is also giving back to towns and locals who supported the festivals through difficult years and building community through the distribution of free events throughout the region.

Despite this progress, Stanfest’s organizers remain cautious. According to Greencorn, the greatest challenge for organizations like Stanfest that already struggle with climate impacts is that they are being asked to plan, fund and implement major resiliency projects without dedicated support. Currently, the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts and Arts Nova Scotia do not run programs to deliver dedicated support to arts and culture organizations’ efforts to adapt to the effects of climate change.²

¹ All crew leaders are experienced volunteers; like many not-for-profit organizations, Stanfest relies heavily on volunteers due to its limited financial means and unstable revenues.

² Some climate adaptation projects by arts, culture and heritage organizations may be eligible to the Canada Council for the Arts’ grant on [Sector Support, Innovation and Development](#), but no explicit reference is made to climate change or adaptability in its description of eligible activities.

In 2023 alone, Stanfest accumulated a deficit of revenues over expenses of \$75K, with 29% of its revenues from public funding (all three levels of government). The influx of public support following the 2023 crisis contributed to an increased public funding to 40% of Stanfest's revenues in 2024, and an excess of total revenues over expenses of \$36K in 2024. But this excess was still not enough to compensate for the deficit caused by the previous year's natural disaster, leaving little margin for investment in climate resiliency. In 2025, the festival managed to eliminate its accumulated deficit for only the second time in almost 30 years.

"Identifying vulnerabilities, like drainage or shelter, is one thing. Fixing them is another, especially when festival sites are owned by municipalities or other agencies. While there is significant discussion at provincial and federal levels about climate change, very few concrete programs exist to support this work."
 – Troy Greencorn

Stan Rogers Folk Festival has weathered so many storms that its organizers have become committed to raising awareness to the urgency of climate action and of climate adaptability for arts and culture organizations. For years, Troy Greencorn has been calling for greater public support at all levels of government to address this issue, recommending the creation of targeted programs that could help nonprofits plan and evolve to be more climate-resilient and financially stable in the long run. Stanfest has managed to survive by adapting how it plans, programs and operates to continue delivering for its artists and community; but new strategies for broader climate adaptability supports are needed to ensure that arts, culture and heritage organizations can navigate the impacts of climate change now and in the future.

Stanfest's Insights for Arts Leaders

- **Begin working on your climate adaptability now:** "Any major outdoor festival not addressing climate resilience is putting its long-term stability at risk."
- **Talk to funders and peers if you're experiencing climate vulnerability:** organizations often feel alone to find solutions to climate change-induced threats, but sharing their experience and work in progress with funders and other arts organizations can raise awareness on the challenges and pathways.
- **Trust the expertise of your community:** organizations themselves must feel empowered to lead this work and trust that volunteers, team members and community members can have intimate knowledge of the realities on the ground. "They know where the drainage fails. They know where wind becomes dangerous."
- **Think about how to give back to your community:** through engagement with community members, and offering free community events, organizations can build bonds and reciprocal relationships that translate into real mutual support in times of struggles.

Stanfest's Insights for Policymakers & Funders

- **Address identified infrastructure vulnerabilities:** Climate change creates challenges that arts organizations are ill-equipped to deal with on their own, especially since solutions often involve public infrastructure.
- **Develop climate action planning support for festivals:** Long term planning is essential to financial sustainability, but it is hard to do when a weather incident can single-handedly upend a festival's programming and operations. Capacity building and training programs focused specifically on climate adaptability and helping arts and culture workers and event organizers plan for the long term could be greatly beneficial.
- **Implement multi-year support for organizational transformation:** multi-year project grants targeting or including organizational transformation are needed for organizations that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, recognizing that major pivots take time, energy and risk.
- **Organize a national summit on climate change and the arts sector:** Stanfest is calling for a national gathering of all three levels of government and of all interested funders and arts organizations to discuss climate resiliency as a condition for the stabilization of the sector.