

envirocentre

**Connecting the Dots
on Greener Events**

2026 Annual Symposium Report



EnviroCentre's 2026 Annual Symposium

Each year, EnviroCentre's Connecting the Dots Symposium brings together residents, businesses, policymakers and community leaders to explore practical solutions to pressing climate challenges.

In 2026, the conversation focused on Greener Events — examining how conferences, festivals, sporting events, and community gatherings can reduce waste, lower emissions and inspire sustainable behaviours.

Events are a cornerstone of cultural and economic life in Ottawa. But they also generate significant environmental impacts, from single-use materials and food waste to transportation emissions.

This year's symposium asked a central question:

How can sustainability become an integrated part of event planning, not an afterthought?

More than 100 event organizers, tourism leaders, municipal staff, researchers and service providers gathered at the National Arts Centre to share insights, explore solutions, and identify opportunities for collaboration.



Foreword



Elyse McCann

Business Development
Director
EnviroCentre

Planning an event involves countless decisions — balancing budgets, timelines, logistics, and the expectations of attendees. In that reality, sustainability can sometimes feel like an added layer of complexity rather than an integrated part of the process.

Yet across Ottawa and beyond, event organizers are demonstrating that sustainable practices can be embedded into how events are designed and delivered. From reuse systems and waste reduction strategies to procurement choices and transportation planning, new approaches are emerging that help reduce environmental impacts while still creating engaging experiences.

Throughout the Connecting the Dots Symposium, we heard from people who are testing these ideas in real-world settings. Their experiences highlighted both the challenges and the opportunities involved in shifting how events operate. They also reinforced something we often see in our work: progress happens when people from different sectors share knowledge, experiment with solutions, and learn from one another.

At EnviroCentre, we have spent more than 25 years working with organizations and communities to implement practical solutions that reduce environmental impacts. Increasingly, that work includes supporting organizations and event planners as they explore new ways to design events that align with sustainability goals.

This report reflects the insights, creativity, and collaboration that emerged throughout the day and helps support continued momentum toward greener events across our region.

Opening remarks



Tara Shannon

Artist & Executive Director
Ottawa Festival Network

What a gift to have gathered at the National Arts Centre, incidentally my favourite place to perform, in a space dedicated to creativity, culture, and community, to talk about the future of sustainability in our event sector.

If you work in events, you know something important.

Events are intense, complex, and temporary. But their impact is not. We build entire communities in days. We coordinate artists, suppliers, city departments, volunteers, sponsors, and audiences. We manage risk, weather, logistics, and expectations, often all at once. And in the middle of that intensity, thousands of people move through the spaces we create. They eat, drink and dispose of things. They observe systems in action.

Whether we intend to or not, we are modelling behaviour. Events don't just reflect culture, they shape it. When waste systems are confusing, people disengage. When sustainability is designed well, visible, intuitive, and accessible, people follow. The shift happens quickly when the system supports the behaviour.

And increasingly, that expectation is coming from municipalities, funders, sponsors, communities, and artists alike. Artists are helping lead this shift. Jack Johnson has produced plastic-free tour stops. Our Lady Peace partnered with La Table des Chefs to recover and redistribute surplus food on their anniversary tour. Sustainability is no longer peripheral to the live event experience. It is becoming central to it.

I know this sector is already under pressure. Costs are rising, labour is stretched, and weather is more volatile. And yet the expectation to do better environmentally keeps growing. My answer is not to act in isolation, but collectively. No single festival can transform reuse infrastructure. No single supplier can normalize recirculation systems. No single policy can succeed without operational alignment.

What would it look like if Ottawa became known not just as Canada's Festival Capital, but as a leader in sustainable event practices? Events are one of the few sectors that gather thousands of people with shared attention. If reuse works at a festival, it can work in a stadium. If it works in a stadium, it can work in a city. If it works in a city, every scale becomes possible.

“Big change starts with small choices. Together, we can move the entire sector forward.”

**Tara Shannon, Artist and Executive Director,
Ottawa Festival Network**

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Symposium at a glance

Diverse sectors represented:

events, tourism, city, nonprofits, academia, service providers and more

100+
Participants

16 discussion tables



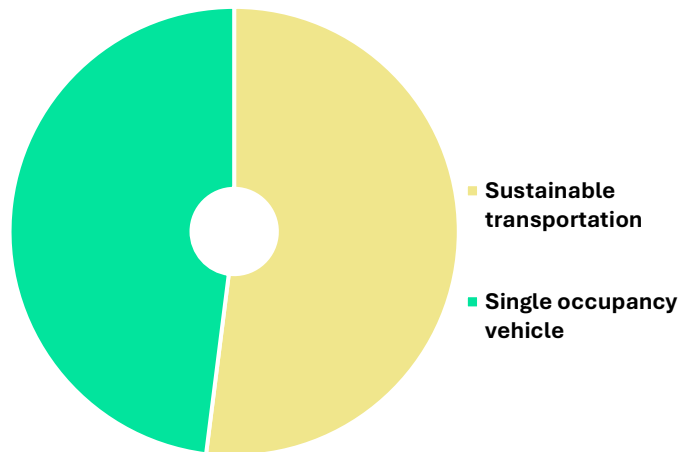
How we walked the talk



Practicing what we preach, the symposium was designed with sustainability in mind, from how attendees arrived, to what happened to the food on their plates.

GETTING THERE

Attendees tracked their own travel mode by dropping a counter into labelled containers at the entrance — a simple, engaging way to make transportation choices visible.



Food waste



3 lbs of lunch food waste

was diverted from landfill through the NAC's ORCA system, which converts organics into grey water. Leftover food was donated to La Tablee des Chefs.

Materials



EnviroCentre's reusable promotional booth was sourced from a Montreal-based company specializing in durable, sustainable materials. Event lanyards were provided by Green Loop Club.

Keynote spotlight



**Crystal
Dreisbach**

CEO
Upstream

Crystal Dreisbach opened the symposium with a keynote on how reuse systems can transform the event industry.

Rather than focusing solely on recycling or waste diversion, Dreisbach encouraged participants to rethink the systems that shape event logistics. Moving from single-use packaging to reusable food and beverage service ware, she explained, represents a broader shift toward a circular economy.

Events, she noted, can be catalysts for the reuse industry. They provide ideal environments for introducing reuse because of the high volumes that providers rely on to amortize their washing infrastructure, and because they help normalize the practice. This creates opportunities to test solutions that can later scale across cities and sectors.

Her keynote set the tone for the day: sustainable events are not about adding complexity, but about designing systems differently from the start.



**Kate
Johnston**

Executive Director
Hillside Festival

In the afternoon, Kate Johnston shared lessons from the Hillside Festival, widely recognized as one of Canada's greenest music festivals.

Drawing on the event's long-standing approach to sustainability, Johnston highlighted how environmental considerations can be embedded throughout event planning — from procurement and vendor relationships to waste reduction, transportation, and energy use. She noted that these principles have guided the event since its early years, well before her tenure as Executive Director.

Her presentation demonstrated that sustainable practices are most effective when they are rooted in clear values and supported by strong collaboration among organizers, vendors, and attendees.

Johnston's message reinforced a central theme of the symposium: when sustainability becomes part of an event's culture and decision-making, it can drive meaningful change while enhancing the overall experience

Panel discussions

Panel #1:

Green events: Yesterday, today and tomorrow

The first panel explored how sustainability in the events sector has evolved — and what the next generation of green events might look like.

Moderated by Joanne Chianello, municipal affairs expert and former journalist, the conversation brought together perspectives from tourism, corporate sustainability, and municipal government.

Mary Sayewich of Ottawa Tourism, shared insights from working with festivals, conferences, and tourism partners across the region. She highlighted the growing expectations from visitors and event organizers for sustainable practices, and the role tourism organizations can play in supporting that transition. For example, Ottawa Tourism supports

sustainability in several ways, including a capacity building program about sustainable practices for its members.

Sarah Levitin of Lush Handmade Cosmetics spoke about the company’s approach to sustainable events and brand partnerships, emphasizing the importance of aligning event operations with organizational values and engaging attendees in meaningful ways. She also reflected on how the sector has evolved over the past two decades: vegetarian catering options were once difficult to secure and waste sorting at venues was rare, requiring Lush to work closely with venue operators to introduce these practices — which are now widely considered standard.

Representing the City of Ottawa’s Parking Services Department, Scott Caldwell discussed some of the ways a municipality can support events and sustainability. While many might wonder what parking services have to do with sustainability, he highlighted an industry-wide shift from parking to mobility. He discussed how city policies, services and infrastructure, can support event organizers, providing the example of Hello Vélo - Events, a temporary bike rack rental program to encourage cycling to events, can help enable greener events across the community.

Together, the panelists reflected on how practices have evolved — from early waste reduction initiatives to more integrated approaches that consider procurement, transportation, and vendor partnerships. Their discussion underscored that sustainability is becoming an increasingly central part of how events are planned and experienced.



Joanne Chianello
StrategyCorp

Moderator | Senior



Mary Sayewich
Ottawa Tourism

Director of Experience
Development at



Sarah Levitin
*Lush Handmade
Cosmetics*

Manager of Travel &



Scott Caldwell
City of Ottawa

Manager, Parking
Services

Panel #2:

Levers of change to support green events

The second panel examined the systems and structures that can help accelerate sustainable practices across the events sector.

Moderated by Valérie Leloup, EnviroCentre’s Strategic Lead for Waste and Circular Economy, the conversation focused on the policies, tools, and partnerships that can drive meaningful change.

Dr. Milena Parent, professor at the Telfer School of Management at the University of Ottawa, brought an academic and governance perspective to the discussion. Her work on sport and event management highlighted how sustainability can be embedded into event strategy, policy, and organizational leadership. Drawing on her extensive experience studying sustainability strategies in real-world contexts, she also offered fresh insights from her involvement with the 2026 Olympics.



Dr. Milena Parent
University of Ottawa
Telfer School of
Management



Emily Alfred
Toronto Environmental Alliance
Senior Waste
Campaigner

Emily Alfred, Senior Waste Campaigner at the Toronto Environmental Alliance, shared lessons from advocacy and policy work aimed at reducing waste and accelerating circular solutions in cities. She spoke about how policy frameworks, industry standards, and public expectations can influence how events operate, and how small policy decisions — like allowing event organizers to plug into street lamps instead of using generators — can make a big difference.

Together, the panelists explored how municipalities, institutions, and industry leaders can create the conditions that allow sustainable practices to thrive — from procurement requirements and infrastructure investments to stronger collaboration across the events ecosystem.

The discussion reinforced an important message from the day: while individual organizers can drive innovation, lasting change requires supportive systems that make sustainable choices easier and more accessible.



Valérie Leloup
EnviroCentre
Moderator | Strategic
Lead, Waste & Circular
Economy

Discussion tables

A central goal of the symposium was to create space for participants to learn from one another and share practical experiences from the field.

Across two discussion sessions, participants joined 16 facilitated tables, each focused on a specific aspect of sustainable event planning — from waste reduction and reuse systems to procurement, food systems, transportation, and climate resilience. Moderators guided each conversation while notetakers captured key insights, challenges, and ideas raised by participants.

The tables brought together a diverse mix of voices, including festival organizers, tourism professionals, municipal staff, sustainability practitioners, researchers, and service providers. This mix of perspectives allowed participants to explore both the practical realities of implementing greener event practices and the broader systems that can support them.

Each table discussion highlighted the challenges organizers face, solutions that are already being tested, and potential next steps for advancing sustainable practices across the events sector.

The following pages summarize key points from each discussion table.



Discussion table featuring Crystal Dreisbach (Upstream) & Kate Johnson (Hillside Festival)

Morning discussion tables

What prevents sustainable events in our city:

Gaps and solutions

Moderators:

**Kelleagh Alexander
& Phil Nowotny**

Ottawa Tourism

Challenges

- Limited infrastructure to support sustainable practices
- Logistical challenges for large events such as races
- Behavioural barriers among attendees and vendors
- Coordination challenges across multiple venues and organizations

Ideas & solutions

- Improve signage and communication, including multilingual messaging
- Place waste and recycling stations in high-traffic areas
- Explore reuse service providers that handle collection and washing
- Shift costs and responsibilities through new vendor models

Next steps

Strengthen partnerships with reuse providers and event service suppliers

From action to story:

Integrating sustainability into event communications

Moderator:

Andrea Flowers

EnviroCentre

Challenges

- Communicating sustainability without greenwashing
- Limited resources for effective marketing and storytelling
- Translating operational practices into compelling messages

Ideas & solutions

- Communicate sustainability before, during, and after events
- Use clear and repeated messaging across channels
- Highlight concrete actions and real impacts
- Encourage sustainable behaviours through event communications

Next steps

Develop shared resources and messaging tools for event organizers

Green teams in action:

Harnessing volunteer power

Moderator:

William Van Geest

Ecology Ottawa

Challenges

- Recruiting and retaining volunteers
- Providing training and safety support
- Transportation barriers for volunteers
- Communication and coordination challenges

Ideas & solutions

- Invest in volunteer training and meaningful engagement
- Provide clear roles and strong coordination
- Build community through skill-building opportunities
- Create welcoming environments that encourage participation

Next steps

Expand volunteer programs and strengthen partnerships with community groups

**Implementing
reuse at events:**

Challenges and opportunities

Moderator:

Andrea Nelson

Friendlier

Challenges

- Behaviour change for attendees unfamiliar with reuse systems
- Accessibility considerations for dishware and waste stations
- Higher costs and logistical barriers for smaller events
- Coordination with vendors and venue staff

Ideas & solutions

- Clear, simple messaging to help attendees navigate reuse systems
- Staff or volunteers stationed at waste sorting areas
- Collaboration among vendors to share reuse infrastructure
- Community partnerships to supply reusable service ware

Next steps

Strengthen networks between event organizers and reuse suppliers

Zero waste events:

Brainstorming ideas to move toward the goal

Moderator:

Sia Veeramani

NU Grocery

Challenges

- Vendor coordination and packaging requirements
- Food waste and single-use materials
- Lack of awareness of sustainable suppliers
- Limited municipal support for waste reduction

Ideas & solutions

- Digital programs and signage to reduce paper waste
- Waste audits and diversion activities at events
- Partnerships with food recovery organizations
- Sustainable supplier directories for event organizers

Next steps

Explore funding opportunities and support from tourism organizations

Getting there:

Creative transportation solutions for events

Moderator:

Cassie Smith

EnviroCentre

Challenges

- Transportation emissions from attendee travel
- Limited transit options for some events
- Geographic distance and accessibility concerns
- Habits and assumptions about car travel and parking

Ideas & solutions

- Consider buses and vans for travel within the event community or even to bring a group of participants to a destination together. It can even be promoted as an extended event/networking opportunity.
- Partner with transit agencies and shared mobility operators for event passes and integration with tickets
- Encourage active transportation, carpooling, and shared mobility
- Use parking fees as eco-fees to support sustainable options
- Event-based transportation demand management programs to simplify these steps for event organizers.

Next steps

Build relationships between event organizers and transportation providers.

Funding green:

Strategies for sustainable event financing

Moderator:

Elyse McCann

EnviroCentre

Challenges

- Limited funding for sustainability initiatives
- Costs associated with reuse systems and waste reduction
- Difficulty quantifying environmental benefits in advance

Ideas & solutions

- Sustainability fees embedded in ticket prices
- Sponsorship models tied to environmental initiatives
- Shared reuse infrastructure across events

Next steps

Explore new funding models and collaborative infrastructure investments

Food waste:

Good food, low impact

Moderator:

Kate Veinot

Just Food

Challenges

- Food waste at large events
- Difficulty sourcing sustainable food at scale
- Limited infrastructure connecting events with local producers

Ideas & solutions

- Plant-forward menus and smaller portion sizes
- Partnerships with food recovery organizations
- Greater connections between event organizers and local producers

Next steps

Strengthen relationships between event organizers and local food systems

Afternoon discussion tables

Measuring what matters:

Tracking event impact

Moderator:

Jennifer Stelzer

EnviroCentre

Challenges

- Determining which metrics to track
- Measuring social and environmental impacts
- Limited data to support sustainability claims

Ideas & solutions

- Track transportation choices, waste diversion, and emissions
- Use simple measurement frameworks
- Share impact data with stakeholders

Next steps

Define sustainability metrics early in the planning process

Setting the standard:

Integrating sustainability into event procurement

Moderator:

Mary Sayewich

& Cedric Belisle

Ottawa Tourism

Challenges

- Limited influence over venue operations
- Difficulty sourcing sustainable products from vendors
- Lack of standardized procurement tools

Ideas & solutions

- Include sustainability criteria in RFPs and vendor contracts
- Share best practices across organizations
- Reduce unnecessary event swag and materials

Next steps

Collaborate on shared procurement guidelines

Make green cool:

Motivating audiences to behave more sustainably

Moderator:

Ashley Kokelj

EnviroCentre

Challenges

- Limited time to influence behaviour at events
- Information overload for attendees
- Perception that sustainable actions are inconvenient

Ideas & solutions

- Gamification and incentives for sustainable behaviours
- Deposit systems for reusable items
- Friendly volunteer support at waste stations

Next steps

Test creative engagement strategies that make sustainability visible and fun

**Travel smarter,
stay greener:**

Cutting event emissions from travel and lodging

Moderator:

Sarah Levitin

Lush Handmade Cosmetics

Challenges

- Travel emissions from speakers and attendees
- Balancing sustainability with convenience and cost

Ideas & solutions

- Encourage train travel where possible
- Integrate sustainability criteria into venue selection
- Communicate transportation options clearly to attendees

Next steps

Incorporate travel policies and sustainability criteria into event planning

City-led reuse solutions:

How local systems can support events

Moderator:

Alexia Petit

Circular Innovation Council

Challenges

- Lack of centralized infrastructure for reuse systems
- Difficulty collecting and cleaning reusable containers

Ideas & solutions

- Standardized reusable containers
- Shared washing and collection infrastructure
- Municipal support for reuse programs

Next steps

Explore city-wide reuse systems and partnerships

Breaking the routine:

How events can spark green habits

Moderator:

Cassie Smith

EnviroCentre

Challenges

- Resistance to changing established event planning processes
- Audience habits and expectations

Ideas & solutions

- Introduce sustainable practices gradually
- Communicate values clearly
- Use events as opportunities to demonstrate and trial new behaviours

Next steps

Develop toolkits and resources for sustainable event design focused on local needs and suppliers.

Closing the loop:

Boosting diversion at events

Moderator:

MJ Schmidt

CAFES

Challenges

- Confusion around waste sorting
- Inconsistent waste systems across venues
- Limited education for vendors and attendees

Ideas & solutions

- Clear signage and visual aids
- Volunteer support at waste stations
- Smart bin technology and deposit systems

Next steps

Pilot and refine diversion systems at events

Risk management:

Heat relief at events in a warming climate

Moderator:

Michelle Rabbetts

EnviroCentre

Challenges

- Increasing heat risks for outdoor events
- Limited shade infrastructure
- Access to water at event sites

Ideas & solutions

- Portable shade structures and green shade walls
- Expanded water refill stations
- Climate-resilient event site design (e.g. ability to connect to water from fire hydrants)

Next steps

Advocate for improved infrastructure and heat mitigation strategies

What we heard

Across the 16 discussion tables, participants shared a wide range of experiences, challenges, and ideas related to making events more sustainable. While the conversations covered many different topics, several key themes emerged.

Sustainability needs to be built into event planning

A consistent message throughout the discussions was that sustainability is most effective when it is considered early in the planning process. Decisions about venues, vendors, transportation, and procurement often determine the environmental footprint of an event long before it takes place. When sustainability is embedded from the start, organizers have greater flexibility to integrate solutions such as reuse systems, waste reduction strategies, and sustainable food options.

Procurement, in particular, was highlighted as a critical and often underestimated lever. Once suppliers are selected, it becomes nearly impossible to impose sustainability requirements retroactively. These expectations must be clearly defined before a supplier is chosen — first as explicit requirements in the Request for Proposals (RFP), and then formalized in the contract as part of the service being provided. This ensures that sustainability is not an afterthought, but a condition of doing business with the event.

Reuse and circular systems are emerging as key opportunities

Many discussions highlighted the growing momentum behind reuse systems and circular economy approaches. Moving away from single-use materials toward reusable food and beverage containers was identified as one of the most promising strategies for reducing event waste. At the same time, participants noted that reuse systems require coordinated logistics — including collection, washing, storage, and vendor participation.

Several participants emphasized that shared infrastructure and partnerships will be essential to make reuse systems more accessible across events of all sizes. A remaining barrier, however, is cost: single-use options are still cheaper in most cases. This is expected to shift as the reuse sector scales and economies of scale bring prices down. In the meantime,

Participants emphasized that practical tools, guidance, and shared resources can help organizers incorporate sustainability into planning workflows — including at the procurement stage.

Looking ahead, there was a shared sense of ambition among participants: the events of the future should have no place for single-use.

participants suggested that a small eco-fee built into ticket pricing could help bridge the gap and support the transition.

Events can inspire behaviour change

Events offer a unique opportunity to introduce sustainable practices and influence behaviour — and, as some participants noted, to challenge or break habits that extend well beyond event day. Thoughtful event design — including signage, volunteer engagement, and creative programming — can encourage attendees to adopt sustainable habits such as proper waste sorting, using reusable containers, or choosing low-carbon transportation.

Many noted that sustainable behaviours are most successful when they are easy, visible, and integrated into the event experience, rather than relying solely on education or enforcement.

Collaboration across the event ecosystem is essential

Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of collaboration across the many actors involved in organizing events. Event organizers rely on venues, caterers, suppliers, sponsors, municipalities, and transportation providers. Advancing sustainable practices requires alignment among these partners, as well as shared standards and infrastructure that make greener choices easier to implement.

Participants also emphasized the value of knowledge sharing and storytelling across the sector — including a willingness to try approaches that may not yet be the norm, but that make practical sense. One memorable example came from Run Ottawa, whose representative described asking residents along the route whether runners could access water at their homes.

In this sense, events become more than a moment in time: they can act as a catalyst for longer-term shifts in how people think and act around sustainability.

Their takeaway was simple but resonant:

"Don't be afraid to ask for help." It was a reminder that creative, community-rooted solutions are often hiding in plain sight, waiting to be unlocked through openness and collaboration.

Measuring impact helps drive progress

Participants also stressed the importance of measuring and communicating environmental impacts.

Tracking metrics such as waste diversion rates, transportation emissions, and food waste can help organizers identify opportunities for improvement and demonstrate progress to partners and attendees.

Clear data and transparent reporting can also help build credibility and support continued investment in sustainable event practices.



Looking ahead

The conversations at this year's symposium made one thing clear: the shift toward greener events is already underway. Across Ottawa and beyond, event organizers, venues, municipalities, and service providers are experimenting with new approaches — from reuse systems and sustainable procurement to waste reduction strategies and climate-resilient event design. These efforts demonstrate that meaningful progress is possible when sustainability is integrated into how events are planned and delivered.

At the same time, many participants emphasized that lasting change will require collaboration across the broader event ecosystem. No single organization can transform event practices on its own. Progress depends on shared infrastructure, supportive policies, and partnerships that make sustainable choices easier and more accessible for organizers.

Events themselves can also play an important role in shaping the future. By introducing new systems, testing innovative solutions, and engaging audiences in sustainable practices, events can help normalize behaviours that extend far beyond the event itself.

EnviroCentre will continue working with partners across the region to support this transition — convening conversations, testing new ideas, and sharing lessons learned along the way. The ideas captured in this report represent the beginning of a broader journey. As organizers continue to experiment and collaborate, greener events have the potential to become not only more common, but the standard for how events are designed and experienced in our communities.



From Left to Right: Elyse McCann (Business Development Director, EnviroCentre), Crystal Dreisbach (CEO, Upstream), Jennifer Stelzer (Strategic Impact Director, EnviroCentre)

Resources & Media

SYMPOSIUM MEDIA

#ICYMI here we have recap reels available on our social media channels @EnviroCentre

PLANNING RESOURCES

Ottawa Tourism has produced a Responsible Events Guide, a practical reference for organizers looking to reduce the environmental impact of their events: <https://ottawatourism.ca/en/business-events/planning-resources>

RELATED INITIATIVES

In 2025 we ran two pilot projects that provide additional models and resources for sustainable event practices:

Reuse Pilot — <https://envirocentre.ca/pilot-program-reusable-cups-take-the-lead-at-5k-race/>

Bike Valet Survey Pilot — <https://envirocentre.ca/work/taste-of-wellington-testing-low-carbon-transportation-solutions-for-community-events/>

NEED SUPPORT FOR YOUR EVENT?

We're happy to help organizations plan greener events.

Reach out to find out how we can help: info@envirocentre.ca



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