

Explorers' Edge Board of Directors Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, February 24, 2021
Webinar

Present: Michael Simonett, Don MacKay, Gail Burrows, Hilary Chambers, Dave Anderson, Christine McRae, Angela Pollak, Scott Doughty, Andrew Rusynyk, Darren Smith

Resource: Laura Ross

Regrets: Mike Strong

Staff: James Murphy, Kate Monk, Erin Smit (taking minutes)

Welcome and Introductions:

Rusynyk: HVHSA reopened on Wednesday and they've had a great six days so far. Maxed out on Saturday for attendance. Great social distancing; enforcing masking will be a bit of a concern but hopeful the hill won't see another shutdown.

Pollak: Whitney has been quiet apart from campfire debate. Businesses are open, some are closed, gearing up for spring. Local business association busy working to incorporate so they can access funding.

McRae: Whitney is quiet. Has been pivoting and focusing on digital programming with consumers, schools, etc. Business is ramping up in that way.

Smith: reopened restaurants last week with 10 people allowed inside at a time. Outdoor dining is now permitted so patio in Baysville is also open; hopeful they won't be shut down again.

Anderson: Parry Sound still in lockdown. Notices the south end with big box stores is only busy spot in town, most of restaurants are shut or trying to do takeout as best they can but seems quiet.

MacKay: simulator is open and 10-12 hours a day is booked with play (in groups of 4). Is concerned we will be shut down with Barrie. Hoping course will open in April, and wants to try for earlier than last year. Should be able to open subject to restrictions.

Burrows: working with the chamber of commerce to push for businesses to be able to open in Parry Sound. Cabins are sold out for the summer already and normally selling just begins now so far ahead in that way.

Chambers: still in lockdown until March 8th – frustrating for people in LR as there have been zero COVID cases in their area. As an unorganized township they become part of North Bay-Parry Sound health unit. Usually snowmobile business is booming at this time, but as the trails have been closed there is very little traffic through town. Restaurants in town pivoting as best they can. Pivoting online for her business as much as possible, trying to think outside the box. NOHFC funding applications are in.

Doughty: all of his staff is healthy – averaging 35-40% occupancy this weekend. Great to be associated with the ski hill as they are busy. Hopeful the doors can stay open and we won't be shut down again.

Ross: Minister launched reconnect grant for festivals and events – must be done before March 15th. Working as quickly as possible to get programs out. Hopeful for more program announcements and support rolling out for the next fiscal year, especially for businesses who were not eligible in the past. Doughty asked what the purpose of funding events is when businesses need funding to stay open. Ross said there is focus and emphasis on safe experiences, is intended to create an atmosphere for modified experiences (virtual) to bring people together in a safe way. Looking into recovery and the future, but also aware we're still very much in the muck and mire of pandemic – also mentioned the different branches under our Ministry which also accesses funding (not just Tourism – but sport, heritage and culture programming as well). Simonett noted there is still no plan for Tourism from the Ministry – finds the details being released and webinars being offered just a regurgitation of information when it's implied there will be announcements of strategy.

Simonett: Rocky Crest is inside Parry Sound district so they are closed (though would be until May anyways); Sherwood is now open but if a lockdown happens again they would likely stay closed until May.

Call to Order and Chair Remarks: Chair Simonett called the meeting to order at 9:51am.

Thanked James, Kate & the team for all their efforts. He addressed the fact that we are a complicated region with a large geographical space with different health units included. Board needs to remember that we represent all facets of tourism industry; we have expertise from a number of industries but must remember to wear our regional hats and think of the greater good for all. Will need to continue to be flexible as we pivot with what comes at us with the changing pandemic landscape.

Conflict of Interest: n/a

Approval of Agenda – February 24, 2021

Motion: Don MacKay

Seconded: Andrew Rusynyk

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Approval of Minutes – December 14, 2020

Motion: Hilary Chambers

Seconded: Darren Smith

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Financial Presentation – James Murphy & Angela Pollack

Income Statement & Balance Sheet – February 18, 2021

Pollak referenced income sheet from the board package; revenue is coming from same sources, continue to follow-up with FedNor (though not confirmed), TPA and program contributions from Destination Ontario and Destination Canada.

Balance sheet – we have cash in the bank, accrued liability is from the voucher program (funds not yet distributed from Cottage Country Spirit Winter Travel Package). Destination Canada and Destination Ontario money does not need to be spent until September 2021 (possible extension to December 2021), so this money will be deferred revenue to be carried over to the next fiscal year. Murphy has asked for a yes or no from FedNor by month's end so we know if this funding will be approved or not, so if it's declined we can remove it from our statements. Vouchers expire Feb 28th and will be sent in ASAP from operators so they can be reconciled before year end.

Motion to Accept Financials as Presented

Motion: Angela Pollak

Seconded: Don MacKay

Discussion: Don mentioned he sent questions he had to ED Murphy before the meeting, received follow-up immediately.

Carried

Executive Director Update – James Murphy

ED Murphy began with a land acknowledgement, and apologized for the late circulation of materials. Wearing our regional hats in an effort to move tourism forward for the region. We're reacting to changes in closures, funding, etc. as they come – but have developed a strategy that will turn the ship towards industry stabilization in our region in preparation for a changing and evolving landscape in our industry.

Hopkins & Murphy have both received their TICO travel counsellor certification. Murphy is now moving forward with the supervisor/manager test. Monies will now be coming in and out with a new division within the RTO as 'Travel Agency Business Development' – more to come on this. Monk & Murphy completed the Indigenous Canada Course from the University of Alberta. Explores key issues facing Indigenous peoples today from a historical and critical perspective highlighting national and local Indigenous-settler relations. McRae discussed native-land.ca and its interactive mapping that helps understand each territory where you're located (or travelling to) for giving proper land acknowledgements.

Cottage Country Spirit Local Travel Package – Winter Edition: 196 participating SMEs for winter edition. 2,529 packages claimed. 32 businesses have already received cheques in Muskoka and Parry Sound with 1,307 vouchers returned and reimbursed to date. Lots of great feedback from businesses posting to Facebook about the program, as well as feedback from the radio promotion (on four Moose FM stations throughout the region) and direct emails from consumers who appreciated their vouchers and wanted to tell us how they spent them and how wonderful it felt to know they were supporting local businesses in their own communities.

Winter Arts Collective: follows the same concept of the Group of Seven 100th Anniversary celebration highlighting artists working in a number of different mediums. Three pieces of content have gone up already (with their included FB post promotion) – great promotion for our local arts community with posts already seeing high numbers with reach and impressions. Five more pieces to come.

Ryerson University Students' Union Partnership: a panel webinar titled 'Work & Play in the Great Canadian Wilderness' was held on February 3, 2021. Included a 'Let's Talk' panel discussion with James Murphy, Rahel Renner from Residence Inn Gravenhurst Muskoka Wharf and Erin MacDonald from Wild and Found. The event also featured breakout rooms via zoom highlighting work opportunities with local resort properties and a survey was distributed to the hospitality school student workforce of 700 people. Event closed by promoting a social media contest (#recreatethegreat) which helped to make the event exciting and engaging – keeps the students thinking about our region and learning about what we have to offer here to staff; introduce them to this area as a destination. The recruitment session portion of the event (which was attended by 100 students) included representatives from Deerhurst Resort, Voyageur Quest, Taboo Resort, ClubLink, JW Marriott, Residence Inn by Marriott and Wild and Found. This was a successful communication style for this sort of event which can be replicated in the future, and will be facilitated with James' Georgian College students next.

Humber College: this partnership is a capstone thesis project for the Explorers' Edge working group to research what the main obstacles are for urban students to work in rural destinations. This work will also be taken into consideration for social catalyst enterprise housing concept research and articulation study being done by consultants Impact & Main for the RTO.

Georgian College Packaging & Sales Course: students are getting burned out with online learning; working to revive their interest with Master Class speakers to encourage engagement (including speakers from the Ontario Sea Kayak Centre, Kuration, RTO12, Hammond Transportation, Residence Inn, Voyageur Quest, Ignite and ClubLink). The course curriculum will also include RTO product and strategy inclusion, discussions of the EE KTAs, as well as work towards each student receiving their TICO license to help with their employment down the line.

Howl at the Full Moon Zoom: 2,237 registrations (and new hyper local leads into our database) from Canada and the US. Purpose of the program was to engage our audiences – retain and motivate them – to keep our destination top of mind when travel begins again. 216 viewers' submitted photos after the event for the contest, and to date 356 people have viewed the recording on YouTube. Destination Canada produced some Instagram communication to push it out, and Destination Ontario also put some paid promotion behind the event. Event became a benchmark for future product zooms from Explorers' Edge.

Fat Bike Fun Wheel: 2,895 page views on Moose FM, 487 entries into the contest. On air personalities promoted Explorers' Edge and the Cottage Country Spirit voucher program, but main purpose was a much needed shout out to businesses in the region and sharing the sentiment of supporting local business in our communities. Gift cards purchased from 15 local restaurants as prizes, as well as three grand prizes from three different outfitters. This initiative also helps develop our relationship with local media and keeps Explorers' Edge as an organization top of mind for our new hyper-local audiences.

Digital Campfire: participation from six local businesses throughout the region – great organic reach on this content on Facebook. Engages our audiences and nurtures leads without encouraging travel so when the marketing can be 'turned back on' audiences will be ready.

Website: new website set to launch in April. Wireframes have been completed and final designs are in development. Explorers' Edge and Great Canadian Wilderness websites will be merged to both fall under the Great Canadian Wilderness brand. The new site will also include a booking widget where direct booking package sales will be offered.

Impact & Main: working with consultants to develop 'Work-Integrated Ecosystem for Workforce Development and Sustainability'. A deep dive into the different pillars has been completed (sustainable workforce/recruitment, employees, housing, career training and advice, life skills and advancement, employers, investors and Explorers' Edge entrepreneurship); nothing is working in silos anymore. Will never move ahead without housing. Next steps being formulated including industry surveys of stakeholders for feedback. More important than ever given workforce attraction challenges due to the pandemic. Posts are being made to LinkedIn (breadcrumbs) to reach different types of investors, gather insight from other individuals outside the industry who have ideas to share.

Parry Sound Deputation: contacted by the Economic Development Officer in Parry Sound. Deputation will happen on Tuesday, March 16th. Explorers' Edge wants to understand the roles and responsibilities in Parry Sound and have a dialogue that includes stakeholders and business owners in town. Also asked to meet with Canadore College representatives on February 16th to open another office space in Parry Sound. Discussed their past eco-tourism program, tourism representatives (DMO in Parry Sound), etc.

Pollak asked about the housing strategy research and if any of it was yet public. Monk said research has been compiled for us and it will be made available when completed – report will be reviewed by end of fiscal, and stakeholders should have details available by May.

Monk noted that workforce issue was identified in 2018 as a massive gap and in addition to that sustainability; have now been exponentially moved to the front as an item from research requiring massive attention region (and industry) wide. Simonett mentioned pandemic will only exasperate our workforce issues.

Board Operational Plan Presentation – James Murphy and Kate Monk

ED Murphy precursor board that we will need a consensus from them and a motion of approval for plans to be submitted before the end of March (after this presentation and plan is discussed).

Ontario is the only province without a plan – Explorers' Edge will 'float all boats'. Staff concerns see workforce shortages even more pronounced; service industry is a tough sell and tourism considered an 'unsafe' industry. Workers are jumping to other industries and being reskilled by government programs; seeing a decrease in tourism school enrollment. An exponential increase in the cost of housing keeps low wage workers away.

Local residents are becoming the bread and butter of local business, and negative resident sentiment more evident than ever towards travellers or 'outsiders' (pandemic has exasperated this issue). Will need to create an outreach or engagement plan – this audience needs to be nurtured to favour tourism as an economic driver for our region.

Discussed over-tourism and its negative effects. Higher volumes of visitation expected compared to urban destinations when the dust settles, and what this might mean for potential disrespect for the natural product offerings and how our messaging/education can help to combat this problem (content, zoom sessions, etc). 'Doubling tourism receipts' is no longer an attainable or prudent measurement. No federal or provincial multi-year plan for regional/rural stabilization, recovery or rebuild indicated. There is no foreseeable return to international visitation, so hyper-local remains important for long term sustainability.

Presented - The Path Forward: Regional Destination Development

Discussed the evolution of RTO12s competitive strategy from an industry centric approach with no cohesion or overall strategy (2011-2014), a consumer centric approach with goal of increasing visitation and spend (2015-2020) to a region/community centric approach (2011-present) where the aim is to leverage the business of tourism to develop strong, resilient communities that thrive no matter the economic situation of the day. Will 'float all boats'; not just the boats of SME owners, in order to build long term sustainability of the regional tourism industry and its stakeholders. The regional, sustainable economy will be tourism-industry lead. We will build a business ecosystem. No direction is coming from government, so the region must look towards its own self-sufficiency.

Definitions to consider moving forward: ecotourism vs. sustainable tourism vs. regenerative tourism. Sustainability will become a 'buzzword' for funding applications as a reaction to mass tourism. Regenerative tourism is the notion that using the business of tourism as a catalyst, actively and constantly improve the social, environmental and economic conditions of all stakeholders. Create entrepreneurial communities – or a business ecosystem – that will thrive now and into the future. All parts of the system come into balance and feed each other to build economic, social, cultural and environmental stability. This is not anti-development; is instead in favour of development that helps more than just the bottom line.

Monk discussed local workforce outreach program – partnering new workers in the community with local tourism ambassadors to experience local product while fostering relationships to make them feel part of the community and welcomed by locals and the industry.

Discussed the title of 'Destination Development Organization' – the business of tourism as a catalyst for thriving communities. Traditional focus on marketing and PR (which is incumbent upon us to continue with), but working to consider other opportunities that are underdeveloped – regenerative community development and participation, and revenue generation opportunities. Looking at ways outside of just visitation and spend to build the sustainability of our industry. It can be done by developing streams for revenue generation by the RTO including package revenue with TICO, public and private partnerships, investing, consulting, merchandise and membership revenues (which can also be invested).

Circular economies was presented – building entrepreneurial communities. Region-centric approach diagram touches on role of residents, workforce, natural product, government, local culture, visitors and operators. KPIs yet to be decided (will not just be visitation and spend); but will seek to reach higher yield visitors.

The board was presented with a RTO12 Revised 3-Year Strategy that included a updated:

- Vision: RTO12 is a Destination Development Organization that leads the Canadian tourism industry in regenerative development, ensuring the region's tourism stakeholders and communities are resilient and able to thrive long term.
- Mission: RTO12's mission is to steward the regional tourism industry's recovery, rebuild and renewal by developing innovative, regenerative programs to ensure long-term sustainability and success for all stakeholders.
- Mandate: Steward, Invest, Build Community, Innovate, Train, Attract (workers, investment, etc).

ED Murphy discussed '*The Business of Tourism*':

Short Term:

- Stabilizing the tourism economy & SMEs
- Packages, Marketing, Transacting
- Business Development – Pivoting, Adapting to New Markets (local)
- Investigate new, regional supply chains (e.g. field to fork, art suppliers, authentic Indigenous products, etc.)
- Job recruitment

Long Term:

- Building community connections and supply chains
- Changing resident and workforce sentiment
- Inclusion - community input & feedback related to tourism
- Revenue Generation & Community Re-investment
- Social enterprise catalyst housing
- Improved infrastructure

A three year strategy will replace the current five year strategy and projects will include:

Year One:

- Benchmark year for revenue generation
- Membership – creation of fund via membership and investment to ease future industry stresses
- Package sales – targeting the type of visitor (seeking higher yield visitors)
- Transacting programs
- Continued development investment - Workforce Thrusters Strategy (housing, training/education, regional currency)
- Hyper local market development – stabilizing tourism SMEs
- Domestic markets when viable
- Public Relations and outreach to improve resident participation and sentiment
- Job recruitment
- Expand/improve outreach with First Nations and Metis communities

Year Two:

- Re-investing in the community
- Visitor Sentiment
- Presentation / Buy-In – Workforce Thrusters Strategy
- Development of career and life skills training deliverables for catalyst housing project
- Development of housing building approach
- International travel – commercial air service

Year Three:

- Launch Community Regional Workforce Thrusters Program
- Community Bonds
- Accommodation
- Training Curriculum
- Transportation
- Regional Currency
and continue with
- Community Investment
- SME Development
- Workforce Development
- Marketing & Transacting programs
- Commercial Air service

ED Murphy discussed the draft BOP for 2021-2022. Line items include:

Workforce Development:

- Facilitated recruitment zooms with Ontario Colleges and Universities, high schools and international training centres
- Continuation of Workforce Thrusters Strategy
- Development of course curriculums for Georgian College
- Additional research with third party experts

Marketing:

- Hyper Local Content Development
- Transacting – Cottage Country Spirit & Fuel and Fun (when safe to do so)
- Booking Widget
- Segmented Newsletter Deployment
- Preparations for Commercial Air service Winter 2022

Human Resources:

- New hire: Communications Manager. Will oversee the Marketing Coordinator and assist KM with content, package and itinerary development, operator site visits, PR and Media, lead nurturing and industry communications.

TICO:

- Package sales to begin in benchmark year
- \$5 of every package sold will be invested

Product Development:

- After the success of the Howl and the Full Moon Zoom, additional zoom events will be developed highlighting specific product offerings/knowledge including paddling, cycling, arts (live theatre and music included), wildlife experiences and photography, ATV and power sports, historical hot spots and 'introduction to the wilderness' sessions which will highlight the sustainability focus and teach first time visitors about travelling to and experiencing outdoor adventure in rural destinations.

Partnership Program:

- Marketing and communications programs
- Business development and workforce programs
- Project champions

Revenue Generation:

- Membership increase to \$50/year with funds being invested for future use
- Package sales (\$5 per package invested)

Budget:

- Overhead at 40%
- New position (Communications Coordinator/Manager)
- Monk new title: Senior Director of Tourism Regeneration
- Benchmark year for revenue generation including membership, package sales and additional funding streams to offset cost of workforce and marketing

ED Murphy will follow-up with the board at a March meeting. Financials will be reported on then (including the status of the FedNor funding and Destination Ontario partnership allocation) and deferred revenue and YTD totals. Final governance pieces will also be addressed at this meeting including assessing gaps and reviewing the board make-up, as well as board and staff training.

Murphy asked for any questions and the board discussed the value for membership with the new proposed cost of \$50 – what does that look like without being a gate keeper to program participation, business representation on the website, etc. How will this be rolled out to current program participants,

what does the model look like, and is this a good time to be seeking monetary contributions from businesses who are suffering financially?

Motion to Accept the Draft BOP as presented with slight variations to final budget

Motion: Scott Doughty
Seconded: Hilary Chambers
Discussion: n/a
Carried

Doughty asked about other organizations apart from HMAT coming forward with partnership requests. ED Murphy said there are lots of phone calls, with no written plans presented to date.

Governance Update

As time was running past the allotted timeline for the meeting, Simonett requested the governance update be slotted for the March board meeting. Pollak agreed and items 1A, 1B and 1C will be tabled for discussion in March (exact date TBD).

Motion to Meeting went in camera With ED.

Motion: Michael Simonett
Seconded: Hilary Chambers
Discussion: n/a
Carried

Motion to Meeting went in camera Without ED.

Motion: Scott Doughty
Seconded: Don MacKay
Discussion: n/a
Carried

Motion to Adjourn

Motion: Gail Burrows
Discussion: n/a
Carried