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# ONTARIOs WEST COAST

## 2018-2019 TOURISM STRATEGY

### TOURISM, ARTS & CULTURE TASK FORCE

The Huron County Economic Development 2016-2020, approved by County Council in 2015, is the overall strategic plan guiding the work plans and actions of the Huron County Economic Development Department. As identified in the plan, the Economic Development Board believes that Huron County's tourism, arts and culture sector is a vital part of our local economy and, with the correct supports in place, has the potential for further growth and prosperity.

Recognizing that the knowledge and experience of entrepreneurs and volunteers working in this sector is critical to designing supports, a task force was created in early 2017 to advise the Board. The Huron County Tourism, Arts and Culture Enabling Task Force (TAC) is comprised of local tourism operators, industry experts and County staff. TAC met several times during 2017 to develop this strategy and has charted a new course to enhance the sector over the next two years.

### SETTING THE STAGE

In 2015, total visitor spending in our tourism region - encompassing Huron County, Perth County, Waterloo Region and Wellington County - was estimated to be over \$876 million<sup>1</sup>. Maximizing the performance and value of our tourism economy requires an understanding of what makes Huron County unique in the marketplace and a commitment to delivering an outstanding experience at every stage of a visitor's journey with us.

Huron County is differentiated from our regions by our signature mixture of captivating heritage and local cultural experiences, vibrant arts community and serene natural environment – all situated within a two hour drive of approximately two million people living in Southwestern Ontario. Experienced individually, each of our thematic strengths keep visitors returning again and again. When experienced

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport figure derived from Canadian Travel Survey data. 2015 is the most recent year for which data are available.

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together, the sensational harmony of these themes capture hearts and minds to the point where some of our visitors choose to stay here as residents.

For those seeking an outstanding, authentic visitor experience, we are Ontario's West Coast!

## **VISION**

Ontario's West Coast is a recognized tourism brand representing outstanding, authentic opportunities to experience the natural environment, immerse in local heritage and historical places, play a role in the dynamic story of rural Ontario and express yourself alongside our vibrant arts community.

## **MISSION**

To cultivate outstanding destination marketing and management for Huron County.

## **STRATEGY**

As the regional tourism sector leader, the County's Economic Development Department will work with partners to ensure a vibrant tourism arts and culture economy by building capacity and destination development leadership, providing sector supports to operators, and curating story-based destination marketing of Ontario's West Coast. The following eight outcomes represent the priority items to be achieved by this strategy over the next two years.

## **OUTCOMES (WHAT & WHY)**

### **1) Track performance of the local tourism economy**

Investment decisions must be driven by data. The Huron County Economic Development Department will develop metrics to track the performance of the local tourism economy to understand where sector supports are needed as well as measure the impact of supports.

### **2) Renew Ontario's West Coast (OWC) web presence and improve online marketing performance**

Ontarioswestcoast.ca requires an immediate overhaul to reestablish the brand's reputation in the marketplace. Enhancing the look and function of the site will greatly improve the visitor experience in the planning stage of their trip. Investing in maintaining a high-level of engagement and performance on

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the OWC social media properties is also absolutely vital - *if we're not part of the conversation, we won't be a destination!*

### 3) Develop a terms of reference for a regional funding program to catalyze growth of arts & culture sector

Arts and cultural experiences are strong drivers of demand for tourism<sup>2</sup>. The Huron County Economic Development Board has identified the tourism, arts and culture sector as a priority area for investment, given the potential for generating a significant economic impact in Huron County. County staff will develop a terms of reference for a publicly funded regional tourism pilot program designed to catalyze growth of the arts and culture sector.

### 4) Support tourism operators in managing their own online presence effectively

More than ever, online sources of information such as *Tripadvisor.ca* and *Google Business* are influencing the spending decisions of travellers. The County's Economic Development Department will play a leadership role in building capacity – skills and literacy – among tourism operators to manage their business's online presence effectively.

### 5) Reflecting our best, curate and publish compelling story-based content supported by world-class marketing collateral

Competition within the tourism industry is fierce. Succeeding in attracting visitors to our destinations means leading with our best foot forward and demonstrating relevancy to our target audience. Working with partners, the County will curate and publish stories that reflect the strengths of the Ontario's West Coast brand: natural environment, local heritage and historical places, and our vibrant arts community.

### 6) Engage in strategic partnerships that build capacity and support destination development in Huron County

Tourism operators are the industry experts. The County will continue to work with community groups and local associations to identify and implement projects that enhance the visitor experience at our towns, villages and destinations.

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<sup>2</sup> Todd Hirsch. "The economic imperative for investing in arts and culture". The Globe and Mail. March 26, 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/economy/the-economic-imperative-for-investing-in-arts-and-culture/article10463290/>

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### 7) Improve wayfinding signage so visitors find their destinations easily

Improving tourism wayfinding signage in Huron County has been identified as a priority, especially within our towns and villages. The Economic Development Department will work to improve visitor navigation within Huron County.

### 8) Ensure public assets are market-ready and responsibly promoted

Huron County has outstanding beaches and hiking trails. The Economic Development Department will develop and implement an auditing system to ensure that these assets are market ready and responsibly promoted under the Ontario's West Coast brand.

## TACTICS (HOW, WHEN & WHO)

### 1) Track performance of the local tourism economy

County tourism staff will select a series of key performance indicators (KPIs) of the local tourism economy. These KPIs will complement available data from regional sources (i.e., Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership Corporation). Major tasks to complete include:

- Design data collection, storage and reporting system
- Seek data sharing agreements with willing private operators in target areas of the sector (e.g., accommodation providers, event organizers, restaurateurs) and non-profit organizations (e.g., BIAs, Chambers)
- Using data collected from willing local operators and partners, begin reporting KPI performance annually to Council and the public.

Financial Implications	No levy impact
Timeline	Q3 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

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2) Renew Ontario's West Coast (OWC) web presence and improve online marketing performance

The Economic Development Department will continue to manage OWC-branded online properties and market the region.

A. Invest in a new OWC.ca website. Design wireframe and functionality of new site to:

- Organize stories by themes then activity cluster; use metadata tags to improve SEO
- Host compelling stories that answers the question *why should I care about visiting Huron County?*; *cross-promote stories with referenced links*
- Embed calls-to-action within story content (e.g., to operator sites to place bookings/reservations) and link to external sources whenever possible (e.g., *what have other people said?*)
- Host or link to content that answers *how can I visit?*
- Ensure interoperability with social media, events calendar and other apps identified

Financial Implications	\$10,000 from existing budget
Timeline	Q1 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Mark Hussey, Web and Multimedia Specialist

B. Improve social media performance through increasing engagement by:

- Following best-practices published by the medium, focus on posting content that maximizes 'shareability'
- Developing seasonal marketing campaign schedule and increase paid advertising of Ontario's West Coast collateral
- Increasing contesting as part of marketing campaign
- Ensuring calls-to-action are embedded in content, funneling visitors to appropriate online destinations

Financial Implications	\$5,000 from existing budget
Timeline	Q1 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

C. Create dashboard tool to monitor real-time online performance. The County will work with RTO4 to:

- Develop a prototype for the Ontario's West Coast web properties
- Adopt an online auditing system

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Financial Implications	No levy impact
Timeline	Q3 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

D. Remove the business directory from the new website. In its current format, this directory is proving to be redundant for visitors in the age of online information repositories (i.e., *Google Business* listings, *Tripadvisor.ca*, etc.). The business directory database will be taken off line in the winter of 2018 and placed in a dormant stage while the usefulness of this tool is assessed.

Financial Implications	No levy impact
Timeline	Q3 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

3) Develop a terms of reference for a regional funding program to catalyze growth of arts & culture sector

Staff will lead a review of programs offered in other jurisdictions to design a pilot program for Huron County with the aim to launch the program in 2019. Major tasks to be completed include:

- Hosting four to six consultation meetings with stakeholders
- Developing a terms of reference that defines eligibility criteria for applications and ensures value for money invested
- Designing a reporting mechanism to ensure accountability

Financial Implications	Manage within existing budget (staff travel, meeting spaces and light hospitality)
Timeline	Q2 & Q3 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Rick Sickinger, Cultural Services Officer

4) Support tourism operators in managing their own online presence effectively

The Huron County Economic Development Department, through the Small Business Enterprise Centre (SBEC), will design and deliver workshops to boost the skills and knowledge of business operators required to manage their own online reputation.

Example workshop content includes how to claim your *Google Business* listing; the importance of promoting *Tripadvisor.ca* reviews; how to use *Facebook* and other social media platforms effectively;

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online customer service training; online auditing tools, etc. Staff travel will be required to deliver these workshops throughout the County. These expenses are captured in the SBEC budget.

Financial Implications	Manage within existing budget (staff travel, meeting spaces, office supplies)
Timeline	Q1 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Nicki Darbyson, Business Development Specialist, Small Business Enterprise Centre

### 5) Reflecting our best, curate and publish compelling story-based content supported by world-class marketing collateral

Under the Ontario's West Coast brand, the Economic Development Department will curate authentic content (stories and imagery) featuring our strongest tourism assets that answer the question *why should I care about or visit Ontario's West Coast?* Tourism staff will innovate and evaluate printed tourism products, starting with the production of a visitor magazine in 2018. The content of publications will tie into and promote our top themes - outdoor recreation, heritage and history, arts and culture - to target markets.

A. Printed Material. With the goal of distributing a visitor magazine in the spring of each year, the major tasks are to:

- Design layout and format "look and feel"
- Establish content guidelines
- Develop a story queue
- Develop collateral (images and stories) for leading themes
- Distribute guides within Huron County. To minimize staff travel in the distribution of printed material, the magazine will be brought to stakeholder meetings (i.e., BIA/Chamber meetings) for transport to local communities.

Financial Implications	\$15,000 from existing budget (printing)
Timeline	Q1 2018
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

B. Collateral Development. As curator of the Ontario's West Coast brand, staff will continuously scan the local market for stories that reinforce outstanding, authentic visitor experiences in Huron County. The goal is to curate at least 12 new feature stories each year. In-county Staff travel may be required to

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collect imagery/video of destinations to support story development. The number of community/destination visits in 2018 to collect collateral is expected to be between four and six.

Financial Implications	\$5,000 from existing budget (professional photography & travel writing; media familiarization tours); staff travel will be managed within existing budget
Timeline	Continuous
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

### 6) Engage in strategic partnerships that build capacity and support destination development in Huron County

Huron County will continue to support community-driven efforts to enhance the visitor experience at our destinations. Building on the work initiated in partnership between the County of Huron and RTO4, the three immediate priorities are the towns of Blyth, Bayfield and the G2G Rail Trail. The major task is for the Economic Development Department to seek a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with RTO4 that sees each organization contribute \$90k (for a total of \$180k) towards destination development work in Huron County in 2018. The MOU will provide a detailed project description, work plan and cost estimate. Staff will be required to travel periodically to attend stakeholder meetings in Huron County communities. The expected number of stakeholder meetings in 2018 is forecast to be between eight and ten.

Financial Implications	\$90,000 from Economic Development reserves (contribution matched by RTO4 to go towards capital project work along G2G Rail Trail); staff travel will be managed within existing budget
Timeline	Continuous
Lead Person Responsible	Cody Joudry, Director, Economic Development Department

### 7) Improve wayfinding signage so visitors find their destinations easily

In partnership with RTO4, the Economic Development Department will conduct a wayfinding signage project that:

- Adapts the Wayfinding & Signage Standards Manual developed for Bruce County to Huron County specifications
- Improves visitor navigation and their experience
- Creates a sense of arrival and place congruent with that town/village/destination



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- Alerts visitors and residents to key features / tourism assets

Major tasks include:

- Scoping out required project deliverables (i.e., analysis, system design, documentation)
- Writing and posting the RFP
- Scoring applicants and awarding the contract
- Maintaining contact with consultant and receiving monthly status reports
- Supplying GIS data
- Staff travel within Huron County to attend two public consultations of the overall county strategy, and two stakeholder meetings in Bayfield to review the site-specific community plan.

Financial Implications	\$60,000 carried forward from 2017 budget – this sum was equally contributed to by County of Huron and RTO4; staff travel will be managed within existing budget
Timeline	Q2 2018 receive final report
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

### 8) Ensure public assets are market-ready and responsibly promoted

The County's Economic Development Department will work with partners to evaluate and improve the status of trails and beaches. An audit system will be adopted and applied to these assets to assist in investment and marketing decisions.

Major tasks include registering staff for *Standards and Practices* training offered by Trails Ontario

Financial Implications	For inclusion in 2019 budget
Timeline	Q1-Q2 2019
Lead Person Responsible	Scott Currie, Communication and Marketing Officer

## IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

STRATEGIC ITEM		2018				2019			
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
<b>1</b>	Select a set of key performance indicators for regional tourism economy								
<b>2</b>	Renew web presence and improve online marketing performance								
<b>3</b>	Design a terms of reference for funding program pilot to catalyze arts & culture development								
<b>4</b>	Design SBEC courses to boost operator skills in managing online presence								
<b>5</b>	Proactive destination marketing collateral planning								
<b>6</b>	Build capacity and support destination development work								
<b>7</b>	Wayfinding study RFP in partnership with RTO4								
<b>8</b>	Adopt and implement audit system for trails and beaches								