



Indigenous educator Lacey Baker with students at the Matriarch's Garden  
*Photo credit: Janet Hoffar courtesy of Burnaby Village Museum (BVM)*

# INCLUSIVE MUSEUMS

**free admission  
as the first step**

---

**Sanya Pleshakov** Head of Programming & Education: Burnaby Village Museum

---

**Deborah Tuytens** Cultural Heritage Manager: Burnaby Village Museum

---

To be free or not to be free? Most heritage organizations don't have the luxury of pondering this question, but many museum professionals seem to be asking it and there are a variety of opinions out there. At a time when most museums are financially stretched and core funding is down across Canada, contemplating free admission to our sites depends on each organization's unique contexts. When Linda Digby of the Kelowna Museums Society posted this query to the BCMA listserv in 2018, it prompted an interesting and lively discussion.

**“Museums cannot argue that they hold the patrimony of all if only some can afford to see it... There is a fundamental disconnect between the mission statements we write and the act of imposing an entry fee.”**

— Elaine Heumann Gurian

Museum interpreter Brian Ross with visitors at the general store  
 Photo credit: Leanne Scherp courtesy of BVM



Many museum professionals refer to audience engagement consultant Colleen Dilenschneider's argument that introducing free admission neither significantly affects long-term attendance figures, nor does it cultivate increased visitation from new and/or diverse audiences. According to museums expert, Elaine Heumann Gurian, admission fees influence much more than visitor numbers and balancing the organization's budget; this approach changes the very function and orientation of a museum. Gurian holds that, "Museums cannot argue that they hold the patrimony of all if only some can afford to see it... There is a fundamental disconnect between the mission statements we write and the act of imposing an entry fee."

In 2011, Burnaby Village Museum (BVM) waived admission fees (which were at the time, \$12 per adult) and has never looked back. Nine years later, we would like to reflect on our experience and share with colleagues what going free has meant for at least one mid-sized museum in British Columbia.

### Setting the context

BVM is a ten-acre, living history site comprised of both heritage and recreated buildings — homes, businesses, a schoolhouse, a farmhouse, and a blacksmith shop. Animated by costumed interpreters, the museum operates seasonally, sharing the story of Burnaby as it existed in the 1920s. The site is open to the general public six months of the year, and runs fee-based programs, including school programs, ticketed special events, courses, and workshops, in the shoulder seasons.

BVM is owned and operated by the City of Burnaby, a diverse and urbanized suburb of Metro Vancouver. Museum staff report to senior managers and city council; the City's Parks, Recreation and Culture Commission acts as an advisory body for the museum. The City funds between 75-85% of the museum's annual operating budget, most of which



is devoted to staffing. The balance of the budget is sourced from earned revenue and grants. BVM has a large, unionized staff team of around 100, including 20 full-time positions.

Although BVM's stated mission from 2003 is to "foster a shared sense of community and identity for the citizens of Burnaby and visitors," the museum has for many years told the stories of only a select few. Founded in 1971 as a tribute to Burnaby's "founding pioneers," the museum has in the past focused its narrative on Anglo-Canadian settler history to the exclusion of many other communities.

### The how, then the why

"Dated, dry, static, not worth the time, and of limited appeal to many residents." This was how one marketing study described BVM in 2007 before going free. The report identified low levels of public awareness in Burnaby and other Metro Vancouver communities, low rates of repeat visitors,

and a decline in attendance since 2002. Programs and exhibits were unchanging and disconnected from the local population that was becoming increasingly diverse. At the time, it was difficult to obtain additional funding to support any kind of growth or renewal. Doing away with gate admission, the museum's main source of revenue at the time, was not on the agenda.

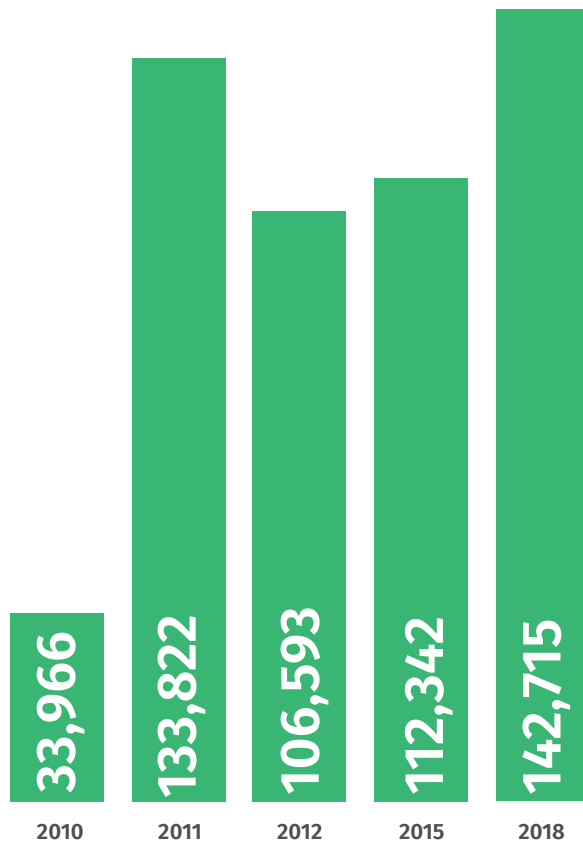
When it came to going free, it was the how that came first, then the why. The decision came suddenly, and it came from the top; a few city councillors wanted the museum to become more accessible to all. Museum staff and volunteers were nervous. Some feared free admission would cause visitors to devalue the museum experience, and that revenues would plunge. Staff worried that if there were an attendance spike it wouldn't last and that the museum would be treated like a public park — no rules, no museum etiquette, no museum decorum.

Indigenous educators Lacey Baker and Meagan Innes with students outside the Learning House with Ocean Hyland's artwork in the foreground  
*Photo credit: Janet Hoffar courtesy of BVM*

**The facts**

In 2011, when BVM first went free, general attendance numbers shot up by 100,000. The operating season included the period from May-August, and a six-week Christmas opening from November-January. When fee-based special events, public programs, school programs, and rentals are included, attendance approximated 180,000 visits.

**The facts:  
General Attendance  
Since Going free**



Single-day visitation during the summer season increased dramatically that first year. On summer Sundays in 2011, for example, average numbers increased tenfold. During the Christmas opening, which used to attract around 8,000 visits over six weeks, the museum would see up to 5,000 visitors in a single day. BVM was no longer a quiet place for leisure, but a busy, bustling village full of activity.

Almost ten years of visitor data demonstrates that the BVM has well survived the novelty spike of free admission experienced in 2011. After an initial drop in 2012, museum visits have steadily climbed. Today, summer and Christmas attendance remains four times the rate it was when the museum charged admission and 2019 is shaping up to be a record year. During our two-week spring break this past year, visitation numbers doubled from 8,000 visits in 2018 to 15,000, and currently, general attendance is tracking above our initial free year in 2011.

The general attendance numbers presented here represent visits, not visitors. It is not currently possible to determine exactly how many unique visitors the museum welcomes over the course of a year; however, visitor survey sampling continues to demonstrate that, on average, one-third (50,000) of the annual visits to BVM represent first-time visitors. Clearly, this is not a question of simply accelerating re-visitation for audiences who are already visiting.

Unfortunately, we do not know how free admission has impacted the diversity of our visitors. Variables such as income, age, and maternal language have not been tracked regularly. Although many staff report witnessing a significant change in visitor diversity since waiving fees, it is also true that the demographics of the local population have changed considerably in the last ten years. Still, one can imagine that free admission attracts groups to whom cost matters — settlement agencies, neighbourhood houses, senior homes, non-profit day camps — all groups that we see more and more at the museum.

Since 2011, operational expenses for BVM have continued to climb as visitor numbers have increased. In addition to the loss of gate revenue, which represented about 12% of combined funded and earned revenues before free admission, costs are up across the board. More visitors mean more toilet



Visitors enjoying the museum's Bright in Burnaby event during Heritage Christmas.  
Photo credit: courtesy of BVM

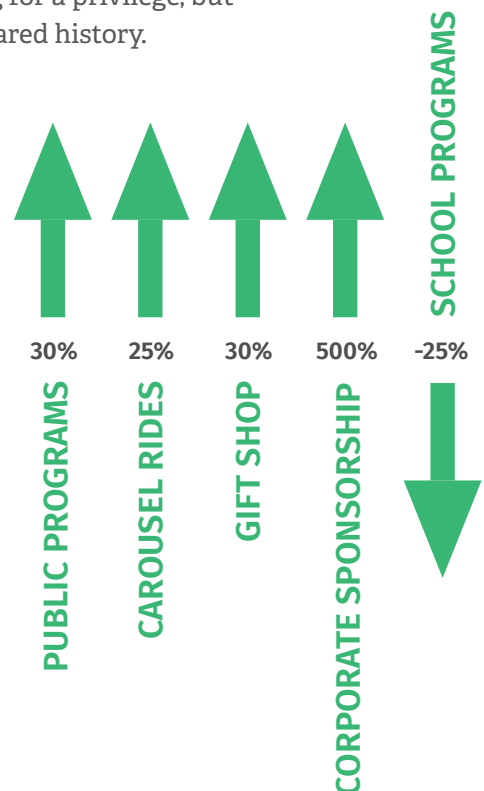
paper, more stanchions for longer lineups, more exhibits repairs, and more staff to handle the crowds. Fortunately, municipal funding for operations and capital projects has also risen and continues to cover the museum's cost increases. Although total museum expenditures have increased, it costs considerably less for the city to fund each visit because annual visitation has increased so dramatically. Since introducing free admission, the cost per visit is down by over 60%, which makes a good business case for our core funders.

Many people wonder how free admission affects revenue. For BVM, public programs, gift shop sales, food services, and carousel rides are all up by 30%. Corporate sponsorship is up by 500%. Other revenue streams including membership and rentals have not changed, and school programs are down by 30%. The donation box, which was introduced after waiving gate admission fees, receives a negligible amount each year — about \$2,000. Still, considering the significant loss of gate admission since going free, the museum is making up approximately 80% of the overall revenue losses.

### The impact

Before free admission, BVM was torn between being a local museum and a museum with tourist appeal. No longer having to chase tourist dollars means that the museum can focus on serving the real needs of the local community. Now, when visitors walk through the entrance without having to take out their wallets many report a feeling of civic ownership and pride. Visitors are no longer guests paying for a privilege, but participants in their shared history.

### Revenue streams since free admission



Key to the re-orientation of the museum's mandate has been a new interpretive plan that focuses research, exhibits, and programming around the stories of those communities long excluded from interpretation. Claiming to be a true community museum, while still pushing the dominant Anglo-Canadian settler narrative, would have been disingenuous. The work of unsettling settler spaces at BVM started with slowly building relationships with local First Nations, and community groups in Burnaby. Today, the museum features an Indigenous Learning House and Matriarch's Garden, a team of Indigenous educators, and year-round Indigenous programming for the general public and school groups. The museum has also embarked on a multiyear research project on Chinese Canadian history involving many community members.

These efforts have produced new research, interpretive materials, and the integration of Chinese Canadian stories throughout the site. Becoming free allowed BVM to become more accountable and more welcoming to the whole community.

Museum interpreter Annalee Wong with students outside the Way Sang Yeun Wat Kee Chinese herbalist shop.  
Photo Credit: Janet Hoffar courtesy of BVM



Burnaby's Mayor and Council are proud of being able to offer such a wonderful experience for their citizens, and they make this point often. The museum's new interpretive vision aligns well with the City's new corporate strategic plan, especially around shared goals of inclusion, diversity and belonging. As a museum driven by community, these values and the visitor numbers that support them, are attractive to corporate sponsors. Free admission to the BVM has resulted in more government support and more corporate funding.

### Conclusion

Free admission still means there's a need to provide a high-quality visitor experience. It's not simply a question of putting up a free admission sign on your door. Many museums across Canada are experimenting with free in some shape or form. The Cowichan Valley Museum, for example, waived admission fees in 2012 and saw their visitation increase dramatically from 2,000 to 10,000 today. But the museum did not simply offer free admission; it also worked with its local communities to focus its efforts to overhaul exhibits and programs and make them more relevant to all. While free admission may not be a realistic goal for most museums at this time, don't let it be a barrier to improving inclusivity. Start now in small ways. What can we all do to provide more welcoming, more inclusive spaces for our communities?



SANYA PLESHAKOV



DEBORAH TUYTENS