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**CASE STUDY:** Building resilience through community collaboration, storytelling and putting community assets into the palm of your hand.

## The Explore South River Project



**About PARC Association:** PARC is a community not-for-profit established in 2000 to promote the development of arts, recreation and culture in the South River area. Working with community groups and municipalities the Explore South River project was led by Todd Lucier, chair of PARC Association and well-known community tourism advocate who has worked with many regional tourism organizations in Ontario over the past two decades with Tourism Cafe Canada and Northern Edge Algonquin. The Explore South River Project was a pilot project for growing a visitor economy and creating economic resilience by focusing on grassroots community engagement, building on the communities unique assets to create an inclusive vision of vitality.

### **Explore South River Vision:**

PARC and community groups, municipalities, residents, businesses co-create a thriving vision of our community highlighting our history, culture, arts, recreation, learning and entertainment.

## Explore South River Project Collaborators:



NAME	ROLE
LESLIE TAYLOR	WRITER
ROB LEARN	ALGONQUIN COFFEE - WRITER
DANIELLE MARR	NORTHERN EDGE ALGONQUIN - WRITER / COMMUNITY ASSET ID
BRIAN MAY	COMMUNITY OUTREACH
KARA MITCHELL	FORGOTTEN TRAILS: COMMUNITY OUTREACH
JAMES TOTH	CRYSTAL CAVE CANADA: INTERPRETIVE PANEL DESIGN
JENNIFER MCCOURT	DISCOVERY ROUTES: MAP DESIGN / PRODUCTION
CHRISTINA KEARNS	NATURE NATIVES GALLERY: MAP DESIGN / LOGO VOLUNTEER
GREG WATERS	STONEMOTE COTTAGE: CATERING AND EVENT SET UP
RICK JEFFERY	FORGOTTEN TRAILS - VOLUNTEER
WENDY MACRIMMON	WMAC PHOTOGRAPHY
TODD LUCIER / BOB WEAVER	PARC ASSOCIATION - VOLUNTEERS
DANIEL BRADBURY	CREATIVE ONE
SOUTH RIVER COUNCIL	MEMBER
MACHAR TOWNSHIP COUNCIL	MEMBER

Project partners included story sharing event hosts: South River Brewing, Friendly Circle Senior Centre. Funding partners included NOHFC (Ontario) and TABIA (Digital Main Street lab). The overall project vision was led by PARC Association volunteer Todd Lucier and web/app project coding was done by Creative ONE.

**The Birth of an Idea:** In 2018, an enthusiastic group of businesses and artists met to discuss the production of a “Things to Do” printed map. Upon discussing what people really wanted the project to accomplish attendees expanded the opportunity to include: identifying community assets, researching our history and telling our stories and sharing an inclusive events calendar of things to do. In 2019 a print map was created. In 2020, it was time to bring all aspects of the dreams of attendees together in the Explore South River Project to put everything into the palm of our hands.

### Project Goals:

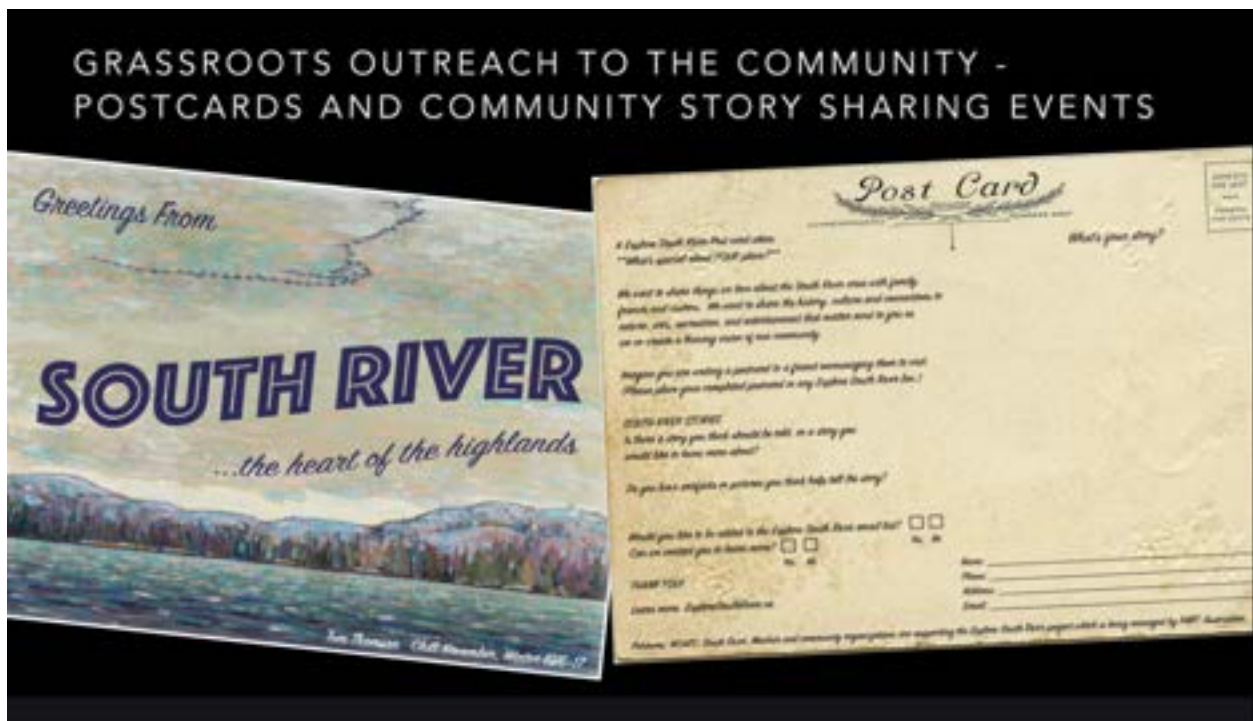
The Explore South River project was designed to inspire community exploration and discovery and to provide visitors and residents with access to a wide range of experiences from their mobile device. Handheld websites and apps have been an essential part of our lives for over a decade. Nevertheless, handheld community tourism initiatives have often missed the mark when it comes to providing a user experience that meets community, tourism operator and visitor needs. PARC Association worked with

over 30 community partners to develop an inclusive handheld digital app that includes all existing community assets as well as an inclusive events calendar of all public arts, recreation, culture, entertainment events happening in the South River area. In addition, the project brought to life community history and culture with digital and place-based stories that have been recorded as part of the analogue *Explore South River* story sharing initiative. And like any engaging tourism project, the best place to start is with our stories.

## Stories

Instead of hoisting a brand on a community and saying “Hey everyone, get behind this”, PARC began by asking the community - “**What stories matter most to you?**”

The project began by sending a postcard to every household in the postal code inviting the sharing of stories. The team placed drop boxes throughout the community to collect the story ideas written on these postcards. Then PARC and partners hosted three community story sharing events - each attracting 20-40 attendees between January and March 2020. Stories were shared and pinned to a location on a large printed community map.





Next, they hired local story writers and researchers, led by Danielle Marr to dig through community archives and meet with local historians to flesh out the community stories and design 12 interpretive story panels. The panels were installed throughout the community at locations relevant to each story.



**A Museum without Walls:** Visitors and residents are invited to explore these “Forgotten Tales” stories in the locations where the story panels are anchored. The cultural / historical significance of each story is rooted in place, so visitors are standing in the place where history happened as they learn. For example, our train station story is located across the tracks from the current station in a small park because that was the original location of the station before it was moved across the tracks to be closer to the hotels!

Distributing the panels throughout our community encourages visitors and residents to explore our rural landscape.

One unique aspect of this project was the creation of 13 story pages on the website and handheld app. These pages provide additional information and photos revealing more information about stories encountered on the “Forgotten Tails” tour of the South River area. When a visitor to one of the interpretive signs clicks on the Quick Response code featured on the sign they discover more information on the story. In the near future we will be including audio and video interviews we recorded with local historians.



#### The Wrong Side of the Tracks

The South River Train Station was originally located on the east side of the tracks, but when the Standard Chemical Company came to town, and the Village was selected as a divisional point, they needed a certain amount of flat land to build additional lines which would allow trains to turn around. So, the decision was made to move the station to the west side of the tracks near the hotel which would free up the land on the east side for the additional track needed to allow trains from the north and south to switch direction.



## The Importance of Stories

PARC Association has had a social media presence on Facebook since 2017. Since that time they have had fewer than 100 followers. Releasing news about interpretive story panels and community stories resulted in tremendous growth in followership on Facebook and Instagram was seen.

July 12, 2021 Total page Likes - 438 Total Page Followers - 499


Facebook engagement was incredibly good. The post below reached over 7500 people and garnered over 600 comments, reactions and shares demonstrating the power of local stories to inspire people.

**Explore South River**  
May 5 · 🌐

**HAPPY LANDING**

When we were trying to determine what stories we would tell for this project, the Happy Landing (which was located where the South River Brewing Co. now sits) was a no-brainer. Anyone who grew up in South River, or has memories of visiting likely has a story to tell about this legendary stop, but here's a few fun facts we dug up in the interview process!

📌 Their motto was to "build in on service" and it was a very successful business, going through no less tha... [See More](#)



**Performance for Your Post**

**7,575** People Reached

**618** Reactions, Comments & Shares 📊

<b>346</b> Like	<b>68</b> On Post	<b>278</b> On Shares
<b>52</b> Love	<b>14</b> On Post	<b>38</b> On Shares
<b>1</b> Haha	<b>0</b> On Post	<b>1</b> On Shares
<b>4</b> Wow	<b>1</b> On Post	<b>3</b> On Shares
<b>161</b> Comments	<b>35</b> On Post	<b>126</b> On Shares
<b>57</b> Shares	<b>66</b> On Post	<b>1</b> On Shares

**2,050** Post Clicks


<b>714</b> Photo Views	<b>0</b> Link Clicks 📊	<b>1,336</b> Other Clicks 📊
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**Explore South River**  
April 20 · 🌐

**CHEMICAL (RAIL)ROAD**

So many people hear "Chemical Road" and think...lck! What a terrible name! But this road holds so, so much significance to the little community of #SouthRiver. Never heard the story?

We have been working for nearly a year to collect and display some of South River's more significant and fascinating stories - right from the humble beginnings of the first settlers that called this place home. Thanks to local historians, the patient staff at the South River ... [See More](#)



**Performance for Your Post**

**2,896** People Reached

**205** Reactions, Comments & Shares 📊

<b>142</b> Like	<b>50</b> On Post	<b>92</b> On Shares
<b>10</b> Love	<b>8</b> On Post	<b>2</b> On Shares
<b>27</b> Comments	<b>13</b> On Post	<b>14</b> On Shares
<b>26</b> Shares	<b>26</b> On Post	<b>0</b> On Shares

**367** Post Clicks

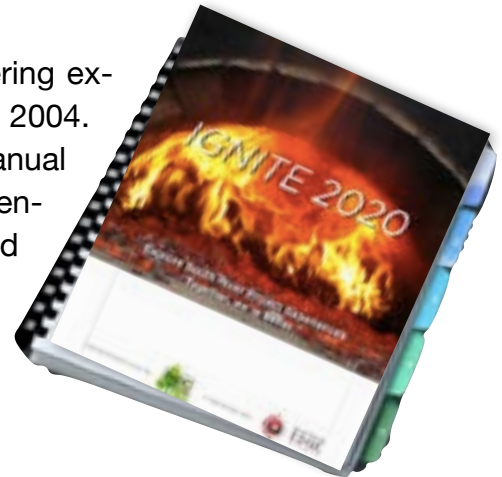
<b>68</b> Photo Views	<b>0</b> Link Clicks 📊	<b>299</b> Other Clicks 📊
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**NEGATIVE FEEDBACK**

<b>1</b> Hide Post	<b>0</b> Hide All Posts
<b>0</b> Report as Spam	<b>0</b> Un/Re Page

## Building Capacity

Todd Lucier of Northern Edge Algonquin has been offering experience design training to tourism professionals since 2004. He contributed his expertise by authoring a training manual and providing online training with five live webinar presentations to South River tourism businesses. Todd helped participants understand the opportunities available for presenting rich experiences to visitors both as part of the Explore South River project and as an Airbnb experience.



## A Brand is Born.

PARC Association moved to integrate community stories with community tourism assets (anchored in art and adventure) to create a cohesive community web presence. First they worked with Creative ONE (Huntsville, ON) to develop a brand built on the community stories and the importance of the community connections they were fostering.



The brand encourages visitors and residents to get to know the amazing people of our area. The bullseye heart, is a visualization of tree rings of a cut log (hearkening to the forestry and logging history of the area with Standard Chemical Co.). The heart illustrates the idea of a lively, cohesive, colourful, artsy community with bright purple and blue dots representing residents and visitors. Surrounded by nature the rings represent water, forest and sunlight.

PARC shared the brand with the community by producing an informative postcard explaining the brand and announcing the launch of the new website and handheld app.

## Together, We're Better: Highlighting Community Assets online

The Explore South River project began with fewer than 30 community enterprises as paying members. When COVID began to impact the small businesses located throughout our region PARC began to see significant value in the project supporting ALL CONSUMER/VISITOR facing businesses regardless of paid membership status. By showcasing an inclusive vision of our community offerings we could lead economic development in the region and be a catalyst for representing the myriad of adventure and art experiences available. Danielle Marr led the research and identification of key



community assets. PARC decided to be as inclusive as possible and included listings for both member and non-members to showcase the vibrancy of our community.

Food and accommodation as well as things to do are vital to establishing the attractiveness of any community. However, by expanding their vision of what matters most to visitors it became important to include all types of enterprises.

Typically, service industries are not seen as important players in establishing a community vision for attracting visitation or creating a vibrant community to attract business to our area. However, when we think of the era we are in, the element of CARE is essential in meeting the needs of visitors and residents.

Project focused on Exploring by categorizing each business, enterprise or community asset under one of five main categories: **Arts, Play, Stay, Savour and Care.**



By showcasing service industries including home/cottage and vehicle services, event spaces, community resources, associations and clubs, retail, service and wellness offerings visitors and residents can find everything they need in the community in the palm of their hand.

### **Collaborating to Create Grassroots Content**

**Inclusive Member Listings:** Lowering the bar for inclusion meant not asking members to create their own listing copy. Instead the team hired writers and volunteers to write listings in a friendly conversational format.

**Equality of Exposure:** Listings are randomized so there is no preference shown to any service regardless of alphabetic or subcategory listing. Each time a page is loaded, the order of listings changes.

**Safe and Approachable:** Descriptions are simple and inviting and often include the names of local small business owners, creating a small, charming, community feel.



**Highlighting Community Assets:** Artists, musicians and entertainers provide a cultural context for the region and there are enough trails to keep a visitor busy exploring for weeks! The project also made room for Airbnbs and community event spaces to be found easily so event planners can find accommodation and meeting spaces even though South River and Almaguin region don't have a major chain hotel in the region.

**Warm and Welcoming:** Our community web presence isn't advertising. We decided logos and special offers were out! Photos capture the warmth and colour of our community.

A local professional photographer was hired to take photos of businesses to give a professional look to many listings where photos were not available. PARC also produced short videos with founding members so they can share their own story in less than a minute.

**Loosened Border Restrictions:** Listings focus on things to do in and around South River. This is a loose boundary. Events happening in other small nearby Almaguin communities are included. If a visitor can explore something that is easily accessible from South River it's an asset! Enterprises beyond the municipal boundaries can be valuable assets to the community too. South River is attractive by being inclusive.

**Instant Access to Action:** The focus on the listings shifted from long text descriptions and multiple images to a minimalist / scrollable format that focuses on 6 potential micro-elements for each listing: a strong lead image, friendly title and description and up to four clickable links to engage users (click to call, visit website, get directions/map, watch video).

**Handheld First:** Doesn't it make sense if people have an app or website on their phone they might want to call or easily navigate to the place they are interested in by using their device? Click to call and instant map directions to community locations are vital.

**Dynamic:** Easily scrollable and familiar touch screen actions make using the app natural. Member listings are enhanced with a flip-card effect that can showcase additional information, story, or anecdote on the back of each listing.

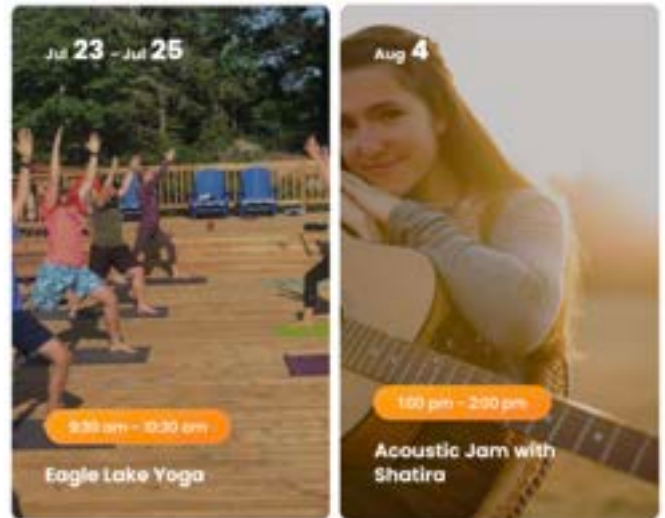


## What's Happening NOW in our Community?

**Events Listings:** PARC created an easy to edit event listing that mimics the minimalist approach taken with business/enterprise/experience listings. Each event is featured with a strong lead image and event title. Overlaying the image is the event date/time. When a user clicks on the image a full page of information is revealed with event details.

Event ticketing and sales will be possible in the future.

The platform allows for easy creation of events and the plan is to integrate all public events happening in the Explore South River area.



## Ambassadorship

When a visitor asks for directions, inquires about things to do, or wonders what's happening this weekend, the handheld app and web presence have the answers. PARC's goal is to inspire visitor-facing employees in all areas of the economy to be knowledgeable about what's happening now by having the app installed on their device. When service workers are knowledgeable, they become ambassadors.

PARC Association hired an Explore South River ambassador who is busy in summer visiting South River enterprises to let them know about the app and updating listings and creating media. As well PARC encourages visitors to download the app by distributing merchandise featuring our brand and answering visitor questions at a dedicated visitor kiosk at Crystal Cave Canada on weekends - our busiest tourism attraction in the region.



## Early Results

The following keystone metrics are representative of the project at the current time (2021). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, some project elements had limited results. The project will create significant positive impact on our community as restrictions are lifted and organizations begin to plan and host community events once again.

Measures of media coverage, and economic impact are provided as representative of the extremely positive impact of this grassroots community project.

### Media Coverage:

The Explore South River mobile website / app were featured on Almaguin Highlands Tourism radio program on Hunters Bay Radio, [TheNorthBayLocal.com](http://TheNorthBayLocal.com) and [BayToday.ca](http://BayToday.ca) news. Toronto Star: <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2021/07/29/south-river-eyeing-phone-app-as-major-promotions-tool.html>

A recent social media post resulted in a news feature on the train station and resulted in the planned restoration of a rail stop in the community when the Ontario Northland train is restarted in the mid 2020s. The new digital media presence is a driving factor in restoring the train stop in South River and beckoning visitors to the region.

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post from the page 'Explore South River', dated June 4. The post text asks for help to sign a petition and join a letter-writing campaign for a train stop in South River. It mentions excitement about passenger rail returning to Northeastern Ontario but disappointment that the region of Almaguin is being bypassed. Below the text is a photo of a small, single-story building with a gabled roof, likely a train station, next to railway tracks. At the bottom of the post is a 'Sign the Petition' button with the text 'Make South River a Train Stop on the New Northeastern Passenger...'. To the right of the post is a 'Performance for Your Post' sidebar showing 2,491 people reached, 197 reactions, comments, and shares, and 321 post clicks. The sidebar also includes a 'NEGATIVE FEEDBACK' section with options to hide the post, report as spam, hide all posts, and unlike the page.

Performance for Your Post		
<b>2,491</b> People Reached		
<b>197</b> Reactions, Comments & Shares (i)		
<b>94</b> Like	<b>14</b> On Post	<b>80</b> On Shares
<b>9</b> Love	<b>4</b> On Post	<b>5</b> On Shares
<b>1</b> Wow	<b>0</b> On Post	<b>1</b> On Shares
<b>58</b> Comments	<b>4</b> On Post	<b>54</b> On Shares
<b>35</b> Shares	<b>35</b> On Post	<b>0</b> On Shares
<b>321</b> Post Clicks		
<b>0</b> Photo Views	<b>110</b> Link Clicks (i)	<b>211</b> Other Clicks (i)
<b>NEGATIVE FEEDBACK</b>		
<b>0</b> Hide Post	<b>0</b> Hide All Posts	
<b>0</b> Report as Spam	<b>0</b> Unlike Page	
Reported stats may be delayed from what appears on posts		



<https://www.northbaynipissing.com/community-story/10413294-all-aboard-almaguin-south-river-residents-lobbying-for-train-stop/>

Over 1200 signatures were collected on the petition and news of the community initiative reached the front page of regional paper resulting in South River being included as a stop in restoration of passenger rail service to Northern Ontario.

### Economic Impact:

Measurement	Estimated Impact at Project Start	Actual Impact at Project Reporting Time
Number of businesses supported	32 current member businesses (10 accommodation and food, 15 arts entertainment recreation, 1 health care, 3 retail, 1 forestry, 1 construction, 1 service)	Over <b>100 Business Listings</b> (2 provincial parks, 13 accommodations, 5 food producers/grocers, 5 dining, 3 catering, 5 beer and spirits, 3 artisans, 11 galleries / studios, 6 entertainers, 7 guided experiences and equipment, 4 recreation, 6 wellness/health care, 3 forestry/construction, 5 personal services, 4 retail, 5 provincial/municipal services, 5 automotive/service, 2 manufacturers, 5 cottage/home services)
Number of jobs maintained	108 (6 health care, 50 accommodation and food, 22 arts entertainment recreation, 16 retail, 6 forestry, 4 construction, 4 service)	<b>285 jobs supported</b> (4 provincial parks, 24 accommodations, 12 food producers/grocers, 12 dining, 3 catering, 20 beer and spirits, 6 artisans, 15 galleries / studios, 8 entertainers, 20 guided experiences and equipment, 7 recreation, 16 wellness/health care, 15 forestry/construction, 6 personal services, 16 retail, 20 provincial/municipal services, 28 automotive/service, 40 manufacturers, 14 cottage/home services)
Number of community groups supported	4 culture and service clubs	5 culture and service clubs
Number of community group members supported	200	250



Number of members engaged in creating listings	32 members provided expanded listing information.
Number of listings created	Over 100 business and enterprise listings were created. Over 30 local activity listings including trails, public beaches, boat launches and parks were created.
Number of community events listed	Over 100 local events were created (as of summer 2022). As a result of COVID-19 limitations on social gatherings made many events not possible.
Number of app stores successfully launched to	The app is available in both Google Play and Apple app stores.
Number of Social media subscribers to Explore South River	Our social media subscriber database has more than doubled since our website/app release from 192 to over 1000 followers. Social media engagement has been remarkable.
Summary of media reports featuring the Explore South River Project	Our Explore South River project was featured on Almaguin Highlands Tourism radio program on Hunters Bay Radio, <a href="http://TheNorthBayLocal.com">TheNorthBayLocal.com</a> and <a href="http://BayToday.ca">BayToday.ca</a> news. One of our social media posts featuring our webpage story on the train station resulted in significant media coverage including a front page feature/lead story in the June 13 online and print editions of Almaguin Highlands News <a href="https://www.northbaynipissing.com/almaguinhighlands-on/">https://www.northbaynipissing.com/almaguinhighlands-on/</a>

### Try the App!

The Explore South River project was recognizing as an Ontario Tourism Resiliency Award Winner (2021) in the category of community collaboration. The project encourages other communities to learn about this project and follow in the footsteps of PARC Association to grow their visitor economies sustainably.



Learn more about community development initiatives which build visitor economy resilience. Training elements can include new experience design, partnership and collaboration, community marketing, storytelling, app and website development which are part of Northern Edge Algonquin's IGNITE tourism training for regional tourism organizations and destination marketing organizations (<https://www.northernedgealgonquin.ca/professional-development/ignite/>) Phone: 888.383.8320.

Got the App?

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

*“Together, we’re better.”*