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Explorers' Edge Board of Directors Meeting Minutes
Wednesday April 22, 2020
Webinar

Present (Webinar): Jeff Suddaby, Michael Simonett, Brenda Scott, Don MacKay, Scott Doughty, Angela Pollak, Hilary Chambers, Eric Miglin, Curt Dunlop

Resource: Laura Ross, Regional Development Advisor, Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries

Staff: James Murphy & Kate Monk

Welcome and Chair Remarks: Chair Suddaby began the webinar at 9.30am, thanked the directors for joining the call remotely.

Round Table Discussion: Directors discussed business challenges and scenario planning associated with the COVID-19 crisis. Directors noted that this is uncharted territory and that decisions are being made on a day-day basis.

Conflict of Interest: N/A

Approval of Agenda – April 22, 2020

Motion: Don MacKay

Seconded: Hillary Chambers

Discussion: n/a

ED Murphy and treasurer Simonett presented updated financials taking into account COVID 19. International Social Media Marketing and International FAM tours & trade shows were taken out of the budget and domestic marketing and transacting were updated. Murphy noted that projects associated with international travel & tradeshow would no longer be applicable this fiscal year. It was noted that all marketing will need to be done for domestic audiences. Simonett acknowledged that the budget will be changed several times over the course of the fiscal year as information, updates and travel advisories are updated. Murphy noted the recommendations will be fleshed out later in the presentation. Murphy updated the board on the audit progress to date. Directors enquired about the commitment to the commercial airline project and asked for an update. At this point the ED noted that communication is ongoing between the airline and airport as to what the status of summer service looks like both with the airline and the airport – taking into account the new realities of social distancing. Directors also enquired about the budget related to office expenses and wages as the work environment has changed.

ED Murphy noted that this would be revisited shortly as needs of staff are assessed over the coming weeks.

Staff then updated the board of directors on COVID -19 updates.

COVID-19 created a wave of information that required constant 24 / 7 monitoring in order to have stakeholders understand what the options are. Wednesday Webinar Series was initiated and held March 25, April 1, April 8 & April 15, 2020 (attendance 80 per webinar) with additional Webinars that included Marketing Intro & Advanced (100 attendees) and a Business Consultation with Stuart Morley (65 businesses). The RTO also hosted a CFIB webinar with senior managers and policy directors (200 attendees). In addition staff took part in Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism & Culture Industries webinars on March 16, 23, 30 April 7, 13, 20 along with round tables hosted by MPP Norm Miller & MPP Lisa MacLeod. During this time Economic Developer and CAO Communication was deployed enquiring about the Community Improvement Plan / plans for tourism recovery.

Staff also continued relentless communication with Canadian Federation of Independent Business, Tourism Industry Association of Ontario, pushing for tax relief for businesses from area municipalities to ensure liquidity, adding voice to calls for greater wage subsidies and cash flow to businesses (not just loans), advocating for a loosening of rules for BTIF grants (eliminate 50 cent collars from Parry Sound Muskoka Community Network so businesses can pivot to e-commerce) while continuing to meet with the Minister. As an outcome, the board was provided recommendations in the development of immediate mini seminars to assist tourism business owners with “scenario planning” and other items. Board thanked staff for the continued communication and webinars and acknowledged that regional webinars are important moving forward.

Staff then shared with directors outcomes of a recent RTO12 Survey that yielded 200 Responses (March 27). Priority items included; rent and mortgage immediate relief, Navigation of information related to federal Small Business Assistance, Seasonal and rural-specific issues (e.g. Internet, previous revenue drops from flooding, etc), Deposit model for operations has created liquidity issue, and the fact that most operators find themselves in Scenarios 1 & 2. As a result the Member to Member Forum www.rto12.ca was updated and a Business Operator Gated Forum on Facebook was launched.

Moving forward the strategy for RTO12 taking into account Covid-19 realities will need to include:

- Deposits – incentivizing
- Business pivoting – e.g. E-commerce, winterization
- Stimulating the economy – voucher programs i.e. Longer term/extended season & sales

In order to be utilize our partnership fund it was recommended utilizing funding partners such as FedNor, MNDM, Ontario Trillium Foundation ect. so that the RTO focuses on one partnership that would enhance Campaigns (Gift Certificate, Voucher), SME Business Development Support and a Research & Product Component. The board acknowledged that one partnership working with our Federal and Provincial partners should be explored first as our traditional partners would have budgets under more pressure due to lack of cash flow.

Staff provided directors with an overview of recommended programming starting with the immediate need, research – Post Covid Consumer behaviour which would touch on:

- Consumer behavioural changes due to Covid-19 on future travel
- What will consumers require for peace of mind travel – immediately? Longer term?
- What are the high potential markets for domestic travellers once the Covid restrictions are lifted? High income? No kids?
- Which Key Tourism Activities – or product – is differentiated and will stimulate travel?
- Changes to communication strategy based on new preferences? Will incentivized travel (packages, etc) help us be competitive?
- Porter Airlines resumed schedule – challenges to purchase?
- Economic Development Recovery needs from municipalities (separate research)
- Workforce / student intentions – return to work in our industry? What will attract them?

In addition to research staff provided directors with a business development (recovery) outline that includes:

- Hiring of planning consultants (grad students) to help tourism operators understand social distancing, commodified space (and its value), and how to adapt to new consumer behaviour/travel intentions
- Spatial Distancing, municipal requirements, and building cost analysis expertise for the tourism operators
- Pivot to e-commerce or from warm season to four season in order to generate steady income moving forward
- Retrofitting
- Digital Mainstreet or other e-commerce/online enhancements
- Workforce retention (return to work incentives?)

In addition to the research and business (re) development programs and immediate identified need is to ensure business owners are liquid as the COVID-19 situation draws out. A gift certificate incentive “7 WEEKS OF WAITING WITH THE GROUP OF 7” is being developed as a branded “future travel program” to generate “cash in” for operators (incentivized gift certificates). This will leverage distinct anniversary for our region – the Group of Seven 100th anniversary of their founding and include the purchase a gift certificate at a participating operator, which will get the consumer 7 weeks of wilderness fun associated with our brand, our parks (SPACES!) or the Group of Seven. In addition to this immediate program directors were briefed on programs that are in the queue, as described by being ready once travel is permitted, they include:

- Fuel & Fun “Tipping Point Program” for competitive advantage with drive markets in the fall
- Website re-build (domestic & international MERGE) with packages, TICO functionality
- Package development for Post-Covid itineraries
- Content Marketing & Lead Nurturing re-launch

- Winter content and potential HMATA partnership (Winter Wonders)

Staff noted that the program expenses would be offset with additional funding via an application process with our partners while continuing with ongoing projects that include Social Enterprise Catalyst Housing, noting that this is going to be more important than ever, Student outreach, Workforce considerations for re-boot and Website Development.

The final update to the board included staff outlining many of the unknowns facing the organization:

- Tourism Economic Development Fund
- Economic Recovery Committee (provincial)
- Role of Destination Canada / Destination Ontario – very competitive domestic market
- No tourism plan
- Development of “recovery committees” – even the District of Muskoka/municipalities
- How many businesses still need to be stabilized?
- What happens if curve isn’t flattened?
- July re-boot?
- Airline re-launch date
- Spatial distancing protocols by federal and provincial legislators

Directors thanked the staff for the thorough update and work completed. They acknowledged that this is a very different environment to be working from and the assistance provided in navigating the new realities is appreciated.

ED Murphy shared with the board the cancellation of the upcoming June 1, 2020 AGM and will set a future webinar AGM date for late June early July, 2020. Directors noted that a July date exceeds the three months since our fiscal year end, ED murphy responded that concessions are being made with not-for profits during this time and will attempt to keep the date with the three month time frame acknowledging that the auditor will need to be engaged. Staff then updated directors with upcoming webinars associated with Summit speakers noting that the speaker(s) will host webinars in June 1, 2020 which will include:

- John Stackhouse, Senior Vice-President, Office of the CEO at RBC - Zoom / Webinar
- Frederice Dimanche, Phd Director, Ted Rogers School of Hospitality & Tourism Management Ryerson University - Zoom / Webinar

In closing directors shared updates on their individual businesses and current state of affairs in the sub regions.

Motion to adjourn

Motion: Hillary Chambers

Discussion: N/A

Carried