

Explorers' Edge Board of Directors Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, September 9, 2014
Muskoka Riverside Inn, Bracebridge

Present: Curt Dunlop, Don MacKay, Jerry Feltis, Michelle Berry, Anthony Rizzo, Andy Vitich, Hilary Chambers, Diane Wiber, Jackie Leung, Nicole Saulnier, Andrew Ryeland, Jeff Suddaby, Jackie Leung

Regrets: John Miller, Kim Loader, Drew Rachar

Staff: James Murphy, Erin Wilcox

Resource: Laura Hernando – MTCS

Welcome and Introductions: Jerry Feltis called the meeting to order at 9:32am

Round Table & Other Business

Jerry Feltis: Mill on Main – phenomenal year, up 30%. Covered patio offered advantage with poor weather. Rocky Crest – great year as well, discussed summer occupancy and outlook for Fall. Discussed use of flash sales to backfill inventory.

Diane Wiber: saw increase in riders this summer, almost all were last minute bookings. Diane attributes this to weather; people day tripping or deciding last minute; seeing a lot more first generation Canadians coming to ride. Hoping for increased business with Fall colour season; will be open in the winter and would like to offer sleigh rides.

Nicole Saulnier: GBA had a good year tourism wise, lots of last minute bookings, a lot less advanced bookings, seeing increase in day trippers. June was busy with training. Discussed intent to work towards changing school year to October-July; how that would affect tourism.

Anthony Rizzo: property has majority seasonal sites, yearly guaranteed income, new seasonal residents on waiting list. Transients were mostly last minute bookings, weather played a role. 7 sites to be reconstructed, increased rates on water view sites. Discussed declining supply market for campgrounds; private owners inability to meet Government standards and mandates. Discussed role in developing the Almaguin Highlands Chamber of Commerce; waiting on registration and development of a strategic plan.

Michelle Berry: demand in private parks with good reputation is high; discussed different experiences for guests in provincial vs. private parks. Property opened two weeks late this year and was able to make up the margin. 25th anniversary weekend was phenomenal, contest winner stayed with them, had a great time. While the weather was raining, no fire ban meant guests were happy. KOA against the norm as far as reservations, lots of pre-booking, not as many walk-ins for them.

Hilary Chambers: SunDog Gallery doubled income this year, lots of people just stopping in. Dealing with staffing issues this year; held Writers Retreat, went very well. Business in the resort is amazing; August

was full, September is booking up, October very busy. Finds a lot of bookings generated from being pet friendly; good tipping point.

Andrew Ryeland: late spring was disappointing, down at start of season; will finish the year even. Discussed the corporate market and ability to fill the demand and needs of larger groups; glad to have Grand Tappattoo open and Rocky Crest nearby to meet the accommodation needs of those groups.

Curt Dunlop: great year for them; pub up 20%, Muskoka Beer Festival up 25%, Session Toronto up 50%. Beer store pre-ordered 7000 bottles of their new beer developed with Muskoka Brewery; Royal Winter Fair is coming up.

Don MacKay: opened late due to weather, business has been consistent. Seeing a lot more walk-ins and day of bookings. Discussed visit to the Canadian Open. Discussed use of local radio ads, how the way the weather is presented and perceived by visitor's affects business for golf courses.

Jeff Suddaby: business overall for summer was very good; back to 1999 numbers. Noticed a lot of Americans coming through the restaurant, proximity to Algonquin Park is big pusher of that. Finds with Americans the demographics are switching from the 60-65 age group to more of the 35-45 age group.

Andy Vitch: business is down 10% over last year, but last year was best year ever. Still beating in 5 months what they used to do in 12 in revenues. Discussed changes happening with social media and how that affects his business; Facebook, TripAdvisor, Google AdWords, etc. Looking into what the next social media craze will be and how he can use that to draw business.

Jackie Leung: summer was up, August was down due to cancellations that couldn't be filled, up 20% year to date due to amazing winter. Discussed looking for tools that can be used to push out updated vacancy listings; especially last minute ones due to cancellations. Is seeing less international guests; noticing a lot of Europeans using booking.com. Spoke about not wanting to send money to a commission based site that is not local; wants to put a lot behind JackRabbit.

Approval of Agenda – September 9, 2014

Motion: moved by Don MacKay that the Agenda for September 9, 2014 Board of Directors meeting be approved.

Seconded: Jerry Feltis

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Approval of Minutes – June 18, 2014

Motion: moved by Andy Vitch that the Minutes from June 18, 2014 Board of Directors meeting be approved.

Seconded: Anthony Rizzo

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Financial Presentation – for period ending August 31, 2014

Discussion: Treasurer Vitchev provided the Board of Directors with a brief update. Jerry Feltis asked when next funding comes in; Laura Hernando has processed. ED Murphy spoke to income coming in, as well as paperwork moving forward for Resorts of North Muskoka, Golf Muskoka, etc.; as well as client services agreements, Ed Murphy spoke to drawing payments each month, gets our HST back faster. Discussion around accounts payable and monies for services not yet rendered; Ministry is generous in giving funds upfront, Laura discussed TPA and how monies are dispersed.

Approval of Financials – for period ending August 31, 2014

Motion: moved by Jerry Feltis that the financials presented at the September 9, 2014 Board of Directors meeting be approved.

Seconded: Hilary Chambers

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Approval of Consent Agenda

- a) Transacting Committee
- b) Research
- c) Tourism Operator Relations (Partnership Funding)
- d) Marketing

Motion: moved by Jerry Feltis that the Consent Agenda for the September 9, 2014 Board of Directors meeting be approved.

Seconded: Hilary Chambers

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Executive Director Update – ED James Murphy

Ed Murphy discussed the Tourism Operator Relations position and provided updates:

- 170+ operator interactions
- programs & operators engagement (F&F and Sweater Weather Tour)
- communication regarding Golf Muskoka & Resorts of North Muskoka
- discussing yearly trends with operators; bringing back information
- working heavily on the JackRabbit system; operators seem appreciative, more training is required
- finding overall awareness of RTO12 to be good; anyone not seemed generally overwhelmed by influx of information from various sectorial agencies (BIAs, Chambers, DMOs, RTO, etc.)

ED Murphy discussed program feedback; tipping point programs create credibility in the industry, shows operators were here to help put heads in beds and money in pockets. Working with operators to leverage funds from FedNor.

ED Murphy spoke to Marketing position; use of branded content, website redesign (making site optimal for social media and more readable like a magazine; same navigation, higher SEO). Discussed Partnership Funding; 14 projects in the works and 2 FedNor applications we are overseeing. Product Development program at 35K, making Ride the Edge work hard for us; expanding on fishing, cycling, and Group of Seven to keep pushing Ride the Edge. Working with outside partners; Ken Turner with fishing, Randy Mitson with cycling. Keeping a close eye on Ontario Trillium Foundation and looking into what opportunities lie with them. If we can leverage our cash with other granting agencies it is good business, getting credibility with regional and provincial partners.

Motion was put forth for support of the FedNor applications.

Approval of Contractual Agreement – Golf Muskoka

Motion: That the RTO will enter into a contractual agreement with FedNor and Golf Muskoka to execute tourism programming.

Motion: moved by Don MacKay that the agreement be accepted

Seconded: Hilary Chambers

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Approval of Contractual Agreement – Resorts of North Muskoka

Motion: That the RTO will enter into a contractual agreement with FedNor and Resorts of North Muskoka to execute tourism programming.

Motion: moved by Curt Dunlop that the agreement be accepted

Seconded: Michelle Berry

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

ED Murphy spoke to our transacting programs; JackRabbit, Spring Fuel & Fun reconciliation and launch of Fuel & Fun for Fall 2014. Spoke to research being developed; 2014 brand health, development of new data collection model, and updated visitor exit survey (use of rack cards instead of iPads). Discussed ongoing community relations; Tourism Summit (Muskoka Marketing Strategy) and Destination Parry Sound. Board discussed need for a brand champion; what does it stand for, who is the holder of the brand, role of Muskoka Tourism in pushing that brand forward. Jeff Suddaby asked if anything was on the table; James said not yet, MTMA must develop a marketing strategy, something collaborative with regional partners. Discussed final document recommendations; District to initiate next steps. Board is looking forward to more succinct projects coming through from MTMA to provide partnership funding. ED Murphy spoke to final doc from Strategy Corp.

ED Murphy discussed the Destination Parry Sound (DPS) project; how we regard Parry Sound Tourism as the DMO, what role does the Chamber play. Ryeland spoke to how DPS is an industry based initiative, not a tourism based project; no regional government in Parry Sound, how that affects their plans. Perry Harris to present at the Community Relations committee meeting.

ED Murphy talked about ongoing work with OTMPC; free standing inserts (Local Insider, Best of Ontario, Christmas, Winter, etc.), provincial websites, and Connecting America program; FSI meant to be integrated project that draws you to new website. James supports the BOD process; better ROI in developing content and pushing out initiatives. Discussed use of Taboola; driving qualified traffic to our site (associated posts). Andrew Ryeland spoke to data mining; open data. How we can get access to this data and specify it to our needs. Data is public domain; MacKay suggested someone comes to the table to show us how to access and utilize this information; ED Murphy to seek out more information on the mining of the data and bring it back to the table.

ED Murphy discussed MTCS updated TPA reporting, report submissions. ED Murphy met new Minister, explained funding extension now for one year. Spoke to the new Minister about RTO model, was keen on collaboration; Murphy spoke to him about how we are collaborating and leveraging our funds and partnership programs with Federal dollars (FedNor), as well as other RTOs and regional partners; way to show the RTO model is a successful one. Jackie Leung has initiated chair to chair meeting with other RTOs; waiting on TIAO consultation outcomes. ED Murphy also discussed the Ontario Trillium Foundation & FedNor; opportunities being presented for collaboration.

Laura Hernando discussed final report being shared before the tourism summit (TIAO); and summary of sessions. There was a request for James to sit on the OTMPC Northern Tourism Marketing Committee; to be discussed.

OTMPC Northern Tourism Marketing Committee

Motion: A motion was put forth that ED Murphy submit his name for consideration as a member of the Northern Committee.

Motion: moved by Andrew Ryeland that ED Murphy submit his name for consideration

Seconded: Andy Vitch

Discussion: TBD

Break at 11:40am.

Committee Updates:

Governance – Anthony Rizzo:

Rizzo spoke to handoff from Tony Armstrong; no meetings since then. Meeting in coming weeks, will draft initiative for board and committee recruitment. Need help to recruit business colleagues to the board, help support some of the committees. Don asked about open spots for next year; will be determined after the committee meeting. Laura Hernando asked if there is still a spot open from Algonquin Park; will help try to orchestrate with Parks Canada; Algonquin Park has internally hired a marketing staffer, Laura to put James in touch with her. Committee will work to develop a survey to ascertain governance strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement.

Research – Diane Wiber:

Wiber began by discussing the brand; research and tracking met last week; spoke a lot about brand health. The government wants to know how well EE is seen in the rest of Ontario, has remained unchanged; sitting at 7% brand recognition, highest with people who have visited and live in the GTA, consistent across age groups expect 55+. Toronto and Niagara seeing more repeat business; probably due to short duration day trips. Niagara is most unaided recognition, Muskoka is #2, however recognition does not necessarily translate to visitors. One of the greatest challenges is the idea that we are further away as seen by GTA consumers, perception that we are too far for a day trip (how we can work on our idea of changing perceptions). Andy spoke to logistics being the biggest barrier to the distance perception. James spoke to operational planning session and how these ideas can be brought to the table. Diane continued with brand health; spoke to our index, quarter 4 will be live on dashboard next week (dashboard update will include three sections a) business index b) visitor exit survey c) social listening). Is moving to a three time a year collection. HST is a struggle, must work with operators to convince them that information is anonymous; goes to collection law firm that aggregates information. Spoke to visitor exit survey, updated the Ipads with a rack card supported with a QR code so visitors can make it easier to take part.

Tourism Operator Relations – Andy Vitch:

- 13 partnerships ongoing
- 2 leveraged with FedNor
- 1 leveraged with RTO13, FedNor and Northern Ontario Ministry of Development and Mines
- 2 Parry Sound, 1 Algonquin Park, 7 Muskoka
- 2 regional projects
- 40k yet to be allocated

Marketing – Hilary Chambers (had to leave) presented by James:

Spoke to graphs sent out to BOD; branded content strategy is doubling visits to our website. Discussed how this translates to outbound traffic to the operators; has increased but not significantly; offering a “book now” capability in all branded content along with links to local operators should help.

- 72,872 visits to explorersedge.ca vs. 25,522 in August 2013, up 185%
- YTD 200,751 vs. 96,656 in 2013, up 108%
- YTD we have achieved 36% of the total traffic objective for the year, but have spent only 25% of the total advertising budget
- Mobile/tablet traffic accounts for 61% of total visits YTD, versus just 32% in 2013
- Total 9,325 outbound clicks versus 5,182 last year
- YTD 32,291 clicks versus 17,897 same period last year

Moving away from big campaigns meets our goals of driving traffic to the website. Website redesign will be ready in time for the Operational Planning session in October; predicts spike in traffic as it is more mobile friendly and offers easier navigation; next committee meeting beginning of October. Search and discover is working; content is fueling audiences, evolution is tracking what consumers are doing, where are they going, what are they looking at. Search engine marketing; refining year over year, takes into

account booking engine. Blogs are providing results; 20% are return visits and 80% are getting new visitors.

ED is interested in looking into revenue generation around branded content; how we can provide services to small businesses. MacKay mentioned how we can sell something we are already doing well; we provide phase one by proving we are effective already on this front. Jackie spoke to consumer browsing habits; computer vs. mobile, how Facebook encourages people to go directly back to FB after they read their content piece that brings them away, online you are more likely to delve deeper into content. Building a case for revenue generation, Curt suggested building the model based on click through rate (you pay if people click on your story). This idea was well received by the Board.

Transacting – Jerry Feltis (had to leave) presented by James:

Spring 2014 Fuel & Fun:

- 278 bookings
- 148 operators involved
- 54% redemption rate (increase over last year)

Fall 2014 Fuel & Fun:

- to date 110 operators participating
- 200 packages will run October 1-31, 2014

JackRabbit:

- 344 widget hits (in the last 8 days)
- 75% conversion rate (consumer going directly to operator site or reservation system)
- traffic: direct 2%, blog 31%, homepage 27%, mobile 40%
- next steps: uploading and testing attractions

Transacting committee is now working on the design and implementation of the widgets on the Muskoka Tourism and Golf Muskoka pages, as well as packages and special offers. Leung asked about the smaller operators and what JackRabbit is showing in regards to \$ rates being shown for them, etc. Murphy commented we are in the early days and still seeing how the program is working; Staff have been following up with operators.

Community Relations – Andrew Ryeland:

Community Relations Committee has new representation from FedNor, Muskoka Community Futures, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation; Kim Loader, member of the board, has also joined on. CRC having a meeting one week from today; making an effort to stimulate collaboration and get the group thinking about regional programs to move tourism forward. Debbie van der Beek from Ignite will speak to corporate market at the meeting, Laura Hernando will be present to give industry insight. Donna Maitland is going to speak to the Ontario Trillium Foundation and what initiatives are being offered; what funding is available and how to access it. More will come out of meeting on the 16th; more to report at the next meeting.

Ministry of Tourism, Culture & Sport Update – Laura Hernando:

TDF update; new program has been launched. Programs are still status quo but with some updates; including new Minister Michael Coteau and return of Deputy Minister; interested in Tourism portfolio. There are a number of different funding programs being offered with tourism angles and interests; Ontario Trillium Foundation, Celebrate Ontario, Summer Experience, etc. ; Laura is working to create master document about each program with more information. Tourism Development Fund now online for Grants Ontario. TDF has three streams; product development, tourism investment, industry capacity building; all are available through the online system and on the consent agenda. Celebrate Ontario launching next week. Launching internet site for RTOs; not sure of logistics yet, called TRIP (tourism regional information portal), will launch this fall.

Motion to Adjourn

Motion: Don MacKay

Seconded: Curt Dunlop

Discussion: n/a

Carried.