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**Explorers' Edge Board of Directors Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, September 25, 2024
Zoom**

Present: Angela Pollak, Darren Smith, Michael Martyn, Gabriela Hairabedian, Hilary Chambers, Jackie Leung

Resource: Laura Ross

Regrets: Dave Anderson, Anubandu Lakhera, James Roberts, Didier Dolivet

Staff: James Murphy, Erin Smit (taking minutes)

Call to Order and Chair Remarks: Angela Pollak called the meeting to order at 9:36am.

Conflict of Interest: n/a

Round Table

Michael Martyn – Good summer season at Festival of the Sound. Happy with revenue targets and getting caught up on financial reporting. On the whole revenues are ahead of projections and are looking at a good surplus at their year-end. Discussed moving festival dates back a week for 2025; take more advantage of tourism rush at beginning of August (putting August long weekend in the middle of the festival instead of at the end). 'Our Next Audience' plan is underway; kids concerts for young families, yoga classes at the water with live music, candlelight concerts by donation (not ticketed) – making it as easy and accessible as possible to new people; an investment in the future of the festival.

Darren Smith – Good summer overall. Another increase to minimum wage coming in the next week, effects about 61 of their employees. Challenging on the restaurant side, almost 50% increase in the last three years for servers. The pre-pandemic restaurant model may not be feasible anymore; looking at changes to how the restaurants are serviced, mentioned automation or semi automation. Discussed the LCBO strike and how that affected their sales in store. Rolling out product to private sale licensees (convenience stores and grocery stores) moving ahead now.

Gabriela Hairabedian – had a busy summer season, consistent with prior years. Mostly international travelers, domestic traveler low for her. Seeing last minute cancellations from domestic visitors, and more customers cooking themselves in their cabins instead of visiting restaurants. Concerned for the winter season as international travel is low in winter, so if domestic is down her winter may be down.

Angela Pollak – summer was on track with last year, August felt very busy and was a bit ahead of last year. Property has increased the number of tents and opportunities to purchase items on site to

increase revenue. Discussed low numbers in September; other local businesses in South Algonquin had to close down during the season due to lack of staffing or lack of business making staying open not financially feasible. Received funding to put up a workshop to launch activity programming – tourists are currently self-serve; looking to offer guided excursions, educational workshops, arts & crafts, etc. Trail Signs were installed with the RTO Partnership, and looking at improvements for their 175 Trail that is 40km long in SA. Discussed the use of commercial passes with Ontario Parks and the challenges they are facing with the current system; time devoted to problem solving, following up with guests, being compliant with the online system, ticketing of their guests, etc. Looking at running a springtime Accessibility Conference in South Algonquin.

Hilary Chambers – The Lost Fox B&B is making a comeback after COVID closure. Worst September for the resort in years with a high number of cancellations. Debt load and staffing challenges keep them very busy.

Jackie Leung – slower than normal summer for them, but fall always proves busy for them so looking forward to a busy season. Not so many cancellations, but not as many bookings as in previous years (attributes this to not marketing as much as in the past).

Approval of Agenda – September 25, 2024

Motion: Darren Smith

Seconded: Angela Pollak

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Approval of Minutes – March 20, 2024

Motion: Michael Martyn

Seconded: Darren Smith

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Murphy provided the board with a financial status five months into the fiscal year, *Income Statement & Balance Sheet Period Ending August 31, 2024*

- regarding the CIBC GIC Investment, estimated about \$6k in revenue over the course of the fiscal year
- Bridge Financing – Muskoka Community Futures, carried us through and has been repaid

Murphy enquired about the financials note memo provided to the board, all agree this is good practice before each meeting; discussed digital marketing tax, cost of doing business, mileage for travel (50 cents to 62 cents), paying for items from operators during site visits; Chambers mentioned how appreciated it is by operators that RTO pays their way when making operator visits for meetings, etc. CEO discussed our bookkeeping services looking at getting direction from a bookkeeper who understands the TPA, revenue generation financials for publically funded entities and not-for-profits, 'budget finance committee' to possibly be developed as things get more complicated with the TICO revenue generation piece.

Murphy updated the directors on the revenue side:

- Partnership Revenue: \$100,000 from various partners, including Huntsville Theatre Company, Muskoka Tourism Marketing Agency, and nine regional resorts.
- Interest Revenue: \$2,420 from a \$550,000 GIC investment, with two withdrawals for cash flow needs.
- Program Contribution: \$3,378 from Muskoka Tourism Marketing Agency for an occupancy statistics program.

Murphy continued with expenses:

Administrative & Overhead:

- Communication / Office Equipment: \$9,600 for supplies, tech maintenance, and internet.
- General Expenses: \$7,707 for shipping, subscriptions, operator engagement, and team wellness.
- Staff Travel: \$9,700 for travel-related costs (hotel, mileage, meals).
- Professional Fees: Legal fees for Carters Associated.

Industry Relations:

- Governance / Policy Consultation: \$1,022 for creative work.
- Membership: \$5,400 for memberships including TIAO and LinkedIn.
- Website: \$5,052 for platforms like Adobe and Mailchimp.

Program Development:

- Marketing: \$87,000 for campaigns with Destination Ontario, Northern Ontario, and Kuration.
- Product Development: \$20,000 for Indigenous Strategy, sustainability consultants, and software.
- Research: \$3,694 for CBRE and Kuration (Destination Canada expense pending).
- Workforce Development: \$6,798 for Lakehead University and awards.
- Partnership: \$222,896 for partner MOUs and 98 invoices.

Approval of Financials and Notes as Presented – September 25, 2024

Motion: Darren Smith

Seconded: Michael Martyn

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Murphy updated the director on the upcoming meeting schedule:

- September 25, 2024 (9.30am – 12.00pm) Board Meeting (Zoom)
- October 9, 2024 (9.30am – 10.30am) Board meeting if necessary (Zoom)
- October 18, 2024 (9.30am - 11.00am) Annual General Meeting (Zoom)
- October 29, 2024 (9.30am – 10.30am) Director Onboarding and Q&A (Zoom)
- October 29, 2024 Circulate Board Survey
- October 31, 2024 Big Applause Awards Luncheon, JW Marriott
- November 5 - 6, 2024 Explorers' Edge Tourism Summit (In Person - Windermere House Draft - Agenda)
- November 27, 2024 Planning Meeting (10.30am – 2.30pm) (In Person)
- January 9, 2025 (9.30am – 12.30pm) Board Meeting (Hybrid)

- March 26, 2025 (9.30am – 12.30pm) Board Meeting (Zoom)

TICO Readiness Analyses of Content Marketing Initiatives

Murphy discussed the objectives of the partnership with DO as part of an overall content analysis report. It was noted that Explorers' Edge in-house content generates lower bounce rate, higher engagement, and significantly higher referral traffic once users land on the content, resulting in deeper engagement with overall content on the site, and ultimately, cost efficiencies.

Learnings from participation in this partnership and its results landed with cancelling the Fall 2024 partnership; discussed goals being more than general awareness but looking for engaged audiences who interact with content in a way that moves them down the purchase funnel. Obligated to go with DO's Agency of Record, flagging the type of traffic that comes from this strategy; looking to move in different directions moving forward. Chambers asked about moving the marketing in-house; Murphy agreed this is the objective for some projects, but will continue to collaborate for certain items, for example, the partnership with DO to bring CHCH Morning Live to the region.

Murphy updated the board on the Business and Operational Plan Status, i.e. Current / In Development / Up Next

- Operator Zoom with the New Fly Fisher (August 20)
 - EE to work with Mark Melnyk and select operators to introduce fly fishing product to the region
- Product Development Surveys for low-funded/represented sub-regions (October) with in-community sessions TBC
- ATV/Trails product with What A Ride / DO
- Community of Interest Zooms – Algonquin Park, Destination Weddings, New To Canada/Introduction to Winter
- Sustainability – Positive Impact Series, Re-certification by pilot project operators, tracking of environmental impact on product offering (Rebecca Francis)
- EOI process completed late winter 2023 for Catalyst Housing project
- Candidate selected for continued discussion (Impact & Main)
- Meetings (virtual / in-person) June to September
- Design Proposal mid-September
 - Utilization of AI powered workforce hub, based on original ecosystem design for the project (online training component)
- Workforce Survey 2.0
 - Discussed the decline in International Students and how that will affect the new workforce
- Lakehead University work-integrated learning partnership
 - Special High Skills Major Programming (SHSM)
 - Organizing and delivering SHSM programming – Tourism Stream in partnership with Parks Canada to high school classes in that stream at Muskoka Lakes Secondary School and St. Dominic Catholic Secondary School in Bracebridge and Gravenhurst High School.
- Almaguin Adult Literacy Centre
- Near North District School Board

Marketing Update September 2024

- ATV/Trails Promotion with What A Ride: multi-channel promotion including YouTube
- TICO Zoom test with Algonquin Outfitters: tracking operator conversions from EE marketing while building the new “Explorers’ Edge Travel Lounge” branded OTA hub (lead nurturing) (September 10)
 - report back from AO showed people who were given the QR discount code as part of participating in the Zoom was being used; positive outcome, shows how this can be monetized for revenue generation in the future.
- Destination Weddings Zoom with Get Married in Muskoka (November)
- Add A Dash of Colour Consumer Contest Campaign (and lead nurturing): Fall 2024 including CHCH broadcast tour (launches September 16)
 - CHCH guests mentioned an interest in returning to the region to travel Algonquin Park along Hwy 60 from West to East Gate to highlight operators and product opportunities in the park
- Online Holiday Market to sell “the gift of travel” – launches mid-November
- Media list development with VOIMA Group

Murphy updated the board on the CHCH Morning Live program noting that this was part of the overall strategy, to ensure subregional areas outside of Muskoka were highlighted, as noted in the BOP Muskoka is very well funded with a DMO (offset with EE partnership program) and municipal accommodation tax organizations.

Murphy provided a quick recap on the culinary site visits:

- Maurizio's Pizzeria in Parry Sound
- Chef Henrie Bistro & Café in MacTier
- Parry Sound Area Municipal Airport’s Wings Cafe
- B. Lepage Fishery in Nobel
- Dent Bay Baking Company in Parry Sound
- Copperhead Distillery and Spirits in Sundridge
- The Pulled Smokehouse & Welcome Center Canteen in Burk’s Falls
- Riverbowl in Burk’s Fall

Murphy noted that Monk would provide a more in-depth marketing updated, Murphy noted that landing page testing was taking place in anticipation of our Regenerative Travel agency and for revenue generation.

- Explorers’ Edge Travel Lounge
- IconicCanadianResorts.com
- CanadasBestGolf.com

Murphy added that part of the overall strategy for special interest groups, attending a zoom, entering into the lead nurturing database and moving them down the purchase funnel.

Murphy touched on the TICO Readiness Report report again as part of the update noting the Destination Ontario analysis of content marketing. Murphy expanded on the Value-For-Money investment assessment coincided with EE developing innovative, strategic marketing programs to ensure the success of the company’s new travel agency initiative. Murphy continued by updating the board of the cancelled fall Destination Ontario Program – opted for a media partnership CHCH television

Looking forward Murphy update the board on the Big Applause Awards which will launch late September and cumulate with a Lunch for the winners at JW Marriott October 31, 2024

Additionally, Murphy provided the board with a short overview of the Women in Tourism Social Club Annual event at Windermere House the evening of November 5 and the Explorers' Edge Tourism Summit, Rural Product Development: Collaboration for Success (Windermere House) on November 6, 2024

- TIAO Andrew Siegwart
- Municipal Accommodation Tax Panel
- Rural Moderated Panel
- Product Development Breakouts
- Industry Partnership - Revenue & Expenses
- \$15,000.00 Summit Cost
- Ticket Purchase (Eventbrite) \$15.00 Women in Tourism & \$50.00 Day Summit
- Event Sponsorship \$5,000.00

Murphy provided the directors with a brief partnership update;

- Tall Pines Music Festival
- Huntsville Theatre Company
- Howl Photography Convention
- Black Fly Festival
- Muskoka Tourism Marketing Agency
- Photography Program
- US Fall Drive Destination Ontario Partnership
- Winter Spotlight Destination Ontario Partnership
- Commanda Museum
- Muskoka Chautauqua
- South Algonquin Business Association Trails
- Resorts of Ontario – Rendezvous Canada
- Town of Parry Sound Shuttle Program
- Muskoka Arts and Crafts
- Friends of the Muskoka Watershed
 - Maple Trees and Lab Coats
 - Peer Under the Surface Cruise
- Parry Sound Chamber of Commerce
 - Visitor Exit Survey
 - Rack Cards, Social Links, Newsletter links
 - 65 responses to date

Additional Murphy shared partnerships in development In Development:

- West Parry Sound Museum - Brand Development;
- South Algonquin Business Association – Marketing
- Venture Muskoka – Workforce Development
- French Authors Association – French Culture Development

- Gravenhurst MAT - 2sLGBTQ Market Readiness

Murphy cited that we have 26 partnerships which have racked up 88 transactions. Murphy expressed to the board that for the 2025 – 2026 planning the group could entertain focusing the partnership on product Development. Would also need to consider if the organization needs an employee who is dedicated to this, what does this look like moving forward?

Murphy provided the board with a short governance update that involved;

- Review of Governance Policies – Director Input
- Nomination Process – Circulation and Posting Director Recruitment Info Package
- Review of the board Skills Matrix
- Executive Committee
- Completion of the Financial Audit; update to come with year in review at the AGM for the board

Hairabedian mentioned an international visitor who cross country skied on the Leaf Lake Trail and said it was one of the best in the world. Asked about how this can be better promoted for this season; it is only 1km away from the East Gate so is a great asset for South Algonquin. Murphy mentioned reaching out to Ontario Trails Council (we have a membership with them), what does that look like with Ontario Northland, and how this ties in with a Product Development focus for the partnership program (possibly with Ontario Parks).

Ross provided an update; some of the key themes and topics that have been discussed at this meeting are top of mind for her as well. Trails, visitor experience, operator support for product development, etc. Looking to provide better support for industry partners; currently looking at training and workshops available to operators. Workforce is another theme, working on this for over a decade – rising cost of operating and how we continue to move forward with creative solutions as a result. Community Sport & Recreation Infrastructure Fund has gone live; fielding inquiries about this now. Discussed Minister and staffing changes at the Ministry.

Murphy noted that we have another board meeting on 9th, then meet again at 18th, then summit. Directors opted for short meetings more often rather than long ones quarterly. Monk will have marketing update on the 9th. Martyn asked for calendar links to be sent out for the dates to be held for everyone in their schedules; James agreed this will be done.

Motion to Adjourn

Motion: Darren Smith

Discussion: n/a

Carried.