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Explorers' Edge Board of Directors Meeting Minutes
Wednesday January 15, 2025
Zoom

Present: Gabriela Hairabedian, Sarah North-Harris, Tristan Berry, Dave Anderson, Didier Dolivet,

Resource: n/a

Regrets: Jackie Leung, Anubandu Lakhera, Darren Smith

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

Call to Order and Chair Remarks: Gabriela Hairabedian called the meeting to order at 9:38am.

Round Table

Hairabedian, Chair of Explorers' Edge, owner of Four Seasons Algonquin Cabins in South Algonquin, as well as a member of the South Algonquin Business Alliance for 6 years. Seeing a very slow winter so far, hoping bookings will pick up for February and March.

Berry, Parry Sound KOA Holiday co-owner noted winter season is unremarkable for them as a campground, busy preparing for the next season to come. Attended a conference in Texas for KOA park owners from North America. Discussed a 20% decrease in overnight campground bookings in Canada.

Dolivet, Managing Director, JW Marriott The Rosseau Muskoka property has been quiet for the first two weeks of January, looking at higher occupancy for February. Some room renovations are coming to completion to be launched in April. Sees corporate travel coming back beginning in the spring; waiting to see how elections across the border affect travel motivators for leisure and business.

North-Harris, Director of Education for Camping in Ontario remarked that this time of year is where her members are recouping and planning for next season. Planning their upcoming meetings and technology upgrades in house. Keeping a close eye on politics and how they anticipate that will affect travel. Also keeping an eye on demographics; getting creative with the way they partner around the province to share resources.

Anderson, Owner of the Island Queen in Parry Sound shared with directors that winters are fairly quiet, getting ready for the next season. Group bookings are coming in for 2025. Future is unpredictable, been running their business for 50 years, just need to be prepared for the unknown; discussed importance of being flexible and ready for anything.

Conflict of Interest: n/a

Approval of Agenda – January 15, 2025

Motion: Sarah North-Harris

Seconded: Tristan Berry

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Approval of Minutes – November 12, 2024

Motion: Dave Anderson

Seconded: Sarah North-Harris

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

BUSINESS AND OPERATIONAL PLAN STATUS AND UPDATE

CEO Murphy discussed post-regional tourism summit feedback and the survey that was dispersed to guests after the event. The mid-term report has been submitted and the third transfer payment has now been sent. James acted as a guest speaker at the Camping in Ontario sustainable training session in Niagara Falls, Monk also participated via Zoom. Launched the holiday market content in November promoting gift certificate sales for operator liquidity leading into the winter/gift giving season.

Discussed involvement in the District of Muskoka resort policy review with the District Chair and ROO ED; the RTO are not lobbyists so worked to engage Resorts of Ontario and made sure they were aware of what was going on; hosted a call with both parties involved - lots of information and context to share on that call and then handed it over to Resorts of Ontario as they are actively involved in lobbying efforts.

Both Good and Murphy attended the Destination Northern Ontario Tourism Summit. An Explorers' Edge in person planning session with the executive also took place, as well as participating in a Town of Parry Sound Economic Development meeting. Monk also met with Cliff Valley Astro Tourism via Zoom along with Ec. Dev members from the Almaguin Highlands and met with Christine Luckasavitch to discuss developing Indigenous product – Indigenous Painted Landscape.

Partnership development is also ongoing with new projects supporting Hidden Valley Highlands Ski Area, Bracebridge Fire and Ice, The Foundry – Speakeasy, JW Marriott – CP 24 and Rich Trenholm.

Q4 Project Action Items

Explorers' Edge senior staff held an executive status to define action items for the coming months; Business and Operational Plan is to be submitted for January 27th. Will participate in a reengaging meeting for Loring-Restoule on January 23; goal to plant seeds for partnership and product development opportunities off the success of an event partnership this fiscal year working with an operator who has become a champion in that sub-region. Co-creation lab product development sessions are coming up; after the March 6th session a proposal for travel to South Algonquin as well will be proposed.

Monk spoke to the five-year marketing strategy being developed with the Destination Ontario Northern Marketing Committee she will be taking part in. CEO Murphy spoke to the upcoming bridge financing requirement with lag from the province on final TPA payment. Monk will be attending Montreal Velo

show with Ontario By Bike (OBB) at the end of February; traveling with Destination Ontario. Opportunity for us to do recon; strategy to test other provincial markets, looking at Quebec. OBB also has a TICO license; intelligence gathering with their team as well opportunity to discuss their approach to packaged sales. Murphy noted upcoming deliverables in Q4

- 2025-2026 Business & Operational Plan: due January 27
- Commanda Museum / Loring-Restoule: January 23
- Co-Creation Labs for Product Development
- Almaguin Highlands - January 22, Katrine Community Centre
- Loring Restoule - February 12, Argyle Community Centre
- Parry Sound - March 6, TBD
- Destination Ontario Northern Marketing Committee Planning: January 27-28
- Town Halls: February 25-26 (Gravenhurst, Parry Sound, Burk's Falls)
- Big Applause Awards Luncheon – Muskoka Bay Club
- Bridge Financing
- Montreal Velo Show with Ontario By Bike: February 21-23
- Women In Tourism (Parry Sound) March 5
- Fishing Fam Tour organization: Ron James (Fish TV) and Pat Roach (Trailer Park Boys)
- AH Adult Literacy Centre Development: catalyst housing and training development
- Social Media/Analytics Today Webinar: Peter Coish (date TBD)
- Motorcycle Touring Content with DO (test Quebec)

FINANCIAL STATUS

Income Statement and Balance Sheet Period Ending January 8, 2025

CEO Murphy noted we are up to date with the bookkeeper and auditor; always takes a look in Q4 to see if reallocations are required.

The following budget lines were reallocated to cover organizational expenses; Professional Fees, Accounting/Legal, Transacting, & Marketing. Discussed delays in the launching and operationalization of the RTA - required TICO Training

Related to allocation Murphy noted that the following budget lines were topped up; Bank Charges, General Expenses, Staff Travel, Governance / Policy & Procedure Consultations (summit expenses), Membership, Research, Workforce Development, Wages and Salaries.

Income Statement - Revenue Update

Based on the partnership attestation, the partnership is 98% fully committed, and revenue reflects this strong commitment with the final MTCG transfer payment of \$229,621.00 has been processed. Of note, total interest earned from the GIC amounted to \$8,325.01

Income Statement - Expense Update

Travel expenses incurred associated with TIAO summit, Northern Summit, Camping in Ontario Conference, Lake Head University & Partnership Networking, supporting office expenses were also

incurred with updating equipment, meeting technology and end of year organizational expenses. In this reporting period expenses were incurred related to the Regional Tourism Summit & Big Applause Awards. Additionally with marketing, Peter Coish has been re-engaged as strategist. On the Product Development front Murphy noted that the part time Sustainability Position completed deliverables and we are now moving into the final year of GreenStep Solutions which was captured in expenses. Also incurred expenses with Destination Ontario, Skift, Canada Data Collective, & Survey Monkey

CEO Murphy asked if there were any questions or comments concerning the income statement or balance sheet. Gabriela asked about the \$229k line item; Murphy explained outstanding payments owing from partnership projects ongoing, as well as the TPA to be deposited (has been processed).

Budget & Finance Committee (being developed)

The committee will provide Financial Oversight (Ensure accurate budgeting, reporting, and compliance with regulations), Strategic Planning (Align revenue generation with sustainable community reinvestment) & Resource Allocation (Manage funds effectively and mitigate financial risks).

Motion to Accept Financials as Presented

Motion: Tristan Berry

Seconded: Gabriela

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN: “Anticipated Uncertainty”

As a preliminary discussion prior to the Business and Operational Plan presentation Monk spoke to ‘anticipated uncertainty’. Discussed potential early election, low dollar (even with retrenching from cost of living if Canadians are vacationing they are likely vacationing here – everyone will go for low lying fruit in the GTA). Opportunity for us to develop markets outside the province. We know from the Porter airline experience that Montreal is a big market; need to start focusing on that more heavily.

Monk sits on a committee of DMOs, spoke to American anglers and drop in bookings as a result of political following. Thinks Canadians will not travel to America and will stay in Canada for their vacations; also discussed international travellers potentially not wanting to travel into America either. We have an opportunity and competitive advantage with our ability to pivot and refocus quickly; content marketing and market ready product will play a key role.

Discussed changes in social media, platform fatigue, platform bans across America and Canada. Looking at a more personal approach to advertising leading to conversion; lead nurturing will be a focus for the travel agency. Discussed the investment by the provincial government into gaming in the Niagara region; will be watching this closely to ensure investment is also made into rural tourism development.

- Potential federal and provincial elections
- Low dollar (Canadians stay put /Americans may travel here)
- US Tariffs (bad for Canadian and American consumers)
- US “Canadian annexation”, chirping, etc. (Americans don’t come/Canadians stay home or go overseas)
- Other nations unstable (France, Germany, Korea, etc.)

- Potential to pick up additional overseas travellers
- Social Media changes (META, TikTok, platform fatigues etc.)
- Sustainability/DEI taking backwards step with tech bros, banks, etc. (still popular with travelers)
- Opportunity to test other Canadian markets (especially Quebec)
- DO has considered “TICO Readiness Report” and is now marketing for engagement not impressions; EE is now working more fluidly with their team
- “Personalization and engagement for conversion” is resonating marketing strategy with social media fatigue

2025-2026 BUSINESS AND OPERATIONAL PLAN OVERVIEW

Murphy presented the 2025 – 2026 Business and Operational Plan

Explorers’ Edge Strategic Focus

Vision EE is a Destination Development Organization that leads the Canadian tourism industry in regenerative development, ensuring that the region’s communities and tourism stakeholders are resilient and able to thrive long-term.

Mission EE’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.

JM discussed corporate strategy and long term development – positioning Explorers’ Edge as the leading organization for rural sector innovation and sustainability. Working to build a strong corporate brand with a primary objective of revenue generation for project innovation and sustainability.

Focus Items for fiscal 2025-2026

Regenerative Travel Agency – Business of Tourism

- Sales, Revenue, Profit, Reinvest in the Community
- Collaboration with as many operators as possible

Catalyst Housing – Work Force Development

- Pilot the development of Training Platforms – Tourism as the Catalyst. How are we nurturing the growth of individuals into a strong workforce for the future.

Product Development

- Attract Visitor, enhance the experience, boost economic impact, collaboration

Sustainability

Research and Communication

Regional Outreach

- Resource for partners (regional, provincial and federal)

Transportation

- Continuing development of Northlander, as well as looking into ground travel options with Air Canada.

Key Updates to the 2025-2026 BOP

- Revenue Generation
- Flagship Programs (Content & Vouchers)
- Operationalization of the Regenerative Travel Agency; training with TICO, marketing, piloting packages
- Continue with Community Investment including the Big Applause Awards, Tourism Summit and Women in Tourism events

BUDGET PILLARS with Allocation

Governance & Administration \$166k

Human Resources \$481k

Industry Relations – \$31k – Key items include

- Regional Tourism Summit - Development of Agenda, Partners, Theme etc. & Sales & Sponsorship
- Supporting Organizations via Membership - TIAO, Ontario by Bike, Ontario Trails, Chambers, BIA
- Corporate Website - Data Management System updates, media section, potential revenue area
- Committee & Community Meetings - In Person, regional and provincial

Marketing – 175k - Personalization and Engagement for Conversion

Monk noted this pillar requires its own separate meeting to overview each project fully. We are trying to differentiate ourselves in the marketplace with the travel agency creating tangible conversions.

Targeting communities of interest who are likely to purchase based on sustainability and on having elements of different properties and transportation available to disperse them into the region to create experiences. Discussed regions with a MAT tax and how moving into other areas without one to help level the playing field for rural operators is a point of focus. Spoke to a personalized experience; engagement on zoom, building brand loyalty, returning visitors season over season, development of a podcast. Using content as a tool to build an audience into the lead nurturing database to then test package sales with (noted core marketing continues); also discussed ‘always on content’, the ability to pivot based on environmental factors and changing travel trends.

- Marketing Regional Content 25%
- Travel Agency Marketing 37%
- Travel Agency Corporate Development 16% (Media, Website Updates, Booking Widget)
- Travel Agency Consumer Development 16% (zooms, video, photos, content, contests, incentives)
- Strategist 6%

Product Development - 60k

- Fishing: 10k (identified that this is big for west Parry Sound).

- Cycling: 10k (looking at Quebec as this market. Pop up coffee shop; a roaming personalized experience promoting the regions cycling routes to travelers).
- Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR): 10k (discussed Ontario Parks pass loans)
- Product Development Workshops Training: 9k
- Product Content: 6k
- Sustainability: 15k - Greenstep Final Year & PT Position (Rebecca Francis)

Research – 38k

- Survey Platform: 4k (Survey Monkey)
- Canada Travel Collective: 12k (Destination Canada)
- Research Programs 18k (CBRE, Skift, Environics)
- Strategist 4k

Workforce – 15k

- Big Applause Awards: 5k
- Women In Tourism: 5k
- Catalyst House - training development: 5k
- Almaguin Highlands Pilot Program Training Component

Murphy discussed the opalization of business components and its impact on Revenue Generation.

Sponsorship- Big Applause Awards & Regional Tourism Summit

Regenerative Travel Agency – Revenue Generation – Pilot Year

- Profit to be reinvested into voucher programs
- Profit to be used for organizational investments to support the community in the future

Discussed how board meetings will be held as revenue generation starts to play a role; how ministry reps are involved in these meetings now, and how that might change moving forward with earned revenue not being held to any ministry restrictions.

Partnership Allocation – Murphy discussed the approach to 2025-2026 partnerships.

Product Development – PRIORITY (50 / 50 Allocation)

- Regional Tourism Summit / Conference (50 / 50 Allocation)
- Marketing Regenerative Travel Agency (50 / 50 Allocation)
- Marketing (30 / 70 Allocation) Asset Development, Workforce & Research (Allocation TBD)
- Onboarding of Staff Position: this will be a focus for the new hire (Proposed title: Manager of Partnerships, Sales and Compliance handling partnership program oversight, obtaining their TICO license, and assisting with ministry reporting)

Risk Mitigation – briefly discussed risks associated with the organization.

- Stagnant Funding Model
- Inflation
- Turnover, Staff & Board

- Industry Role Confusion
- Consumer Decision Making Process
- Current State of the World

North-Harris made note of the history that goes into informing the distribution of funding across our pillars. Made note of the timely commitment to revenue generation; a smart focus.

Motion to approve the 2025–2026 Business and Operations Plan and the allocation of budgetary resources to align with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Gaming's strategic pillars, as presented on January 15, 2025.

Motion: Dave Anderson

Seconded: Sarah North-Harris

Discussion: n/a

Carried.

Meeting adjourned at 11:10am