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DRAFT - Board of Directors Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, October 8, 2025
Zoom

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by the Chair at 10:07 am.

Attendance

Present: Gabriela Hairabedian (Chair), Tristan Berry, Sarah North-Harris (Vice Chair), Jackie Leung, James Murphy (CEO)

Regrets: Dave Anderson, Didier Dolivet, Anubandu Lakhera, Darren Smith

Resources: Darlene Leskovar, Regional Development Advisor, Ministry Tourism, Culture and Gaming

Quorum: *Not achieved.* The meeting proceeded for discussion and information-sharing purposes only. No motions or approvals were tabled.

The meeting of the Explorers' Edge (RTO12) Board of Directors was called to order by Chair Hairabedian at 10:08 a.m. on Wednesday, October 8, 2025. In attendance were Tristan Berry, Sarah North-Harris, Jackie Leung, Darlene Leskovar (Destination Ontario liaison), and James Murphy (CEO). Regrets were received from Darren Smith, Dave Anderson, Didier Dolivet, and Anubandu Lakhera. It was noted that quorum was not achieved; therefore, no formal motions or approvals were brought forward. The meeting proceeded for discussion and information purposes only.

Murphy provided a comprehensive mid-year financial and operational update. The organization remains in a stable position midway through the fiscal year, with an ongoing audit and Annual General Meeting preparation underway. Approximately \$200,000 is currently invested in a GIC, and accounts receivable of roughly \$51,000 are being collected from partnership contributions. The Indigenous Youth Tourism Strategy, awaiting final approval of \$70,000 in funding from

FedNor, was identified as a key project under development, with \$20,000 already advanced to initiate work. Approximately \$10,000 in HR and onboarding costs have been incurred as part of ongoing staff transitions and professional support services.

In terms of staffing, Murphy reported that Jennifer Montpetit has now fully onboarded as Partnership Manager, overseeing thirty-five active partnerships across Muskoka, Parry Sound, Almaguin, and South Algonquin. The organization is preparing for Smits upcoming departure in December, with a restructured Administration and Travel Services Coordinator role to be offered to an incoming candidate, who will work from the Bracebridge office. With Smits departure the Travel Agent position was put on the back burner. Good continues in his social media and content development position, supporting communications and brand continuity.

Discussion followed regarding the Partnership Program, which continues to gain traction region-wide. Of the sixty-three inquiries received, approximately forty proposals have been reviewed and thirty-five formalized, ensuring balanced representation across all sub-regions. Projects currently being monitored for timing and completion risk include the Township of Georgian Bay wayfinding initiative, the Town of Parry Sound tourism strategy RFP, and adjustments to the Town of Huntsville MAT partnerships to better align with EE's collaborative objectives. The Board reiterated its commitment to equitable distribution and sustainable development over traditional grant-style funding.

Murphy then provided an update on product and destination development initiatives. The Indigenous Youth Tourism Entrepreneurship Strategy is progressing through its discovery phase, including the identification of thirty-five Indigenous and allied stakeholders, and a developing collaboration with Beaver Creek Institution to explore Indigenous-led design and branding elements. Work continues in the 2SLGBTQI+ tourism market through the upcoming Diva Dialogues: Unlocking Inclusive Growth in Tourism luncheon, scheduled for October 22 at Sawdust City Brewery, which will feature a panel discussion, live performance, and participation in the *Rainbow Registered* accreditation program. Workforce initiatives include the Inclusive Service Excellence Workshop with OTEC, confirmed for November 18 in Huntsville, and an SHSM partnership with Huntsville High School. Explorers' Edge has also provided support for the Women in Tourism breakfast hosted by the Muskoka Lakes Chamber of Commerce on October

23. Sustainability work continues under the guidance of Rebecca Francis, with three new businesses joining the GreenStep program, and an application submitted to the Ontario Community Environment Fund (OCEF) to advance climate adaptation and shoreline restoration pilot projects.

Marketing and communications performance remains strong. To date, the organization has invested approximately \$110,000 in marketing, of which \$58,000 was directed to in-market campaigns. Website analytics reflect over one million page views, fourteen million impressions, and approximately 750,000 unique visitors year-to-date. Fall promotional efforts have included a Globe & Mail full-page feature and a CHCH Morning Live segment showcasing Parry Sound as a destination. The upcoming State of Social Media in 2025 workshop, scheduled for October 15 at Muskoka Collective, will feature a hands-on session for operators and be recorded for future use. Directors also discussed the idea of temporary “portfolio liaisons” within the Board to enhance visibility into key organizational areas such as marketing, partnerships, and HR.

A major highlight of the meeting was the official launch of the Explorers’ Edge Regenerative Travel Agency, a milestone that transitions the organization from awareness building to direct experience sales. Two curated small-group packages are now available through Eventbrite: *Culture, Cranberries & Culinary Excellence* and *Heroes, History, Heritage & A True Taste of Muskoka*. Each experience is designed to deepen visitor connection with local stories, people, and places, while generating measurable economic benefit for host communities. Early projections indicate approximately \$4,500 in net revenue to be reinvested into investments, programming and community programs. Plans are underway to incorporate overnight accommodation links and to convene sub-regional co-creation labs in November to develop winter and 2026 product offerings.

Transportation and access opportunities were also reviewed. Murphy noted growing interest in developing winter product around Algonquin Park, particularly in South Algonquin, where limited plowing, signage, and grooming continue to constrain visitation potential. Leskovar will liaise with Ontario Parks and Destination Ontario to explore partnership options, and a Madawaska/South Algonquin Town Hall is scheduled for October 27, with hybrid participation available for ministry representatives. The Ontario Northland passenger rail service is now

anticipated for late 2026, and the FIFA 2026 World Cup was discussed as an opportunity for regional “Escape Toronto” marketing campaigns encouraging domestic travel with potential fuel card incentives.

In governance updates, James confirmed that the RTO Model Review currently being conducted by the Ministry is a routine internal assessment and not tied to the Auditor General’s audit. Director Anderson has advised of his intention to step down from the Board, and recruitment efforts are underway to identify new directors with entrepreneurial and operational backgrounds. Given the absence of quorum, all financial approvals and motions will be circulated electronically following the 2025 Regional Tourism Summit at KOA Parry Sound.

The meeting concluded at 11:57 a.m. The Chair thanked all participants for their ongoing leadership and support. The next meeting will occur following the Summit, at which time formal approvals will be completed electronically and planning for the Annual General Meeting will proceed.