



3 Taylor Road, Bracebridge, ON P1L 1S6
1-800-835-7303
Algonquin Park, Almaguin Highlands, Loring-Restoule, Muskoka,
Parry Sound & South Algonquin
www.explorersedge.ca



Draft - Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Tuesday March 24, 2026

Hybrid Meeting

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order by **Sarah North-Harris** at **10:09 a.m.**

Attendance

Present: Sarah North-Harris (Vice Chair), Darren Smith (Treasurer), Gabriela Hairabedian, Ken Schulz, Jackie Leung, Brent Ellison, Tristan Berry James Murphy (CEO)

Regrets: Didier Dolivet

Conflict of Interest

The Vice Chair reviewed conflict-of-interest expectations, with particular emphasis on future discussions regarding the Partnership Program. Board members were reminded to declare any conflicts and recuse themselves from related discussions as required. No specific conflicts were declared at the outset of the meeting.

Approval of Agenda

A motion was made to approve the agenda for the June 11, 2026 Board of Directors meeting.

Motion: Approved.

Moved by: Berry

Seconded by: Hairabedian

Carried.

Approval of Previous Minutes

To approve the minutes of the March 24, 2026 meeting.

Motion: That the minutes of February 18, 2026 be approved as presented.

Moved by: Smith

Seconded by: Ellerson

Carried.

Year End Review and Financial Update

Management reported that the 2026/27 Business and Operational Plan had been approved by the Ministry and that the first transfer payment had been received. In reviewing 2025/26, the Board heard that the year had focused on the transition of partnership administration, expanded community outreach, regenerative destination development, Indigenous youth tourism work, 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion, industry learning, brand storytelling and the initial development of the Great Canadian Wilderness travel agency. The organization also continued to strengthen relationships with municipalities, chambers, operators and Indigenous partners, while placing greater emphasis on bookable experiences, collaboration, sustainability and measurable economic benefit.

Pre-audit year-end financials were reviewed. Management advised that expenditures were approximately \$5,000 over the \$1.3 million budget, with some adjustments still anticipated through the audit, and noted the continuing effect of rising operating costs. The full year-end report and audited financial statements will be circulated to directors when available. An Annual General Meeting was anticipated for September.

Business Confidence and Tourism Funding Environment

Our strategist presented the annual Business Confidence Index, which recorded its strongest result to date and moved above a score of 50. The discussion suggested that operators were generally more stable and resilient than in previous years, although expectations for significant growth remained modest. Approximately half of respondents expected to operate below full capacity and only about 24% anticipated higher revenue. Directors discussed reduced discretionary spending, increasing fuel and logistics costs, shifts in group business, and evidence that some domestic and international travellers were choosing Canada over U.S. travel. The Board agreed that these conditions reinforced the need for Explorers' Edge to support demand generation, package sales and measurable conversion. The Index findings, landing page and podcast will be published and the related promotional-prize follow-up completed.

The discussion also turned to reduced access to government funding and employment supports for tourism businesses. Several participants described challenges with employment, training and development programs, and concern that tourism projects were receiving less support than in prior years. Management committed to follow up with the Ministry and to prepare an advocacy communication for relevant provincial representatives, including Minister Stan Cho and MPP Graydon Smith, outlining the impact of these constraints on tourism operators and workforce development.

Partnerships and Destination Development

Senior staff provided an update on the 2026/27 partnership program. Demand significantly exceeded the funds available, with approximately \$600,000 in matched-investment requests. Applications were

consolidated into approximately 33 active partner relationships, and support is being phased based on timing, need and alignment with program priorities. In some cases, contribution levels were reduced so that Explorers' Edge could support a broader group of partners while encouraging greater partner investment and less reliance on RTO funding over time. Partnership criteria now more explicitly consider Truth and Reconciliation, sustainability, 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion and alignment with organizational values, and management is increasing due diligence before agreements are finalized.

The Gravenhurst partnership was highlighted as an important pilot, having moved from agreement into operator engagement, package development, business support, asset kits, geo-fencing and visitor exit surveys. Forty-four participants attended the initial operator session and identified a need for ready-to-use social content, package examples, peer connections and visitor intelligence. Other work discussed included the Parry Sound tourism strategy, Hope Arises birch-bark canoe build, True Nature Guidance, Parry Sound Chamber visitor information initiatives, Huntsville Theatre Company, Away We Go Tours, Muskoka Marathon and other product-development opportunities that may feed into future travel-agency packages. Staff will continue direct operator and community visits, including work in South Algonquin and Parry Sound, while advancing the first Gravenhurst packages and business-support tools.

Inclusion, Indigenous Tourism and Workforce Development

The Board was advised that Explorers' Edge had completed the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce destination audit and received Rainbow Registered accreditation; Northridge Inn was also recognized. Management reported that the Indigenous youth tourism initiative had evolved toward a youth-centred approach supported by Elders and Knowledge Carriers. Twenty youth from seven high schools participated in the Pine Crest gathering, following engagement with students at Rosseau Lake College, and participants developed and presented tourism business ideas. Management emphasized that Indigenous programming and communications should remain community-led, with Explorers' Edge acting as a conduit and supporter rather than claiming ownership of the work.

The Big Applause Awards were also reviewed positively as a way to recognize tourism and hospitality excellence while bringing partners together for practical learning and visitor-intelligence presentations. Management indicated that the program would continue, with volunteer recognition identified as a possible future focus.

FlixBus and Visitor Transportation

Management reviewed the FlixBus initiative, including competitive fares, connections from Toronto and Pearson, earned-media activity and the work undertaken to locate stops at tourism-relevant businesses rather than generic roadside locations. Explorers' Edge is negotiating a reseller/ticketing agreement that would allow transportation to be incorporated directly into travel-agency packages and would provide access to load-factor information to help guide marketing. The organization is also pursuing joint marketing opportunities with FlixBus, particularly through its international consumer reach, and will develop promotional assets that operators can use in their own channels.

The Board discussed the importance of using the service for more than point-to-point transportation. Work is continuing on last-mile connections, visitor experiences associated with individual stops and packages that encourage travellers to move between communities, stay longer and spend locally. The route was viewed as a strong fit with the organization's broader goals of geographic dispersion, affordable visitor access and travel-agency conversion.

Marketing, Travel Agency and Visitor Intelligence

Our strategist outlined the shift in marketing strategy from a primary focus on inspiration and awareness toward a stronger conversion model, while continuing the organization's storytelling and stakeholder work. The Great Canadian Wilderness travel agency was positioned as a locally informed, nonprofit booking channel whose purpose is to convert existing travel consideration into bookings and reinvest value in local tourism development. Planned tactics include paid search, selected Meta and Instagram advertising, package-specific landing pages and remarketing. Measurement will increasingly focus on cost per lead, cost per conversion, booking attribution and, over time, customer lifetime value rather than impressions alone.

Management reported strong organic social performance, with approximately 146 posts between April 1 and June 10 generating about 1.8 million in reach with limited paid support. Visitor exit surveys, geo-fencing, occupancy information, travel-agency analytics and the Business Confidence Index are also being combined to create a stronger business-intelligence picture, while Tourism Tip Tuesday is being developed with chambers and BIAs as a short-form channel for frontline visitor information and local updates.

AI Trip-Planning Tool Pilot

Our strategist presented a proposed AI-enabled trip-planning pilot intended to reach high-intent travellers earlier in their planning process, provide personalized itinerary guidance and convert those users into qualified leads for the travel agency. The initial product will be web-based and mobile responsive. It will use a curated operator database together with appropriate public data sources, with human oversight during the pilot period and more detailed recommendations introduced only as the quality and reliability of the information improve.

Directors discussed operator data quality, consent, privacy, data ownership and the need for appropriate safeguards. Management advised that Explorers' Edge would retain ownership of its prospect data and that consumer consent and Canadian privacy requirements would be built into the tool. The project will be treated as a pilot rather than a full rollout, with success assessed through usage, saved trip plans, qualified leads and eventual conversions.

Strategic Planning and Digital Infrastructure

Management described 2026/27 as a transition and pilot year. Once the current travel-agency, partnership, visitor-intelligence, inclusion and technology work has produced sufficient learning, the Board and staff will develop a new three- to five-year strategic roadmap and consider the future website and digital infrastructure needed to support the increasingly integrated systems.

In Camera – Confidential Partner Conduct / Relationship Matter

Adjournment

Motion: To adjourn the meeting.

Moved by: Smith

Carried.

DRAFT