

**Explorers' Edge Board of Directors Meeting Minutes**  
**Tuesday, April 2, 2013**  
**Shamrock Lodge, Port Carling**

**Present:** Gary Froude, Diane Wiber, Andy Vitch, Jackie Leung, Tony Armstrong, Jerry Feltis, Don MacKay, Andrew Ryeland, Michelle Berry, Dan Feasby

**Absent:** Lois Barron-Ralph, Ken Turner, Mike Laba

**Staff:** James Murphy, Erin Wilcox

**Guests:** Laura Hernando (MTCS), Peter Coish (Cloud Ad Agents)

**Call to Order:** Gary Froude called the meeting to order at 9:38am

**Approval of Agenda- Tuesday, April 2, 2013:**

**Motion:** Don MacKay

**Seconded:** Andrew Ryeland

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried**

**Approval of Minutes- Monday, January 14, 2013:**

**Motion:** Tony Armstrong

**Seconded:** Don MacKay

**Discussion:** n/a

**Carried**

**Approval of Financials- Balance Sheet March 27, 2012:**

**Discussion:**

Financials were presented for April 1, 2012 – March 28, 2013. The organization is working towards yearend of March 31, 2013. MacKay spoke to payables noting this was end of year and due to the way funding flows from the government combined with HST our payables are larger than normal. The yearend financials will be completed in one month; we are currently waiting on the final monthly bank reconciliation. MacKay discussed actual vs. budget spend from financials presented with the agenda and spoke to organization doing what we set out to do when we began our operational plan one year ago. Armstrong asked what we should pay attention to on the financials vs. what is day to day. MacKay responded administration and overhead is reviewed internally on a weekly basis by the ED. ED addressed expenditures related to the hiring of the Social Media Manager. MacKay spoke to industry

relations, what we have approved to do; we have managed our budget within that number. MacKay spoke to program development, being accountable project to project and committee to committee. Vitch asked if we have access to the financials of other RTOs. ED responded it is an individual board decision by those organizations, at their discretion, whether to post online or share (minutes, budget, etc.). MacKay spoke to outgoing chair, Froude, about possibly giving a call to their board chairs about discussions of a trade of information, we could see how we stand against the other 12 RTOs, how we may get a percentage, but not necessarily the exact numbers. Vitch spoke to concern of pushing too much administration onto the organization, specifically workload and what to do; we may need to add more into administration moving forward. MacKay replied we can't do it so we don't – if there were more administration needed then we would have to drop, or make changes in some area. Feltis noted that our current partnership fund program requires administration. Feasby pointed out that the Product Development Fund programs are run by third parties and like the Product Development Fund the Partnership Fund program deliverables would be executed by a third party. ED spoke to how we write the client service agreement, how we outline objectives and performance standards, how we write the contract, and how it is built into the contract that the third party must report CSA (client services agreement) would elevate some of the administration burden.

**Approval of Financials- Balance Sheet & Income Statement March 27, 2012:**

**Motion:** Don MacKay

**Seconded:** Tony Armstrong

**Carried**

**Executive Director Update- James Murphy:**

ED thanked the board for the two and a half months since the last meeting, touched on projects that happened over that time (Jan 14-Mar 31), in short the ED has been collecting program data, reconciling programs and negotiating TPA with the ED. During this period the ED Murphy has:

- Continued with stakeholder engagement (Georgian Bay Country, Kearney Dog Sled Races, Huntsville Festival of the Arts, OTMPC, REDAC, Resorts of Ontario, Canador College, University of Waterloo, Savour Muskoka, John Murden Art Gallery, Town of Bracebridge Branding Committee, Muskoka Chamber of Commerce at MTMA Service Meeting and the Labour Market Group.
- Facilitating workshops with Muskoka Arts and Crafts (social media presentation), Muskoka Small Business Mentoring Workshop, David Foote Economic Impact presentation, as well as stakeholder negotiations (met with GBC to help facilitate three year strategy).

MacKay asked about the status of Georgian Bay Country (GBC). ED spoke to their strategic plan, the move from the visitor information centre, and GBCs desire to develop value through an online visitor information centre, updating their current website, to develop tactics for driving traffic to their website, and interest in embarking on an asset study. Parry Sound area operators at the table spoke to their

disappointment towards the closing of the visitor information centre, and feel there is a lack of support for tourism in general from Seguin Township.

ED Murphy continued with update on community outreach efforts:

- Facilitated and attended meetings David Foote, District of Muskoka Resort Policy, Ryerson Township, Gravenhurst Township, Taboo Resort GM, Golf Muskoka, Resorts of North Muskoka). ED spoke to meetings with Chambers of Commerce, discussed concern over duplication of services (visitor information and print guides/maps).

ED discussed work happening through the board at the committee level

- Governance Committee is concentrating on the creation of a nomination committee and the nomination process
- Marketing Committee is concentrating on their needs and requirements moving forward as well as the committee interviews
- Transacting Committee is concentrating on Fuel & Fun and Explore the Edge
- Partnership Committee has reviewed initial applications
- Nomination Committee is organizing and outlining a timeline
- Research Committee has developed an indicator framework and is working on performance measures
- Community Relations Committee is working with OTEC on a summary of services and workforce development
- Executive Committee is holding bi-weekly Tuesday meetings and is working on a regional scan
- Tourism Operator Relations Committee is concentrating on reconciling the TPDF and an operator strategy.

ED spoke to the operations

- A full winter campaign analysis report is being developed and will be available in the coming weeks
- Transacting committee launched of Spring Fuel & Fun (operator follow-up and switch to Petro Canada gas cards to accommodate more regions),
- Marketing committee interviews (18 in total)
- Tourism operator strategies being set in place (operator forum, CRM database and membership push
- Launch of phase three of the new website (including searchable database and seasonal overview)

ED also spoke to work with the Government:

- Discussions of the TPA (4 meetings, 2 sets of changes)
- MTCS monthly teleconferences

- OTMPC (consumer insight research segmentation, 2013 RTO advisory committee, TBEX travel bloggers, how we are on track with regards to marketing and segmentation).

Ryeland spoke to a grant program for power sports, it's importance for his industry and how trails will benefit as a result.

ED briefly spoke to his ongoing work with the other RTOs, monthly conference calls, TPA processes, partnership funding and performance measures. Armstrong asked about sharing a boundary with other RTOs, spoke to cooperative efforts between border operators. ED replied we have not to date turned anyone away from participation who reaches out. ED Murphy spoke to TIAO, their RTO committee (review of TIAO position paper) and the communication strategy.

ED updated the board on HR:

- Social Media Manager on-boarding
- Explorers' Edge staff year end reports and contracts negotiated
- Executive Director completing and submitting year-end review & 360 performance review to be reviewed by the executive committee.

ED Murphy spoke to the Tourism Product Development Fund, their reconciliation (administrative oversight required to ensure projects are on budget and meeting objectives and deadlines), those involved have met funding benchmarks and have submitted progresses reports and reviews. ED noted that 9 inquiries have already been made for next years' TPDF (with smaller overall budget).

## **BREAK**

### **Committee Updates:**

*Marketing Committee- Jackie Leung with Peter Coish (Cloud Ad Agents):*

Leung introduced Peter Coish, President of Cloud Ad Agents, who, with the ED, will be providing the board with an update. Leung stated that the marketing plan will be presented to committee at the next meeting then passes floor to the ED. ED spoke to winter wrap report, including Facebook advertising, clicks to page, likes from ads, clicks to EE page from banner ads, and increase daily traffic to Explorers' Edge website (now average 740 visits a day, up from 236 visits in 2012). MacKay asked for comparatives from other tourism organizations. ED replied we do not currently have any, we have our own benchmarks that we compare to. Coish spoke to publicly made information, how RTOs should be sharing information with each other, how Cloud is currently tracking information for EE, we have second most active page (Facebook) of all RTOs, not just fans but active users. With Mitson now on board as Social Media Manager he has been working with Monk on the social media strategy, regarding how to post, when and what (based on research). Coish spoke to informed content, website now allows us to publish content and link to operators in the region, as well database now allows us to link content and hopes to see operators having increased traffic as a result. ED spoke to influencing plans for the following year, how our programs align across committees, the marketing budget, and our plans for doing more with less.

### ***Board and ED took meeting in Camera***

When the board reconvened Coish presented a high-level information on the next year's draft strategy and that is to make city dwellers see the quintessential Canadian experience in reach, this is the brand voice. Coish spoke to marketing priorities for 2013 as a result of the one-on-one marketing interviews and the ED spoke to the importance of driving qualified traffic to us and then to operators, traffic to their websites and money in their pockets. Coish spoke to the importance of measuring of success while driving consumers to the doorstep of operators; bringing qualified prospects to the region and its operators. Coish spoke to working with operators as there needs to be understanding among operators that there is an expectation of what happens when they get there. Coish spoke to the equal opportunity website. MacKay replied to Coish's comments, how do we as an organization ensure that our operators are creating the experience once we send them out? ED replied that the research tracking and measurement committee indicators (committee has developed indicator framework with 4 pillars, 2012/2013 saw creation of benchmark measurements) will help track outcomes of our work with operators. Ryeland asked if there is any benefit in having top 20 referrals compared, who they are and how did they find out about my business? Coish spoke to proposed marketing framework for 2013 (online display, tactical ratio, branded content, SEM Google AdWords). Coish spoke to organizing the marketing plan up front for the whole year, instead of program by program (proposes to negotiate up-front annual deals, gives us bargaining power and should permit us to improve buy efficiency by up to 10%). Coish also spoke to success of the EE video ads being used on YouTube and their phenomenal click thru rate. Another success is the role of the Communications Manager, Kate Monk, who continues to keep branded content on the website, which enables higher SEO.

ED spoke to the underlying theme to the marketing moving forward, "marketing needs to do more with less". Coish spoke to Facebook becoming hub of the web, key to driving traffic to websites. EE will want to use Facebook and the investment we have made to turn that into cash for Explore the Edge, having a content strategy (publish calendar) it is about quality of content, sharing of content, user experience while on website, must ensure top drawer content constantly on website, like a magazine, creates better ranking with Google. Vitch asked if there is a goal for how our site will be ranked; Coish responded what matters is visitors to the website and where are they going, create interested users who read the content and want to come here. Discussion ensued from Vitch's question surrounding the new Facebook reply button and Facebook to Android application. Coish noted that we want to be the #1 referral in the region for our operators. Berry suggested for our tactical radio we should look to Sudbury as well as North Bay and the GTA. ED reiterated that specific marketing discussion would take place at the committee level. Feltis spoke to interest in SEO, looking forward to seeing EE move up the ranks. Jerry spoke to alphabetical listings, can there be a paid for service to move yourself up the page. Vitch stated that bringing people to the region benefits everyone.

Discussion began surrounding a change of date for the next board meeting; the meeting was moved to April 29<sup>th</sup> from May 1.

## **BREAK**

### *Governance Committee- Tony Armstrong:*

Governance is progressing; ads have been put in the newspaper to fill vacant spots on Board of Directors. The nomination committee with chair Froude will work through the list of nominees to ensure that a slate of potential directors is brought forward to the board for the April 29 meeting. Then at the AGM on May 28<sup>th</sup> the incoming board will be announced and shortly thereafter the governance training will take place, June. Froude with help from the ED will work with the nomination committee in the coming weeks. At next board meeting there will be slate put forward to the board.

### *Transacting Committee- Jerry Feltis:*

Spring Fuel & Fun is up and running. As the marketing ends, the travel dates start on the tail end of registration. Discussed how last fall there was overlap with registration and stays which created issues for the administration of the program. At the end of the Spring Fuel and Fun EE will move directly into Explore the Edge. We currently have 40 bookings for Fuel & Fun. Leung spoke to Fern Glen Inn having 4 bookings already; Feltis spoke to announcing the program through their avenues. Ryeland asked if Explore the Edge is looking to be more of a year round program. Feltis responded no programs should ever run over each other, this creates issues, instead to have programs align back to back so something is always in market. Feasby wondered whether there could there be another way to include last minute bookings, ED will look into considering some options with the committee. Leung asked about the new process regarding “double dipping” of operators participating as both accommodations and experience providers; discussion began around encouraging guests to travel the region while here as opposed to staying put.

### *Tourism Operator Relations Committee- Dan Feasby*

From the 2012/2013 Product Development Fund 15 applications are currently being reconciled with some holdbacks happening until the final paperwork is submitted. A report has been drafted for the committee and MTCS. Moving forward there is a smaller budget with presumed more interest (9 interested entities so far). The TPDFs fell into three broad categories consisting of development of tourism products (existing products), tourism operator/product capacity, and DMO strategic planning. This time around at the committee level there will have to be diligence in the selection process, more interest with less money. In regards to the tourism operator strategy there has been an operator database developed, an operator forum developed (EE will host topics, reach out to operators), CRM program to update contact with operators ongoing (managing relationships), and membership communication outreach is beginning. Membership: \$1 gives operators a voice at the table, speak at forums, etc.

*Partnership Committee- Andy Vitch:*

Explorers' Edge received 15 applications; approved 11, moved 2 to other avenues, and 2 were denied. The committee did rubber stamp applicants; applications are thoroughly reviewed. Committee is diligent in asking tough questions, and in some cases returns applications for further review and clarification. Supported programs will move tourism in the region forward, build new audiences, and are track-able - providing a means for ROI. 70% of the funds have been allocated. Discussion ensued on how most applications came from Muskoka and how EE would ensure a broad scope of projects being submitted in the future. ED thanks the committee for their time reading notes and diligently discussing projects, going after niche markets, our board wants money in the market right away. MacKay spoke to the processes and importance of applicants projects aligning with the overall strategy of Explorers' Edge. ED spoke to programs engaging and benefiting multiple operators, creating benchmark with ability to measure, track results, grassroots ground swell.

*Research Tracking & Measurement Committee- Diane Wiber:*

Peter Coish and Steve Smith attended the last committee meeting. The outcome of the meeting was the development of 4 indicator pillars; brand health, visitor exit survey (quality of experience), program metrics for Explore the Edge and Fuel & Fun, and business index (HST returns, establish benchmark, numbers for attractions, resorts, etc.). Next steps include identifying indicators under each pillars and gathering information.

*Community Relations Committee- Don MacKay:*

Over the last month the committee has one meeting. OTEC attended and presented their services, great meeting with low attendance. MacKay believes this is where we have to grow our game, industry training. Discussed how we change the attitude that training is not as important as marketing, transacting programs, etc. Vitch spoke to educating the operator, how to explain that staff needs the right attitude on the front lines and about how training will help grow it, which in turn grows tourism in the region.

**Round Table:**

MacKay spoke to concern over weather, last year this time they were open. MacKay is hopeful that we will have a more consistent summer this year with more rain. The David Foote presentation was very interesting, asserted that our big market is not Toronto, but the international traveller, aging traveller from Russia, Germany. A bilingual or translatable website, perhaps on home page, may be something to look into in the future. Don thanks to Froude for his work as chair.

Feltis spoke to 2013 looking more and more like 2008 levels. Right now they are 100% ahead of pace over last year; they typically do 7000 room nights over 6 months and are currently 1000 room nights ahead; 2008 was second best year ever, possibly into 2007 levels which was best ever. Rates have suffered a bit. Rooms have been renovated, dining room is being renovated, and guest washroom renovations are in the works. Owner is investing, in the black last year for first time ever.

Berry has not pulled statistics for a couple of weeks but is on track and slightly ahead of last year in bookings. Nothing major planned for this year, possibly a few sites, her current hurdle is Ontario Hydro, has a transformer big enough to run three parks but air transformer needs to move to add news sites, 25K expense to move what they have and put below ground. Berry reports all same staff coming back, some in their 13<sup>th</sup> year with her.

Feasby had a reasonably good snowmobile season. Saw people showing up at 8pm off the trails for last minute accommodations, a different breed of traveler they are experiencing. It is looking good for summer with bookings and he predicts a good year.

Vitch states bookings for the year are terrific; compares every two weeks to other years. States he owes it all to social media, Google AdWords, Facebook, and TripAdvisor. Sunny Point Resort also won a 2013 award from TripAdvisor as the 4<sup>th</sup> Best Family Resort in Canada. States TripAdvisor is example of how a small operator can use social media to their benefit.

Leung had a good winter, up 40% over last year, second best winter in 8 years (does not offer snowmobiling but offers snowshoeing, dogsledding, and cross country skiing). No big predictions for summer yet.

Wiber is closed at the moment, will open May long weekend, get livestock in shape. Maple Lane Farms closed in February, which will affect the number of stables in the area.

Ryeland does not know what to predict for the year, lots of group inquiries thus far which is good. Hoping volumes from 2007-2008 return, no indications how it will go. Andrew spoke to Kijiji as his top referral, free and worth a try. Discussed the old Rainbow Country billboard, do we want to look at picking it up. MacKay added it would be great to put one on Hwy 11 as well, now entering Explorers' Edge.

Froude spoke to Muskoka Chautauqua going great. Looking to build a building for them soon, in talks with architects, two players have offered free land to build on, both waterfront. With his departure from Chair of EE this will be the first year in 10 years he won't be chairing any boards.

Hernando spoke to Summer Experience Program launch and has now closed, after a review of the program, moving forward other types of organizations can apply for the program. Celebrate Ontario acceptances went out; next phase is developing TPAs for each and working to support other regions as well. OTMPC had a meeting in Toronto last week with the Regional Tourism Unit, this was an opportunity to share information with senior management. The ministry in partnership with OTMPC put together a webinar for travel intentions (survey done in Spring and Summer, what Americans are saying and what Canada is doing).

**Motion to Adjourn:** Dan Feasby

**Seconded:** Don MacKay

**Approved** 12:56pm