



EXPLORERS' EDGE
**PARTNERSHIP
PROGRAM**

2026/2027 PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM



FEBRUARY 27, 2026
EXPLORERS' EDGE

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Explores' Edge 2025/2026 Partnership Fund Summary

The 2025/2026 Explorers' Edge Partnership Fund demonstrated the strength, relevance, and demand for collaborative tourism development across the region. This year's program was oversubscribed, receiving more than 70 applications across all funding streams resulting in 42 partnerships each aligning with Explorers' Edge's Business and Operational Plan, mission, and vision to build a sustainable, competitive, and four-season tourism destination with a regenerative approach.

The diversity and quality of funded projects highlight the vital role partnerships play in strengthening communities, enhancing visitor experiences, and supporting regional economic development. From placemaking and wayfinding to events, digital innovation, marketing, and export-ready tourism, the Partnership Fund continues to be a catalyst for meaningful, on-the-ground impact.

Investing in Placemaking, Wayfinding, and Community Identity

Several partnerships focused on improving how visitors experience and navigate communities while reinforcing local identity and pride. Projects such as Life is Sweet on Ontario Street in Burk's Falls brought vibrant placemaking to the downtown core through custom-designed banners, while wayfinding and heritage signage initiatives in Magnetawan, Georgian Bay, Parry Sound, and Loring–Restoule improved navigation, accessibility, and storytelling.

Trail enhancements and interpretive signage at the Loring Deer Yard further strengthened low-impact outdoor recreation and heritage tourism, positioning the site as a key regional asset.

Strengthening Arts, Culture, and Signature Events

Cultural tourism and community-led events remained a cornerstone of the Partnership Fund. Longstanding and emerging events alike benefited from strategic support, including the Muskoka Arts & Crafts Summer Show, the Commanda Museum Summerfest, and the Bracebridge Downtown Autumn Art Market.

Winter and shoulder-season initiatives; such as the Forest of Light in Huntsville, the Bracebridge Fire and Ice Festival, the Hidden Valley Highlands New Year's Eve celebration, and the Ontario 55+ Winter Games; demonstrate a strong commitment to year-round visitation and economic resilience.

Advancing Digital Tools, Marketing, and Storytelling

Digital readiness and storytelling were key themes throughout the program. Investments supported enhanced digital wayfinding platforms in downtown Parry Sound, expanded social media storytelling by the Loring-Restoule Business Association, and high-quality photography and videography initiatives with Muskoka Tourism and Brennan's Hill Camping & Cabins. These projects help ensure that communities and operators are better equipped to reach new audiences, tell authentic stories, and convert interest into visitation.

Supporting Sustainable, Experiential, and Export-Ready Tourism

The Partnership Fund also supported science-based and experiential tourism initiatives such as Friends of the Muskoka Watershed's educational programs, regenerative tourism storytelling with Forest & Farm, and international market development through Jayne's Luxury Rentals' participation in ILTM Cannes.

A Message from James Murphy, CEO, Explorers' Edge

“The success of the Partnership Fund reflects the power of collaboration. Tourism thrives when communities, businesses, and organizations work together toward shared goals. These partnerships demonstrate what’s possible when we invest in each other, support local leadership, and align our efforts to create stronger, more resilient destinations across the Explorers’ Edge region. By embracing a regenerative tourism approach, we ensure that our growth benefits not only visitors and businesses but also the environment, local communities, and future generations.”

James Murphy, CEO, Explorers' Edge

Explorers' Edge 2026/2027 Partnership Program

Co-Invest. Collaborate. Create Regional Impact.

Applications Open: **February 27, 2026**

Deadline: **March 27th, 2026 @ 5:00 PM**

The Explorers' Edge Partnership Program is a strategic co-investment opportunity designed to support tourism planning, marketing, product development, and the creation of bookable, high-quality visitor experiences across the region.

We will be applying the defined application intake period, allowing Explorers' Edge to review all submissions collectively and ensure funding is allocated strategically to projects that deliver the greatest regional impact.

New for 2026:

Experience Creation & Travel Co Integration

As part of the launch of the Explorers' Edge Travel Company, the 2026 Partnership Program places a strong emphasis on experience development and collaboration. Priority will be given to projects that:

- Pilot new or evolving visitor experiences
- Package or bundle experiences across multiple operators
- Test bookable products that can be incorporated into the Explorers' Edge Travel Company
- Demonstrate collaboration between businesses, operators, or communities
- Align with co-investment models that grow regional value, not just individual promotion

Successful projects may be supported not only through funding, but also through experience design guidance, testing, and potential integration opportunities. Upon completion of the partnership, a consultation with Explorers' Edge Travel Company will be coordinated to evaluate the success of the experience and explore opportunities for integration into regional sales and distribution channels.

Sustainability, Inclusivity & Accessible Experiences / Enhancements

Explorers' Edge supports Inclusivity & Accessible Experiences as a dedicated program stream. This stream aligns with projects that remove barriers to participation and create

welcoming, respectful, and accessible experiences for visitors of all abilities, backgrounds, and identities.

Funded initiatives may focus on accessible experience design, inclusive storytelling and marketing, culturally respectful partnerships, and operational practices that ensure visitors feel represented, safe, and welcome. By embedding inclusivity into experience development, this stream strengthens the region's appeal, broadens market reach, and ensures tourism growth benefits both visitors and communities.

The Explorers' Edge Partnership Program supports eco-friendly initiatives that promote responsible travel and protect the region's natural environments. Through collaboration and co-investment, the program encourages partners to integrate sustainability into visitor experiences and operations that make a positive impact on tourism in our region. Supported initiatives may include low-impact outdoor experiences, sustainable transportation, waste and energy reduction practices, and visitor education that fosters environmental stewardship or other sustainability initiatives that add value to the operator and destination. This stream aims to encourage responsible visitation, extend stays, and ensure the long-term health and resilience of the destination, working towards a regenerative model.

Sustainability Declarations

The 2026/2027 program introduces an even stronger focus on sustainability, inclusivity, and Truth and Reconciliation. As part of the application process, participants will be asked to demonstrate their commitment to these principles by referencing initiatives such as the District of Muskoka Climate Hero program, the GreenStep Sustainable Tourism 2030 Pledge, the Rainbow Registry for 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, and Indigenous-led initiatives that honor the principles of Truth and Reconciliation ([helpful links](#)) This new requirement reflects Explorers' Edge's ongoing dedication to responsible tourism development, ensuring that funded projects not only support economic growth and visitor experiences but take into consideration a comprehensive understanding of sustainability.

Applicants to the Partnership Program can also demonstrate a commitment to sustainability through consistent attendance and participation in the Tourism for Positive Impact series led by Explorers' Edge. The series is held monthly via zoom and in person. Designed for tourism professionals ready to make a difference, Tourism for Positive Impact is a collaborative learning series that combines expert guidance, peer discussion, and participant-driven exploration. Each session offers practical ideas and inspires conversation, enabling participants to shape the learning agenda and take meaningful action toward a more responsible, resilient tourism industry.

Helpful Links

- [Creating Positive Impact: Learning Series for Tourism Providers - RTO 12](#)
- [Take the Pledge | Sustainable Tourism 2030 Pledge](#)
- [Hotel Carbon Footprint Tool & Emissions Calculator](#)
- [Free Sustainability Score - GreenStep.](#)
- <https://rainbowregistered.ca/>
- <https://www.engagemuskoka.ca/climate-heroes>

Program Overview

The Explorers' Edge 2026/76 Partnership Program is a shared-delivery, co-investment initiative that matches stakeholder contributions to support projects that:

- Drive visitation and yield
- Enhance and evolve visitor experiences
- Support regenerative tourism and workforce development
- Encourage collaboration and regional storytelling
- Pilot scalable tourism products with long-term impact

Important: This program is not a grant. All projects are subject to approval through Explorers' Edge's Transfer Payment Agreement with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming, and approval by the Board of Directors and Senior Staff.

Application Intake & Review

New or evolving tourism products, particularly those supported by clear, measurable plans, will be prioritized along with sustainable practises. The Partnership Program is competitive, and demand for funding exceeds availability. We welcome applications from all eligible businesses and organizations.

Explorers' Edge wants to see businesses continue to evolve, to learn from previous projects supported by Explorers' Edge and ultimately, stand on their own, therefore Explorers' Edge may not support applications that are identical year over year.

Please note:

If partnership funds are not fully allocated during the March - April intake period, a second intake may occur in Fall 2026, and again in Winter 2027 if funding remains available.

What We Fund: Streams

Product & Experience Development. Support large-scale tourism initiatives including:

Experience Creation and Travel Company Integration | [Application Link](#)

- Pilot projects aligned with the Explorers' Edge Travel Company
- Sustainability, Inclusivity & Accessible Experiences and enhancements
- New or enhanced visitor experiences

Communication, Marketing & Advertising Campaigns | [Application Link](#)

(Limited number available and must include multiple tourism businesses)

This program stream includes Trade Shows, Direct Marketing campaigns and social media campaigns, wayfinding and signage projects:-

- Marketing & advertising includes tactics that include adwords/search, Facebook/Instagram ads, banner/display ads, radio, print (with exception, print is not a priority) etc. to promote assets/events.
- Media buys are managed by Explorers' Edge Agency of Record. Please note that these campaigns will be run through the organizations Agency of Record (for billing purposes).
- Wayfinding Signage funds are available to conduct a signage plan for installation and installation of the physical signs in the region of Explorers' Edge. Tourism signage is a critical tool for enhancing the visitor experience, supporting local economies, and managing destinations effectively. The aim of the signage is to help travelers navigate unfamiliar areas, discover attractions, and engage more deeply with the region's
- Trade Shows - Tourism operators may apply for reimbursement of up to 50% of eligible trade show booth space costs only to a maximum of \$1,750.

Image Development – Explorers’ Edge Agency of Record | [Application Link](#)

This category includes development of videos and/or imagery through Explorers’ Edge respective Agency(ies) of Record that can subsequently be used in advertising of assets/events, etc. e.g. the collateral developed may then be used in the Communications, Marketing & Advertising stream.

Please note that recruitment videos to be used in advertising for staff and videos related to sustainable tourism are also eligible within this category.

Workforce development and training | [Application Link](#)

This program stream supports initiatives that strengthen the tourism workforce across the Explorers’ Edge region by improving skills, readiness, and capacity to deliver high-quality, sustainable, and inclusive visitor experiences. Projects under this category should demonstrate clear outcomes related to workforce development and contribute to the long-term resilience of the regional tourism economy.

Eligible initiatives may include training, upskilling, and professional development programs that support tourism operators, employees, and partners in areas such as visitor experience delivery, service excellence, experience creation, digital readiness, sustainability, inclusivity, and accessibility. Priority is given to projects that support new or evolving tourism products, collaborative or multi-operator initiatives, and workforce readiness aligned with scalable, bookable experiences.

Projects should demonstrate regional or sector-wide benefit, measurable workforce outcomes, and alignment with Explorers’ Edge priorities, including regenerative tourism, inclusivity, accessibility, and long-term destination growth.

This stream is intended to support workforce capacity-building initiatives rather than ongoing operational or staffing costs.

Research and product validation | [Application Link](#)

This funding stream supports research, analysis, and testing activities that inform the development, refinement, and scalability of tourism products and experiences within the Explorers’ Edge region.

Projects under this category should generate actionable insights that reduce risk, strengthen decision-making, and support the creation of high-quality, market-ready visitor experiences.

Eligible initiatives may include market research, feasibility studies, pilot testing, visitor testing, product validation, pricing and yield analysis, audience research, and data collection initiatives that assess demand, readiness, and potential for growth.

Projects may focus on validating new or evolving tourism experiences, evaluating opportunities for collaboration or bundling, or testing products intended for future integration into regional sales and distribution channels, including Explorers' Edge Travel Company.

Projects should demonstrate clear objectives, defined methodologies, and measurable outcomes, with findings that can inform experience development, marketing, or regional tourism planning.

Priority is given to research that delivers shared value, supports collaborative or multi-operator initiatives, and contributes to long-term, sustainable destination growth rather than standalone or purely academic research.

Who Can Apply

Eligible applicants include:

- Established businesses or organizations (with all required operating permits)
 - Legally registered to operate in Ontario, with all necessary permits in place (federal, provincial, municipal), and there must be no outstanding legal issues that would affect the processing and outcomes of this project and collaboration with Explorers' Edge.
- Tourism operators (private and non-profit)
- Destination Marketing Organizations and tourism associations
- Municipalities and Indigenous communities
- Economic development offices

Applicants must:

- Located within the Explorers' Edge RTO12 region
- Demonstrate the ability to co-invest (cash match required)
- Have a current online presence and public-facing tourism offering

Partner contribution

- Be paid in cash, Canadian Dollars (provided to Explorers' Edge by EFT, INTERAC e-transfer or cheque).
- NOT be funding from other Ontario Government programs, such as Experience Ontario, or Ontario Government agencies such as Destination Ontario, the Ontario Trillium Fund, OMAFRA or other RTOs.
- Payment in full must be made within 30 days of the invoice from Explorer's Edge. Partnerships greater than \$5,000.00 will require a deposit of 10% prior to the partnership commencing. Failure to remit payment in a timely fashion may cause delays. Note that as part of the application, you will need to attest to having read the guidelines and relevant application(s), including all informational links.
- Explorers' Edge wants to see businesses continue to evolve, to learn from previous projects supported by Explorers' Edge and ultimately, stand on their own, therefore Edge may not support applications that are identical year over year.

Program Benefits

Matching Investment

Up to 50% cost-share to offset eligible partnership expenses.

Expert Guidance

Strategic support from Explorers' Edge staff and approved partners, including experience development and alignment with regional priorities.

Regional Focus

Projects must support tourism within:

- District of Muskoka
- Almaguin Highlands
- Port Loring-Restoule
- Algonquin
- South Algonquin
- District of Parry Sound

Flexible Support

Multiple funding streams supporting marketing, experience creation, workforce initiatives, and infrastructure.

Data Collection and Project Reporting

There are project-specific metrics that partners are required to commit to tracking and reporting on in the final partner report - these will be dependent on the type of project you are undertaking and your objectives. That may include but are not limited to:

- Event Attendance
- Program Outcomes
- Earned Media
- Visitation and booking data
- Visitor origin and engagement
- Workforce outcomes
- Sustainability or regenerative tourism indicators
- Anecdotal pieces from Attendees
- Visitor Exit Survey
- Website Analytics

There are also a number of broad tourism metrics we encourage you to consider tracking. As data is the backbone of good tourism planning, the metrics that are considered most useful to Explorers' Edge and/or stakeholders are elaborated during the MOU process

Project / Partner Requirements

Project Requirements

- Projects must be conducted by third parties i.e. Partnership funds cannot be used to pay or reimburse partner organizations. Third parties may include one of Explorers' Edge Agencies of Record - or a subcontractor identified through a mutually led procurement process.
- The exception to Explorers' Edge leading the procurement process is for signage projects, in which the municipality/partner procures services from a supplier in a process that aligns with the Explorers' Edge procurement requirements. Signage is the only capital expenditure that is eligible within the Partnership Program.
- If an approved project is delayed/cancelled prior to start, you must advise Explorers' Edge as soon as possible to allow other projects/stakeholders to access funds made available. Any expenses incurred prior to cancellation of a project will be your responsibility.

Partner Requirements

You must:

- Have a current website/social media page(s), phone number and email address that are regularly monitored.
- Select one representative only to act as the decision maker and liaison with Explorers' Edge and the Agency of Record or consultant assigned to the project to ensure timely and constructive execution of the project. Failure to provide timely and constructive execution may lead to project cancellation, with costs incurred to date the responsibility of the partner.
- Identify Explorers' Edge and the Province of Ontario as partners (not sponsors) with logos on website with active links back to GreatCanadianWilderness.com with logos on all printed collateral supported through the program with 'Funded in Part by the Province of Ontario' on all digital ads supported through the program and in all press releases related to the project – press releases must be approved by Explorers' Edge and include recognition of the funding from Explorers' Edge.
- Tag @GreatCanadianWilderness using #greatcanadianwilderness on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts related to the project.
- Sign up for the Explorers' Edge E-Newsletter (funding updates, announcements, etc.).

Examples of Previous Partnership

Partnership Spotlights Archives - RTO 12



**Partner Spotlight – Brennan’s Hill Camping & Cabins
– Almaguin Highlands**



**Partner Spotlight – Friends of the Muskoka
Watershed – Science-Based Tourism Experiences**



Partner Spotlight - Muskoka Marathon 2025



Partner Spotlight – Loring Deer Yard – Trail Enhancements and Interpretive Signage

Art, music & autumn magic! The Downtown Bracebridge Autumn Art Market returns September 27, featuring live performances, street art, and one-of-a-kind finds in the heart of Muskoka.

Celebrate autumn in Muskoka on Saturday, Sept 27 at the Downtown Bracebridge Autumn Art Market – a free event featuring artists, live performances, and creative discoveries.

Escape to Muskoka this September 27 for a free day of art, performance, and creativity in Downtown Bracebridge.

Partner Spotlight – Bracebridge BIA Downtown Market

Partner Spotlight – Commanda Museum – Summerfest Celebration

How to Apply

1. Review this document
2. Submit your application by **March 27, 2026 @ 5:00 PM**
3. If approved, sign a Memorandum of Understanding
4. Complete your project with approved support
5. Submit your final report within 30 days of completion and pay your portion of the financial contribution.

Key Dates

- Application Period: **February 27 - March 27, 2026 @ 5:00 PM**
- Project Completion Deadline: **March 31, 2027**
- Partner Match: Cash only (no in-kind or government stacking)

Applicants are required to contact Jennifer Montpetit, Partnership Manager in advance to confirm project eligibility and strategic alignment jennifer@explorersedge.ca

Please note: Funding is limited and competitive. Explorers' Edge reserves the right to limit the number of programs funded per stakeholder annually

Applicants should be aware that Explorers' Edge, through funding agreements with the Province is bound by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (Ontario) and that any information provided to the Province in connection with the Project or otherwise in connection with the Agreement may be subject to disclosure in accordance with that Act, as amended from time to time, and that any information provided to Explorers' Edge in connection with their application, project or agreement may be subject to disclosure in accordance with the requirements of that Act. Partners agree to permit Explorers' Edge, if required, to verify/audit information submitted (at the discretion of the Province) to ensure that it is complete and accurate, and that funds were used for purpose(s) intended.

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