

Economic & Tourism Development Strategic Plan & SMART Goals 2024-2027



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COUNTY

Background

On November 30, 2023, Hastings County Council adopted a new Strategic Plan, 2024-2026. One of the major pillars and goals is titled as “Vibrant Communities”. An objective within is to support the growth of local municipalities, businesses and tourism across the 14 member municipalities.

This document follows the key action to “Finalize and implement the Economic and Tourism Development Plan and SMART Goals.” It focusses on the common themes heard across all fourteen municipalities and provides strategic creative actions to respond.

Research for this document commenced following the 2022 municipal election and the introduction of 7 new members of County Council. Hastings County economic and tourism development staff scheduled fourteen separate one-on-one meetings with each of the fourteen Heads of Council. The meetings included senior staff at their local municipal office and their representative on the Municipal Economic and Tourism Development Partners Group.

The meetings provided an opportunity to have a dialogue about economic development with all members of County Council at the start of the new term, and an opportunity to revisit the identified prime objective of economic development in their own local municipality. This included a review and discussion of the reports from previous meetings held in both 2019 and 2021. Each municipal office in the County received a report capturing their individual responses and suggested local actions specific to them.

While Hastings County is a cohesive entity, each of the fourteen member municipalities has unique resources, economic drivers, populations and challenges. Narrowing down specific investment opportunities and objectives in each community helps better guide investment attraction efforts and marketing initiatives carried out by the County of Hastings. Likewise, having a unified approach to economic development strategies is advantageous in budgeting, staffing and branding.

Common themes collected

The following is a summary of the common themes that emerged from the 2023 meetings:

1. When County staff met with municipalities in 2019, many expressed a goal to increase their population and wanted resident attraction. The population has increased. Statistics Canada data indicates the population across the fourteen municipalities combined increased 5% between 2016 and 2021. The number of building permits across the fourteen municipalities has also increased 47% since 2019. The pandemic proved it is possible to work remotely for many business sectors. A surge in people leaving the city has created a greater demand for housing and converted seasonal residents to permanent ones. The topic of housing and balancing the demand for places to live and the influx of new residents is a common thread.
2. During the series of meetings in 2021, County Councillors did not request help with visitor marketing for their communities, especially during the warmer months of the year. This was largely due in part to the pandemic restrictions at that time and the flood of “staycationers”. Now that the pandemic restrictions are over, County Councillors do appreciate help with visitor attraction, while understanding that more emphasis should be placed on attracting visitors and promoting and developing activities during the quieter times of year (i.e. Winter and Spring tourism). For instance, data on short-term accommodations from AirDNA indicates the occupancy rate, among available listings (entire place, private room and shared rooms) is 67.9% in the winter while in the Summer it’s 89%. Further, a recent survey of local commercial accommodation businesses found that occupancy rates are drastically lower in the winter (16%) compared to Summer (81%).
3. Some member municipalities provide in-person tourist information services or work with an external partner to offer this. Others commented that tourists sometimes stop in at their main administration office looking for directions and prefer that alternative methods be implemented to direct visitor inquiries elsewhere.
4. Regarding tourism, County Councillors are still interested in: *Encouraging visitors and seasonal residents to live here permanently bringing their talents with them and buying, starting or relocating a business here*. In many cases, and even before the pandemic, the communities and businesses already experienced an increasing level of traffic from a combination of seasonal residents, campers, cottage renters, and other visitors. Data collected from Environics reinforces this and indicates that the daily foot traffic in the communities in 2022 was 13.2 million visits, which is 4% higher than it was in 2019. According to additional data from Moneris, money spent at retailers, travel and entertainment, and service businesses is up 36% compared to before the pandemic.
5. County Councillors and their staff continue to request support with growing and maintaining the commercial services available. There are vacancies in the downtowns and elsewhere, and often business owners are looking to retire and exit their established businesses. A concern is

losing that particular service (e.g. grocery, Dollar Store, restaurant, places to gather/pub) or in some cases, the community is already lacking a service-type and needs help attracting it.

6. On the theme of investment attraction, County Councillors continue to request assistance with growing the commercial accommodation base. Short-term accommodations have been filling the gap, and statistics demonstrate the number of available listings on sites like Airbnb have increased 335% since 2020! The downside is these properties do not pay the same coveted commercial tax that a motel/hotel would.
7. County Councillors in general continue to express a prime objective of economic development is to increase and sustain the tax base.

How to move forward

Update the Mission Statement to read as follows:

We are a municipal economic and tourism development office with a mandate and mission to implement inclusive and creative solutions to help sustain and increase the municipal tax base including the attraction, expansion and retention of businesses across the 14 member municipalities.

Update the Vision to read as follows:

Hastings County is Ontario's wildly authentic destination for trailblazing entrepreneurs, innovators and explorers. They crave our wildly original nature, authentic experiences and inspiring opportunities.

SMART Goals to Respond

SMART Goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound.

The following SMART Goals are intended to be initiated and completed during the current County Council term (2023-2026). They offer an understanding and identification of opportunities to address economic and tourism development matters with direct input and consultation from all members of County Council.

Action #1: Strategically plan for the introduction of a region-wide Financial Incentives Program to support economic development.

Smart Goal:

Complete a formal plan on how to proceed with a regional incentive program and how it could support economic development.

Rationale:

County Councillors and our member municipalities request help with retaining and expanding commercial services in their communities. This includes filling vacant storefronts and buildings, expanding commercial accommodations and creating new purchasable products and experiences. Offering financial incentives could spark desired investment in available and underutilized properties.

Often County Economic and Tourism Development staff are asked what financial incentives are available for commercial investments. At present there is no County-wide municipal financial incentive available. Financial incentives can help further economic development and planning policy objectives.

Section 28 of the Planning Act permits local municipalities to adopt a “Community Improvement Plan” (CIP) to encourage revitalization, redevelopment and to advance local economic priorities. Some member municipalities within Hastings County have already adopted their own CIP. The Planning Act also allows upper-tier municipalities to participate in local CIPs through Section 28 (7.2). This permits the upper-tier to make grants or loans to the council of a lower-tier municipality and the council of a lower-tier may make grants or loans to the council of the upper-tier municipality, for the purposes of carrying out a CIP that has come into effect, on such terms as to security, and otherwise, as the council considers appropriate.

Steps:

1. Staff in the Planning and Development Department will formally review and assess how, and if, a Regional Incentives Program can be recommended and formally introduced to County Council for review and what the financial impact would be; and,
2. The review process will identify the most impactful ways to target specific types of growth and investment based on the feedback from meetings with County Councillors and their local municipal staff.

Assigned to: Hastings County Planning and Development staff.

Timeline: Commencing immediately with a report due to the Planning and Development Committee by February, 2025

Action #2: Continue the paid and promoted campaign that helps showcase business opportunities (vacancies and businesses for sale) in downtown areas and elsewhere.

Smart Goal:

The Hastings County Economic and Tourism Development Office will continue to coordinate a campaign on social media to target both Ottawa and GTA residents in an attempt to attract them to open a business in one of our vacant storefronts, purchase an existing business or move their existing business to one of our available locations in Hastings County. A similar campaign will use printed material to target seasonal residents, encouraging them to relocate their business (or purchase a business) in Hastings County. A goal is to actively promote ten (10) vacant/available business opportunities per calendar year and see these opportunities become purchased/occupied.

Rationale:

County Councillors and municipalities request help with retaining and expanding commercial services in their communities.

Marketing specific investment opportunities and focusing as well on those who are already cottaging or “playing here” will allow the County to benefit financially by filling vacant businesses in our municipalities, by increasing the number of new business operations and by helping to sustain and grow the municipal commercial tax base. An increase in business and experience offerings will positively impact visitors’ decision-making when considering Hastings County as a location to visit or even to relocate.

An additional benefit is the opportunity to have local businesses become brand ambassadors and create awareness of the Wildly Authentic brand messaging.

Steps:

1. Create investment packages to attract new businesses to vacant buildings, available commercial/industrial properties or buy an existing business for sale in any of our fourteen member municipalities;
2. This will be a multi-faceted marketing program that includes: distribution of a business growth kit, print content, temporary decorative window wraps to market vacant buildings, blogging and SEO strategy, Google Adwords, online advertising and creating/posting paid social content, out-of-home advertising (bus wraps, billboards, etc.) to attract people to open businesses;
3. A unique feature of this involves approaching vacant building owners to acquire permission to install artwork of a functioning business (i.e. bookstore, bakery, coffee shop, barber shop etc.) with an artistic touch. Authentic and colourful, the installations will stop people in their tracks while exploring our communities with our logo and a call to action to learn more and provide streamlined access to the property owner or representative;
4. Published marketing materials will also be produced and given to campgrounds, accommodations, and other tourism businesses to hand out to seasonal residents and transient visitors (who are already coming here). It will contain “Wildly Inspiring” messaging regarding the investment opportunities available here; and,
5. Continue to forward business opportunities to organizations such as The Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program Entrepreneur Success Initiative (ESI). ESI helps prospective immigrant entrepreneurs identify an opportunity to either create a new business or buy an existing business in Ontario.

Assigned to: Hastings County Economic and Tourism Development Office.

Timeline: Already in progress with outcomes and metrics included in the annual Year End Report to the Planning and Development Committee.

Action #3: Pre-qualify properties to market to investors and developers.

Smart Goal:

The Planning and Development Department, economic development staff, and in partnership with all 14 member municipalities, will focus on pre-qualifying properties primed for development and ready for the construction or renovation as a new business, resort, hotel or other major new investment.

Rationale:

Having investment opportunities ready to pitch to investors eliminates major development constraints and makes them more attractive. This process also helps maintain and grow the commercial tax base and can help grow the commercial accommodation offerings.

Steps:

1. With the assistance of the Municipal Partners Group and member municipalities, County staff will lead a scan of vacant properties already zoned commercial / industrial or labelled / considered “ideal” for a new investment such as resort or hotel;
2. Conduct proactive research on the viability of a site, review the current permitted uses and any assessments that might have to be conducted (i.e. environmental, archaeological assessments);
3. On the new HastingsCounty.com website, immediately maintain a database of the sites’ information including zoning and detailed information;
4. Continue to work with the Economic Developers Council of Ontario and Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport to market tourism-related investments to interested developers and investors; and,
5. Explore the feasibility of an application to the Ontario Site Readiness Program for financial support to help prepare a property for potential buyers and investment.

Assigned to: Planning, Economic and Tourism Development Department and Member Municipalities.

Timeline: Aim to have a minimum of two sites identified and ready for investment marketing annually.

Action #4: Make Hastings County and its member municipalities film and television ready.

Smart Goal:

The Hastings County Economic and Tourism Development Office will work closely with the Municipal Economic and Tourism Development Partners Group to make Hastings County a location of choice for film and television companies.

Rationale:

County Councillors and municipalities request help with retaining and expanding commercial services in their communities, and the tax base. Other communities in Ontario and beyond boast millions of dollars in spinoffs from being a host for movie and television filming. While on location, money is spent on hotels, restaurants, tradespeople, caterers, gas stations and even car and furniture rentals.

Steps:

1. Discuss immediately with the Municipal Economic and Tourism Development Partners the level of interest in having a film or television “shoot” take place in their community. Determine what type of permits or approvals are currently required as well;
2. Become a member of the new Bay of Quinte Film Office. This Office seeks to develop standard policies for all participating communities to make it easier for production crews to choose our region; and,
3. Review development of a template for film permit requests, insurance certificate requirements and other approvals that member municipalities can access and use.

Assigned to: Hastings County Economic and Tourism Development Office and the Municipal Economic and Tourism Development Partners Group.

Timeline: Commencing immediately. Review membership in the Bay of Quinte Film Office in the annual Budget. Template for film permit requests and policies to be drafted by December, 2024.

Action #5: Examine prospects for value-added processing and opportunities in the natural resources sector.

Smart Goal:

Hastings County has a high concentration of jobs in the agriculture and forestry sectors. Working with local agriculture and forestry organizations, and Ontario Government Ministry staff, examine new ways to get more revenue from natural resources.

Rationale:

Developing and delivering new projects that will assist the growth of the local forestry (harvesting and processing) and forestry bioproducts (utilizing biomass found in forests for value added production such as fuel) can help generate more economic activity and revenue. Also advancing value added products can create higher returns, open new markets and extend a producer's marketing season and ability to create new recognition for local operations.

An outcome could be more jobs, the retention and expansion of existing companies and farm operations, and also the retention and expansion of the non-residential tax base.

Steps:

1. Collaborate with the Bancroft Minden Forest Company, and Bancroft Area Forest Industry Association on an investigatory project on the feasibility, capacity, economic and environmental impacts of attracting new investment in forest biomass;
2. Meet with the local Hastings Federation of Agriculture, Harvest Hastings and any other farm-based organization to discuss their members' current needs and challenges. Projects may include more networking opportunities to bring together producers/growers with chefs/restaurants;
3. Review with Ontario Government staff at both the Ministries of Agriculture, Food & Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry to determine what resources and funding, and research, is available; and,
4. Establish a plan of approach based on input from the local industry sectors, and the latest trends, for how best to proceed with value-added opportunities and new investment.

Assigned to: Hastings County Economic and Tourism Development Office

Timeline: Meetings with stakeholders to start immediately and a report on next steps and plan of approach to be ready by December, 2024

Action #6: Prioritize tourism marketing and product development efforts on growing visitation during the colder months of the year.

Smart Goal:

Increase visitation and overnight stays during the Fall, Winter and Spring seasons.

Rationale:

Occupancy rates at businesses during the colder months of the year are significantly lower than in the Summer. County tourism marketing efforts can be elevated at attracting more visitation in the shoulder and Winter seasons.

Steps:

1. Both the existing Marketing Plan and Tourism Development Plan are due for a review and refresh. Review and update these existing plans, utilizing available data and insights, including an aim to grow visitation during the colder months;
2. Continue highlighting purchasable experiences while elevating those that take place outside of the Summer months while still supporting Summer operators and experiences; and,
3. Regularly review and update printed material and distribute with the assistance of business organizations in each of the municipalities.

Assigned to: Hastings County Marketing Coordinator and Tourism Development Coordinator.

Timeline: Staff will commence an update of the existing Marketing Plan to be finalized in 2024. The Tourism Development Plan will be updated in 2024 and include actions to help develop Winter season attractions.

Action #7: Strategically market to existing seasonal residents, cottagers, campers etc. who are already coming here and make sure they know what's available to purchase.

Smart Goal:

In conjunction with local business organizations and member municipalities, continue to update and promote a menu of activities, purchasable attractions and local businesses to our existing seasonal residents, cottagers, and campers.

Rationale:

We continue to see an increase in visitors and traffic in our communities along with an increase in overnight stays at accommodators. These visitors include cottage renters, cottage owners and seasonal campers. We do not need to spend our budget attracting these people to our area, as they are already coming here. We can generate some economic benefit for the County through the promotion of local businesses, attractions and events to these seasonal residents.

The purpose will be to assist in retention of existing commercial services, to help retain the municipal commercial tax base, to increase revenue (and hopefully grow) our local businesses who, in turn, will create more local employment.

Steps:

1. Annually review and maintain a “menu” of activities on the County’s website Adventures section highlighting “purchasable attractions”, things to see and do, and list local businesses of relevance to this target group (i.e. restaurants). The aim *will be to highlight purchasable experiences first*;
2. Market directly to seasonal residents through the County’s website and complement with printed material, which will be distributed through cottage/lake property owners’ associations, campgrounds / resorts, short-term accommodations and motel owners, municipal offices and businesses who cater to seasonal residents; and,
3. In partnership with member municipalities, review the feasibility of adding stand-alone kiosks at existing visitor centres. They could feature website links and QR codes leading to curated information on the new Hastings County website, and/or other websites, to help guide visitors and seasonal residents on what there is to see and do in the region.

Assigned to: Hastings County Marketing Coordinator leads the website development portion while organizations in the community can help County staff distribute the published materials to accommodations, campgrounds and other businesses. Support can come from the Municipal

Economic and Tourism Development Partners Group, Lake and Cottage Associations, BIAs, members of the North Hastings Economic Development Committee, Chambers of Commerce and more.

Timeline: Already in process with a final report and outcomes to be provided each year in the annual Year End Report to the Planning and Development Committee.

Action #8: Continue working closely with local accommodators and attractions to help sustain, expand and create purchasable ‘Wildly Authentic’ experiences and market them.

Smart Goal:

Working with accommodations and attractions, we will continue to help them establish and create partnerships. The Goal is to support the development of new purchasable experiences, with an emphasis on new Winter experiences to be promoted for the 2024/25 season.

Rationale:

Promoting purchasable experiences benefits Hastings County financially by attracting new revenue across all four seasons, supporting longer stays by transient visitors, supports jobs at participating local businesses and helps retain the municipal commercial tax base. It also helps build “quality of place” and as a result many visitors who partake in an experience may decide to move here permanently.

Considering the lower levels of visitation during the Winter season, that time of year will be given extra attention for new purchasable experiences.

Currently there are at least 65 purchasable experiences listed on the County website and growing. The goal is to add at least 6 more to the list (ideally winter experiences) by the end of 2025.

Steps:

1. Continue to maintain and market the inventory of purchasable experiences listed on the County website;
2. Through the industry development networking and training events, work with local partners, existing and new businesses with an aim to have them create and market new purchasable experiences, ideally unique winter experiences; and,
3. Develop a marketing and promotional program to sell these experiences through social media, advertising, referrals and word of mouth.

Assigned to: Hastings County Tourism Development Coordinator to help lead with support from the Marketing Coordinator to promote the experiences.

Timeline: Already in process with a status report to be included each year in the Year End Report.

Action #9: Establish an Economic Development Working Group to help create an investment attraction plan to drive further investment into Hastings County

Smart Goal:

The Hastings County Planning and Development Committee will establish a temporary Economic Development Working Group consisting of members from the Planning and Development Committee. The Working Group will work closely with Planning, Economic and Tourism Development Department staff to prepare an investment attraction plan aimed at identifying target industries that would be a good fit for Hastings County.

Rationale:

During separate 1-on-1 meetings with County Councillors and their lower-tier staff after the last election, Councillors were asked what their vision is for the future in terms of local economic growth and what that looks like. A common theme heard was that new investment is desired to help grow the property tax assessment base. However, there was not enough time at each of those meetings to explore further and determine what specific growth they would like to see County-wide. It would be prudent to have a group of Planning and Development Committee members together in a room to have a focused dialogue, collect data and provide direction on where resources for investment attraction should be dedicated.

Steps:

1. Following the adoption of the SMART Goals report, the Planning and Development Committee will be asked to appoint members to a temporary Economic Development Working Group;
2. In conjunction with Planning, Economic and Tourism Development Department staff, the Working Group will prepare a final recommendation report and a member of the Group will formally present it to their colleagues on the Planning and Development Committee for review and consideration.

Assigned to: Planning, Economic and Tourism Development Department staff.

Timeline: Working Group to be established at the August 22, 2024 meeting of the Planning and Development Committee. A final recommendation report is expected to be ready at or before the February, 2025 meeting of the Planning and Development Committee.

Measure and Report

Each of the Goals outlined in this report have their own identified timelines and details to follow and measure. Staff will review the action items regularly and report on progress made and address any changes needed due to the current, and often changing, economic landscape.

Reporting the highlights of progress and work accomplished relating to each SMART Goal will continue to be done through communication to the Planning and Development Committee in the form of the comprehensive annual Year End Report. Staff also will continue to produce the monthly newsletter to the Planning and Development Committee of Council detailing and highlighting ongoing progress, staff actions and accomplishments.

Long-term Goals:

1. Growth of tax assessment;
2. Growth of population base;
3. Business retention and expansion.