

STAFF REPORT: Administration



REPORT TO: Council
MEETING DATE: April 14, 2008
REPORT NO.: CEDC.08.07
SUBJECT: First Impressions Community Exchange Program
PREPARED BY: Lisa Kidd, Communications and Economic Development Coordinator
Peter Tollefsen, Director of Planning

A. Recommendations

THAT Council receive Staff Report CEDC.08.07, "First Impressions Community Exchange Program" for information purposes and;

THAT Council authorize participation in the Program; and

FURTHER THAT Council endorse a partnership with the Town of Gravenhurst as the matching Community to the Town of The Blue Mountains for the purposes of the First Impressions Community Exchange Program.

B. Background

In 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs developed the First Impressions Community Exchange Program. Since that time, hundreds of Ontario Communities have participated in the program.

First Impressions Community Exchange is a structured process that reveals the first impression a community conveys to outsiders, including tourists, potential investors and retirees. It offers a fresh perspective on the community's appearance, services and infrastructure and helps communities learn about their strengths and shortcomings.

Volunteer "visiting teams" from two exchange communities do unannounced, *incognito* visits, record their observations, and give constructive feedback to their exchange community. The knowledge gained through a First Impressions Community Exchange can be the basis for positive community action, focused on downtown revitalization, tourism development, investment attraction, quality service improvement, or broader community strategic planning efforts.

Each visiting team is made up of 5-6 community residents with a mix of backgrounds, occupations, ages, etc. It is important to have a diverse group of volunteers who can assume different roles and assess the exchange community from a variety of perspectives.

The team travels together to the exchange community, which may be 2–3 hours away. They spend several hours gathering information individually or in pairs, then return to their own community. The visit may include an overnight stay to assess the community’s nightlife and accommodation services.

The team then prepares a report and presents it to the exchange community through a scheduled public meeting. The exchange community reciprocates with a similar visit and report-back.

Participating communities select a coordinator to recruit and train the visiting team, arrange logistics for the visit and guide report preparation. Financial costs are minimal and limited to travel costs for the visiting team and the expenses associated with hosting a public meeting. Staff from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, or the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, will train the coordinator and provide all resource materials, including a guidebook and questionnaire.

The Town of Gravenhurst has indicated interest in participating in the community Exchange Program with the Town of The Blue Mountains. The Town of The Blue Mountains and the Town of Gravenhurst share similar characteristics:

The Town of Gravenhurst and the Town of The Blue Mountains are similar with respect to their priorities (as noted in the Town of Gravenhurst Strategic Plan and the Town of The Blue Mountains 2008 Budget Priorities). These include but are not limited to:

Town of The Blue Mountains	Town of Gravenhurst
Participate in affordable housing initiatives	Affordable/Moderate Housing
Complete the Economic Development Strategy	Collaborative Approach to Economic Development through a work plan with community groups
Update the Zoning By-law	Comprehensive Zoning By-law
Ensure environmental sustainability Maintain and enhance our urban forest	Environmental protection and retention of tradition environment character to underlie all of the Town’s decision making
Ensure accessibility and affordability of recreation Build a new Administration Centre	Making all municipal facilities accessible

Deliver land for a medical clinic	Medical presence
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From an economic perspective, both Towns rely on the tourism industry and boutique style shops and business to enhance the unique quality of each respective Town. It should be noted however that, unlike the Town of The Blue Mountains, the Town of Gravenhurst does not have a strong agricultural component, which is an underlying difference between the two municipalities.

From a Community Profile Perspective, the most current data available through Census Canada (2001) indicate that, in comparing the Town of The Blue Mountains with the Town of Gravenhurst, growth patterns, density, and schooling levels for those 20-34 are relatively similar. Labour force indicators are comparable as well, although the Town of The Blue Mountains income levels are slightly higher than those of Gravenhurst.

From a population perspective, while the Town of Gravenhurst has a slightly higher population, both Towns have significant seasonal populations and as a result, likely share similar challenges in terms of demands on local infrastructure such as roads, water, wastewater, and human and social services.

	Town of The Blue Mountains	Town of Gravenhurst
Permanent Population	6,825	11,046
Estimated Seasonal Population	10,428	10,930

All things considered, the Town of Gravenhurst and the Town of The Blue Mountains appear to be a good match for the purposes of the First Impressions Community Exchange Program as there are strong similarities in terms of Town priorities, community profile and population data.

C. The Blue Mountains' Strategic Plan (Statement(s) identifying how actions further the goals of the Strategic Plan)

Strategic Action 1.4 Prepare and Economic Development Strategy
 Strategic Action 3.3 Provide appropriate policies and zoning to protect existing architecture and natural heritage features

D. Budget Impact (cc: Treasury if required)

The Community Exchange Program is of no cost. There are however, costs associated with the following:

Travel/ Mileage	250.00 (estimated)
Public Meeting (advertising and refreshments)	100.00 (estimated)

As this program will build the foundation for the Economic Development Strategy and the Community Improvement Plan, the costs will be funded as part of the Economic Development Strategy Project, approved as part of the 2008 Budget.

E. Attached (Relevant documentation not personal information about an identifiable person)

Attachment 1- First Impressions Community Exchange Program Brochure

Respectfully submitted,

Signature

Signature