

Town of Whitby

Staff Report

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Report Title: Tourism Strategy Update – January 2024

Report to: Committee of the Whole

Date of meeting: January 15, 2024

Report Number: CAO 01-24

Department(s) Responsible:

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

Submitted by:

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**Acknowledged by M. Gaskell,
Chief Administrative Officer**

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1. Recommendation:

1. That Report CAO 01-24, Tourism Strategy Update – January 2024, be received for information.

2. Highlights:

- Destination Whitby, 2022 – 2025 [Whitby Tourism Strategy](#), adopted in May of 2022, is a four-year strategy that provides a framework for businesses, local government, and residents to leverage the visitor economy and grow Whitby as a visitor-ready and welcoming destination. It is a strategy to guide the municipality in future tourism support, promotion, planning, and destination development.
- The Tourism Strategy includes a vision, three key objectives with eight goals and 33 action items. Since the adoption of the Strategy, a total of 16 actions have been completed or are underway. Some of the actions have multiple projects associated with them.
- Tourism Strategy actions have been undertaken in collaboration with staff from various municipal departments (Economic Development, Legal and Enforcement Services and Communications and Creative Services), Central

Counties Tourism, Culinary Tourism Alliance, Durham Tourism and key stakeholders and businesses in the community.

- [Whitby's Food Guide](#) was nationally recognized by the Economic Developers Association of Canada (EDAC) for the top Marketing Canada award for a publication.
- Promoting tourism has been recognized as a top priority within the 2023-2026 Community Strategic Plan. This involves a specific action under Whitby's Neighbourhoods, aimed at strengthening the culinary and live music scenes through collaborative partnerships. Additionally, there is an action item under Whitby's Economy that focuses on advancing Whitby's tourism sector, with particular focus on the waterfront.
- Report CAO 01-24 provides an overview of the action items completed since May 2022.

3. Background:

Ontario defines a tourist or visitor as someone who travels more than 40 km for leisure, business, or other purposes. Tourism is one of the only sectors that employs Canadians in every area of the country. This includes provinces, territories, and electoral ridings. A thriving tourism industry in a community can act as a positive economic driver and support businesses. In fact, the retention of businesses and services in many communities throughout Durham Region depends more and more upon visitor spending.

The tourism industry in Ontario represents over 200,000 businesses and in 2019, the industry in Ontario generated revenue of over 36 billion dollars, which at that time was higher than the combined total from agriculture, forestry/logging, commercial fishing/hunting, and mining industries. In addition to making a significant economic contribution, a prosperous tourism sector benefits a community both culturally and socially.

Whitby's Tourism Strategy examines and provides clear directions as to how Whitby's unique tourism opportunities and businesses can contribute to economic development and growth by offering experiences for visitors and residents alike. The Strategy provides a guide for the municipality in tourism support, promotion, planning and destination development.

The **Vision** for the Tourism Strategy is:

The Town of Whitby will create a visitor-friendly, welcoming, inclusive, vibrant, and accessible destination rooted in economic, social, and cultural connectivity.

The Tourism Strategy includes three key Objectives:

- 1) **Character** – Elevate Whitby through destination development.

2) **Connectivity** – Collaborate and connect with businesses, organizations, and residents to develop tourism offerings, products, and packages.

3) **Content and Communication** – Develop marketing assets to generate authentic Whitby stories; increase Whitby's unique tourism offerings; create a network of tourism partners that support collaboration, coordination, and information sharing.

Tourism development is a new priority for Whitby and now identified as a potential area of economic growth in the Community Strategic Plan. When the Tourism strategy was developed, it was important to acknowledge Whitby's wealth of assets. Whitby is one of Canada's fastest growing communities and combines a small-town welcoming atmosphere with the amenities of a larger urban centre. Whitby is known for its built and natural heritage, including the waterfront, parks, trails, and greenspaces, two historic downtowns, and well-respected creative community and growing culinary scene. Whitby currently has a variety of tourism assets including places like Station Gallery, Port Whitby Marina, the largest entertainment centrum east of Toronto, Abilities Centre, Iroquois Park Sports Centre, numerous award-winning events, golf courses, and the Canadian owned wellness attraction, Thermea Spa Village.

Knowing these strengths and attractions, the Tourism Strategy identifies why people visit Whitby and the six tourism sectors that define Whitby including:

- Nautical Tourism;
- Sports Tourism;
- Family Tourism;
- Culinary Tourism;
- Wellness Tourism; and,
- Cultural Tourism.

Successful implementation of the Tourism Strategy is being realized through collaboration across the organization and within the community by connecting key partners including Central Counties Tourism, Culinary Tourism Alliance, Durham Tourism and Sport Durham, tourism businesses, events, and attractions, and aligning financial resources.

4. Discussion:

The following information provides a highlight of the action items and accomplishments that have been implemented since the adoption of the Tourism Strategy. A more detailed list of action items completed since May 2022 can be found within **Attachment 1 – Tourism Strategy Action Plan Updates**.

Objective 1: Character

Goal 1: Differentiate Whitby as a Unique Destination within Ontario

Collaborated with private sector tourism businesses to help promote and market tourism in Whitby. An example of this included providing 5 Paddles Brewery with canvas bags

featuring the @explorewhitby branding on them for the Royal Winter Fair. Thermea Spa Village and other business partners continue to donate prizes for Instagram contests and prize packs at tourism booth trade shows.

Goal 2: Use Quality Research to Drive Tourism Development

Working with Central Counties Tourism, the Geofencing Research tool was used to provide a deeper understanding of Whitby's tourists through mobility data. By creating specific geofences (a virtual geographic boundary around a particular area) the Town was provided with an accurate estimate of the number of people who entered within a specified timeframe, where they came from, the average number of times locals vs non-locals visited as well as visitor profile information. Locals are known as residents living in Whitby while a non-local is considered a tourist living more than 40 km away. The three locations listed below highlight the information obtained through the Geofence Research. The first larger number represents the total number of visits over the timeframe and the breakdown below each of these represents the unique visitor. Most of the unique visitors are repeating four to five times.

- Whitby Entertainment Centrum (including Reptilia, Flying Squirrel and Aspire)
 - June to December 2022 saw **2,899,320 visits** (locals and non-locals).
 - 196,667 were **unique** local visitors and 78,551 were tourists (from over 40+km away).
- Downtown Whitby
 - June to December 2022 saw **2,625,884 visits** to the Downtown (locals and non-locals).
 - 195,615 were **unique** local visitors and 36,702 were tourists (from over 40+km away).
- Whitby Waterfront and Marina
 - May to September 2022 saw **442,328 visits** (locals and non-locals).
 - 84,378 were **unique** local visitors and 16,407 were tourists (from over 40+km away).

Goal 3: Build Capacity for Community Tourism

Since May of 2022, Creative Communities worked closely with its partners in tourism and collaborated on many projects and initiatives including:

- Culinary Tourism Alliance partnership and participation in the [Great Taste of Ontario \(GTOO\) Passport](#) resulted in Globe and Mail Exposure (**Attachment 2**) for Whitby's food scene.
- Tourism and Economic Development staff attended a "Meet the Tourism Investment Dragons" event in October 2023 hosted through Investment and Development Office (IDO), Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport to promote a hotel investment at Whitby's waterfront.

Goal 4: Grow Local Economic Development for the Tourism Sector

Creative Communities Division supported a Durham College tourism student internship from January to April of 2023 to assist with Food Guide research.

Objective 2: Connectivity

Goal 1: Develop Visitor Readiness

Product or destination development refers to the tourism assets and associated stakeholders that will attract visitors to Whitby and help to create the visitor experience. In 2023, one of the key priorities was collaborating and connecting with tourism businesses and attractions to start to develop tourism offerings, products, and packages to be visitor ready. Actions accomplished included:

- Development of the second edition of the national award-winning [Whitby Food Guide](#).
- Hosting the first Destination Development networking event at Town Brewery designed to engage and pursue partnerships and collaboration.
- Helping local businesses and stakeholders become “tourism or visitor ready” through the promotion of online resources, training, and workshops.
- QR Code Window Clings, bookmarks and copies of the Food Guide distributed to arenas and community centres and linked in their welcome packages during the annual Silver Stick Tournament.
- Creation of an up-to-date tourism stakeholder contact list.

Goal 2: Engage Industry Partners in Community Tourism Economic Development

- Launched the first b2b (business to business) newsletter in June and a second edition in October.
- Memberships with the Tourism Association Industry of Ontario (TIAO), Central Counties Tourism, Culinary Tourism Alliance (CTA) and the Durham Tourism Leadership Team.
- A staff member currently sits on the Board of Directors for RTO6 (Regional Tourism Organization 6 - Central Counties Tourism).
- Tourism staff in partnership with Economic Development hosted a tourism booth at the Canadian National Exhibition in August 2023.

Objective 3: Content and Communication

Goal 1: Develop Digital Content and Optimize Communications with Residents and Visitors

- Launch of Whitby’s new tourism website www.whitby.ca/tourism.
- Launch of Whitby’s tourism brand “Discover Something New to Enjoy” (**Attachment 3**).
- Contracted photographer and videographer to grow Whitby’s image bank, available to all departments.
- Economic Developers Association of Canada (EDAC) Awards Submission for the Whitby Food Guide and subsequent win as the top Marketing Canada Award.

- Development of the [Events Teaser](#) video and two new [Tourism teaser videos](#) to be used over the next year to promote Whitby's amazing tourism destinations.
- Design of various marketing assets including postcards, signage, and bookmarks to promote Whitby Tourism and the Whitby Food Guide (**Attachment 3**).
- Partnership ads and features with Central Counties Tourism and Culinary Tourism Alliance.

Goal 2: Develop an Audience of Visitors

- Launch of Instagram @explorewhitby and Social Media content calendar. Whitby has 733 followers and as of December 11 the tourism team has posted 133 times.
- QR Code Window Clings for both tourism and the Whitby Food Guide designed and delivered to businesses, accommodations and food and beverage providers.

2024 Tourism Strategy Initiatives

To harness the advantages of thriving tourism growth and investments, as well as the broader visitor economy, the primary emphasis for 2024 should remain on maintaining a holistic approach that includes active community participation, engaging stakeholders, coordinated strategic planning, fostering collaboration, ongoing visitor service enhancement, and strategic preparation for future visitor infrastructure. Community buy-in impacts the visitor experience, from the service they receive at local shops and restaurants to the general spirit of the destination.

In 2024, subject to budget approval, the following initiatives and actions will be undertaken to support the Tourism Strategy and Whitby's visitor economy:

- Continuation of the marketing and promotion of Whitby as a tourism destination through social media @explorewhitby, Facebook, and the tourism [website](#). Encouraging user-generated content that encourages visitors to share their experiences across the Town's platforms.
- Participation in the "Do Something Delicious" campaign through the Globe and Mail in partnership with the Culinary Tourism Alliance.
- New print assets to include tear off maps of Whitby and larger printed maps in identified key locations.
- Working with our partners at Central Counties Tourism to host Influencers in Whitby. By collaborating with influential personalities focused on travel experiences to expand our reach to a wider audience. These influencers have shared their personal experiences, effectively endorsing our destination and our stakeholders to their dedicated followers.
- Leverage the "Discover Something New to Enjoy" brand for tourism advertising and promotion with engaging storytelling of our community.

- Launch of two tourism teasers in the Spring and Summer and production of a winter Tourism teaser.
- Implementation of a quarterly b2c (business to consumer/visitor) e-newsletter starting in June 2024.
- Implementation of a Municipal Accommodation Tax (subject to Council approval) as a new revenue stream for tourism and the Town.
- Continue to communicate, collaborate, and build relationships with all partners, tourism businesses, food and beverage and key stakeholders through the hosting of two Destination Development events, b2b (business to business) newsletter distribution (quarterly), QR Window Cling program; stakeholder training workshops; sport tourism opportunities and itinerary building (Stay and Play packaging).
- Implementation of a Waterfront Pop-up Project to promote destination development along Whitby's waterfront, including a temporary visitor centre (pending funding source or budget approval).
- Implementation of a Tourism Ambassador Program by way of the hiring of a summer student (pending funding source or budget approval).
- Development and launch of culinary experiences related to the Whitby Food Guide including a Food Tour and Brewery Tour.
- Use of Visitor Metrics and data to identify target markets and visitor profiles. Collection of postal codes with tourism partners to help further define visitor analytics.

5. Financial Considerations:

For 2023, the Tourism Strategy initiatives are included within the operating budget for Creative Communities at a total of \$20,430, funded from property taxes. The estimated costs for all 33 actions identified in the plan is approximately \$290,000 over four years.

The base operating budget will be adjusted for inflationary pressures and growth. Further, staff will continue to investigate alternate funding sources, including submission of grant applications as grants become available and implementation of a Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT) to support the Town's investment in tourism including marketing, destination development and event support. Details regarding tourism initiatives that may be eligible for funding through a MAT will be included in a 2024 report on the feasibility of a Whitby Municipal Accommodation Tax.

6. Communication and Public Engagement:

Community and stakeholder engagement was undertaken to support the development of the Tourism Strategy. The implementation of the Tourism Strategy includes ongoing discussions with many businesses and organizations such as Central Counties Tourism, Durham Tourism and Sport Durham, Downtown Whitby BIA, Whitby Chamber of Commerce, Tourism Association Industry of Ontario (TIAO), and the Culinary Tourism Alliance (CTA).

Going forward, staff will continue to work in collaboration with these key partners, stakeholders and tourism businesses and attractions and are committed to forging new relationships not only with the businesses but the visitors to Whitby to become tourism ambassadors of our community.

7. Input from Departments/Sources:

The Tourism Strategy is built on an understanding of collaboration and connection, and Creative Communities will continue to engage in ongoing conversations with key departments and stakeholders.

8. Strategic Priorities:

In Whitby's Community Strategic Plan (CSP) 2023 – 2026, tourism is identified in the vision statement with the word explore. Improving the waterfront was highlighted by residents as the most important action to support the Whitby Economy. Action 1.2.2 in Strategic Pillar 1: Whitby's Neighbourhoods, the plan focuses on the need to enhance Whitby's culinary and live music sectors through collaborative partnerships. Action 3.1.3 implements actions to enhance Whitby's tourism sector, with a focus on the waterfront. The Tourism Strategy builds upon these existing priorities and work plan alignment to ensure the pillars of the CSP are advanced.

Tourism efforts in Accessibility and Sustainability are outlined in specific actions of the Tourism Strategy including Goal 3 – Building capacity for community tourism. Specific examples include investing and establishing a well signed, publicly accessible washroom in Downtown Whitby. The Whitby Food Guide was digitalized to allow for better accessibility. Action 2.1.4 under Objective 2, Goal 1 building Visitor Readiness identifies the need to invest in helping local businesses and stakeholders become "tourism ready" through online resources and training including the Safe Travels Stamp certification and the Green Step Sustainable Tourism certification program.

9. Attachments:

Attachment 1: Tourism Strategy Action Items Update Report – January 2024

Attachment 2: Globe and Mail Article – Great Taste of Ontario Passport

Attachment 3: Overview of Brand – Discover Something New to Enjoy and Whitby Food Guide Promotions