

STAFF REPORT: Administration



REPORT TO: Council
MEETING DATE: September 22, 2008
REPORT NO.: CEDC.08.15
**SUBJECT: Tourism Competitiveness
Study Response**

**PREPARED BY: Lisa Kidd, Communications and
Economic Development
Coordinator**

A. Recommendations

THAT Council receive Staff Report, CEDC.08.15, "Tourism Competitiveness Study Response", for information purposes.

B. Background

Ontario is currently undertaking a Tourism Competitiveness Study to look at the best practices and best prospects for growing tourism in Ontario. This initiative is being chaired by Mr. Greg Sorbara, M.P.P. for Vaughan and former Minister of Finance. Province-wide consultations with community stakeholders are taking place during the month of September. Community Stakeholders have also been invited to make written submissions. The final date for written submissions to Mr. Sorbara's office is September 30, 2008.

The Blue Mountains Staff have drafted a submission. A copy of this draft is attached (see Attachment 1). Staff have met with Blue Mountain Resorts Ltd. and the Village Association to share ideas and to ensure that our submissions are closely aligned.

Related to this, The Blue Mountains Staff attended the Tourism Competitiveness Study Consultation on September 17, 2008 in Orillia. At that consultation, Staff presented a 2-3 minute presentation based on the attached document (see Attachment 1).

A written submission will be sent to Mr. Sorbara's office on or before September 30, 2008. This is still in draft stage and Staff welcome suggestions from Council with respect to the ideas contained within this document (see Attachment 1).

Staff believe that The Blue Mountains offers a unique variety of opportunities. This written submission is an ideal opportunity to draw attention to them and map our future for the next 50 to 100 years.

C. The Blue Mountains' Strategic Plan

3.5 Continue to support cultural groups and community events

D. Environmental Impacts

None.

E. Budget Impact

None.

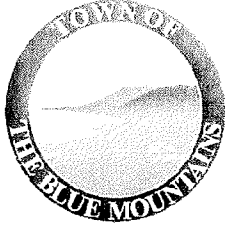
F. Attached

Attachment 1- Mapping the Blue Mountains Tourism Future: A Response to Mapping Ontario's Tourism Future: A Starting Point for Discussion.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "R. Alcedo", is written over a horizontal line.

Signature



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Mapping The Blue Mountains Tourism Future: A Response to Mapping Ontario's Tourism Future: A Starting Point for Discussion

Introduction

The Blue Mountains welcomes the Tourism Competitiveness Study as an opportunity for The Blue Mountains and the Province to work together to promote our region as a major tourism destination.

As a valued component of the Tourism industry in Ontario, in this response, we ask the Province for the following:

- Legislative support to make it easier for municipalities to request attainable housing stock for people, particularly those working in the tourism sector locally; and
- Financial and intellectual support to build an authentic tourist experience, to build our brand, to strengthen our infrastructure and to attract business.

We are pleased to present our ideas to grow tourism. While we are speaking from our perspective in The Blue Mountains, we believe that other major tourism regions would benefit from the same provincial financial and partnership support.

Background

With over 1.3 million visitors coming to Blue Mountain Resort annually, we consider our region to be a valuable tourism destination in Ontario. We expect that number of annual visitors to increase over the next 3 years to reach over 2.5 million.¹

Our Tourism Industry started with winter activities, particularly downhill skiing, which continue to thrive and grow. We are now truly a four season tourism destination.

¹ Blue Mountain Destination Resort Economic Impact Analysis. July, 2006.

The Blue Mountains will be a progressive four season community, building on its agricultural and recreational features, offering a healthy and supportive lifestyle to a diverse range of residents, businesses and visitors.

Today, our record speaks for itself. As hosts of the 2007 TELUS Skins Game and with a 3-year agreement to host the Wayne Gretzky Classic, we are a Golf Mecca for Amateurs and Pros alike. Toronto FC has chosen our municipally owned and operated Tomahawk Soccer Pitches for off-site practices.. Additionally, our accommodations, outdoor recreational facilities and ice facilities have garnered the interest of the National Hockey League Officials, who have held their annual training camp in our Town for two years in a row now. All of this introduces a broad spectrum of people to a wide range of tourism related experiences, which increases our return visit numbers.

Our Town continues to build itself as a fresh, new, top of class product. We believe that this success is the result of strong and effective partnerships with our many private partners. We acknowledge that together, we can and are building an authentic experience for tourists; a different and innovative product, which essentially equates to 'something different to do every day of the year'.

A concerted partnership effort has provided significant momentum for our tourism economy. We do however acknowledge that we have current and future challenges. That said, we believe that we can address these most effectively, with the support of the Province.

The Gap Between Working Here and Living Here

A tourism-based economy requires a large service workforce. Providing reasonable housing options, be it rental units or home ownership, for those who live and work in our region, has become an ever-increasing challenge for our community and our neighbours. A 2001 report to the Tourism Investment and Development Office, produced by Malone Given Parsons Ltd. entitled 'Premier Ranked Tourist Destinations: An Evaluation Framework and Its Testing in the South Georgian Bay Region states that, "...Housing affordability ... [is] seen as... a constraint to expansion of the tourism economy..." (p.xiii).

Comfortable, affordable living space fosters the well-being of both the community and the individual. Attainable housing attracts skilled and energetic adults as well as young families with children to become part of our community. This in turn helps to ensure a stable workforce and a vibrant and diversified community. At this time, the Town of The Blue Mountains is investigating several different ways of ensuring that we have the housing needed for our tourism work force.

At the same time, we recognize and appreciate the Provincial Policy Statement Sections 1.4.2 and 1.4.3 to facilitate residential intensification and provide appropriate ranges of housing types and authorities. We do however ask the Province to consider providing greater authority to the municipality to implement these policies at a local level, ensuring that development plans have attainable housing options, particularly for youth and young families who are most likely to work in the tourism industry.

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Specifically, we are seeking clear authority to require developers to provide a percentage of smaller lot sizes and unit sizes in proposed development applications to achieve a minimum standard of attainable housing for our citizens.

Building Name Recognition

As an amalgamated community with a new name, we need to get our name 'out there', and to build recognition as a major tourism destination. We need the Province's help to literally get 'The Blue Mountains' on Ontario's Official Road Map. We would like to work with the Province actively to develop Ontario's marketing strategy for our area. Working together to help craft the message will be the foundation for community buy-in and building name recognition in an effective way.

Building and Marketing our Brand

Sustainability is about planning for the next 50 to 100 years. We believe that we must take the same long-term approach to build a strong tourism economy.

The first stepping-stone to this is having a sophisticated marketing message to draw people to visit our Georgian Bay Destination. Over the past two years, we have participated in and witnessed the creation of the Georgian Bay Destination Development Partnership. This is an extremely innovative initiative, based on regional partnership efforts to highlight the diverse experience we offer. Essentially, this initiative consolidates and highlights the broad range of diverse experience we offer visitors, including but not limited to: the pristine waters of Georgian Bay; two globally recognized biospheres; a healthy and interesting mix of agricultural commodities and culinary experiences; and many local, provincial and nationally recognized walking and biking trails.

Reflecting the importance of this initiative, in 2007, our Council unanimously adopted a recommendation, recognizing the value of this initiative as part a regional tourism effort (see Attachment 1).

We have excellent relationships with the partners of the Georgian Bay Destination Development Partnership, including the Georgian Triangle Tourist Association, Blue Mountain Resorts Ltd., The Blue Mountain Chamber of Commerce and the local Business Improvement Associations. Through community partnership, we have the ability to bring a professional, expert regional team together for discussion with the Province on how to market Ontario and our region. An integrated message that we can all support is crucial to the success of any marketing initiative and we ask (i) to participate with the Province in the creation of the messaging and marketing strategy and (ii) for financial support of this.

We believe it will take everyone using the same words with the same message, layers upon layers, all pushing relentlessly in the same direction to make this successful.

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Strengthening Infrastructure

Major tourism regions have incredible pressure on their infrastructure. As a tourism destination, we see substantial changes in our population on a weekly and seasonal basis. During peak periods, our infrastructure is being used at peak capacity. Roads, water and wastewater infrastructure continue to be top of mind concerns for us. If we are to accommodate tourists, who are the foundation of our local economy, we need the financial support of the Province to build and maintain adequate hard infrastructure.

Major tourism regions have a high percentage of part-time property ownership. In our case, it is 48% of our total households. We must build our infrastructure to accommodate our tourism visitors.

At the same time, grants for infrastructure renewal and gas tax initiatives are distributed based upon a very old, out-dated formula using permanent population only for financial support. This significantly disadvantages major tourism regions. In our case, we receive 50% of that which we view to be fair and equitable.

We plead with you to work with your colleagues to correct this injustice. The funding formula can be adjusted. The data are readily available through Statistics Canada and Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC). This action will help Ontario major tourism regions meet their financial challenges.

Improving Way-finding Signage

We recognize the importance of way-finding signage on Provincial Highway Corridors. We believe this would be an excellent partnership project for multiple levels of government and the local private sector. In recent years, we have had significant success in working with the Ministry of Transportation, our neighbouring municipalities, local Counties and the local private sector in corridor and way-finding enhancements.

The Ministry of Transportation has its rules. Some of those rules eliminate way-finding signs to help our Provincial, National and International tourists find us easily. Way-finding signs on the 400 series Highways and around International Airports are critical to promoting major tourism regions.

We ask you to work with your Ministry of Transportation Colleagues to find solutions to this issue. Our local team would appreciate the opportunity to meet and discuss viable options.

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Creating an Interest-free Loan Program

The need for tourist operators and businesses to continually preserve and enhance attractions is an ongoing challenge. An interest-free loan program created by the Province and administered with the support of local agencies and municipal governments would also enhance local tourism infrastructure. Building enhancement and preservation of our tourism operations help create first-class experiences.

Attracting Tourists... and Business

Tourism introduces our community to a broad range of people. We see this as an exciting way to introduce entrepreneurs and business people to our community as a place to develop and/or expand business opportunities. For example, boutique style businesses are a perfect complement to tourism. Not only that, but we also see our destination development as an attractor for high technology business.

For us, tourism is not just visitors. It is about building an economy of local professionals, trades people and artisans to support and enhance experiential tourism. As per our Strategic Plan (see Attachment 2), we understand the importance of 'Quality of Place' in all of this and the importance of a diverse experience.

In this regard, we again ask for support in marketing our region and, specifically in this regard, selling a tailor-made concept of 'live where you play'.

While an effort to attract businesses requires concentrated marketing of the "live where you play" concept, there are two other significant considerations to address. First, we need to ensure that our Regional Airport can manage the transportation and delivery of goods, services and people for new and existing business. This means that runways are improved for larger planes and CANPASS is available as part of an enhanced service and operating model. To date, our regional airport is still in need of such infrastructure. While we recognize this under the purview of the federal government, we respectfully request your assistance in advocating with the federal government for effective change in this regard.

Second, we must ensure that businesses have broadband access to develop and succeed in business here. In 2007, the County of Grey received financial support from the Province to implement broadband in the County. While The Blue Mountains is not part of the current project, the County is submitting another request for funding and we respectfully request your favourable review of their application with the hope that broadband accessibility may be increased in our community.

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Building the Authentic Tourist Experience

Currently tourists are looking for local authentic products and experiences. People can plan a trip to anywhere, but people talk about and return to destinations that are *somewhere authentic and memorable*.

We also recognize that along with art, history plays a role in building the authentic tourist experience. We have a wonderful rail, agricultural and Georgian Bay history. In addition, our region has the beginnings of agri-tourism, culinary tourism and local markets that will also build that authentic product and experience. As a benefit, building the local fare experience, also builds our local food stock and enhances our long-term goal of greater local food security.

To give a small but significant example of an authentic tourist experience, we are currently witness to the creation of 'Artsburg', in our small village of Clarksburg. Here, artisans have joined in a cluster to market and share their talents. One of the many benefits is that residents reap a similar level of enjoyment.

While this is an important part of our social and cultural pillars of sustainability and of our tourism economy, we find it increasingly difficult to utilize tax dollars to support this.

We ask the Province to invest in the development of these experiences. In partnership with the Province, we also pledge to bring community partners and experts in the various fields together, to develop a sophisticated message for local and global marketing.

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Concluding Remarks

It was a pleasure to present our ideas for a provincial and local partnership to develop and promote The Blue Mountains. We want to highlight our requests:

- Provide attainable housing options;
- Get 'The Blue Mountains' on Ontario's Official Road Map;
- Jointly work with the Province to market our region as a major tourism destination;
- Change the funding formula for grants to strengthen infrastructure;
- Work with the Ministry of Transportation to improve way-finding signage supporting major tourism regions;
- Create interest-free loan programs for tourism operators;
- Promote the concept of "Live where you Play" as an attractor for tourists and businesses; and
- Invest in local authentic products and experiences.

We are committed to tourism and committed to working with the Province to map our future for the next 50 to 100 years.

The Blue Mountains supports the Province's proactive approach to enhance tourism competitiveness, and is eager to move beyond the stage of discussion and work with the Province to deliver an action plan for investment and necessary legislative changes.

We look forward to working with you to build and implement an innovative and forward-looking competitiveness strategy and action plan to take Ontario Tourism to the next level.

Thank you for this opportunity!

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