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Draft - Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Tuesday September 15, 2026

Zoom Meeting

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order by Sarah North-Harris at 10:19 a.m. after quorum was confirmed.

Attendance

Present: Sarah North-Harris (Chair), Ken Schulz, Kate Hood, Gabriela Hairabedian, Brent Ellerson, Tristan Barry, James Murphy (CEO), Jennifer Montpetit (Director, Strategic Partnerships & Development).

Regrets: Darren Smith (Treasurer), Didier Dolivet, Jackie Leung.

Conflict of Interest

The Chair invited directors to declare any conflicts of interest. No conflicts were declared at the outset of the meeting.

Approval of Agenda

A motion was made to approve the agenda for the September 15, 2026 Board of Directors meeting.

Motion: Approved.

Moved by: Hood

Seconded by: Ellerson

Carried.

Approval of Previous Minutes

To approve the minutes of the June 11, 2026 meeting.

Motion: That the minutes of June 11, 2026 be approved as circulated.

Moved by: Schulz

Seconded by: Hood

Carried.

Year-End Review and Financial Update

Management advised that the 2025/26 year-end audit had been more detailed than anticipated and had therefore taken longer to complete. The review was described as thorough, with audited statements expected imminently. Once received, the statements will be circulated to directors in advance of the September 29 Annual General Meeting and incorporated into the AGM reporting package.

Current-year bookkeeping, reconciliation and reporting continue while the new accountant is onboarded and files, processes and reporting responsibilities are transferred. Management is also implementing more structured invoice-scanning and paperless financial administration to improve consistency and monthly reporting.

The Board received a high-level review of current-year program investment. Selected major program accounts as of September 14 were approximately \$167,000 in partnerships, \$85,700 in marketing, \$40,800 in research and \$25,100 in product development. These figures were presented as program-level spending only and not as the organization's complete year-to-date financial position. Management also reviewed key suppliers and funded relationships to provide directors with greater visibility into where program dollars are being deployed.

Business Plan, Ministry and Sector Update

Management reported that the 2026/27 Business Plan remains on track. The Partnership Program is essentially fully deployed, the Great Canadian Wilderness travel agency has moved from testing into transactions, transportation partnerships are progressing beyond seasonal pilots, visitor-intelligence work is expanding, and Indigenous programming is moving into more public-facing dialogue. The 2026/27 Transfer Payment Agreement has been confirmed, while the RTO mandate, regional development areas and existing reporting framework remain unchanged.

The Board was updated on Ministry staffing transitions and broader provincial tourism leadership changes. Explorers' Edge will continue working with its Ministry contacts while participating in wider RTO collaboration. Management also reported on the September RTO leadership meeting in Toronto, where discussions focused on RTO mandate and funding, Municipal Accommodation Tax, municipal elections, sector competitiveness and the increasingly important role of tourism organizations as destination-development and economic-development partners.

Partnerships and Destination Development

Senior staff reported that the 2026/27 Partnership Program is essentially fully allocated, representing approximately \$166,984 in Explorers' Edge investment, \$184,212 in partner investment and more than \$351,000 in combined tourism activity. Current work spans municipal destination development, product and experience development, Indigenous tourism, shoulder-season campaigns, visitor maps and wayfinding, digital readiness, measurement, workforce development and cultural tourism.

The Gravenhurst partnership was highlighted as an important destination-development pilot. The \$50,000 joint initiative combines Tourism Tip Tuesday, operator engagement, Visitor Exit Surveys, geofencing, package development, e-bike product, Muskoka Bay experiences and fall, winter and early-spring opportunity development. Management described the emerging model as research, industry engagement, product, marketing, transactions and measurement, with the learnings already informing conversations with other municipalities and MAT organizations.

Work in Parry Sound was also reviewed, including tourism-strategy discussions, visitor mapping, Exit Survey integration, fall marketing, Driftscape and cultural and event tourism opportunities. Management advised that future MAT relationships may create opportunities for shared delivery or co-investment, but would also introduce staffing, financial-reporting, governance and equity considerations. Those questions will form part of the November 5 planning discussion. A midterm partnership report will be prepared for Chair review, Board circulation and Ministry submission later in the fall.

Travel Agency, Marketing and Package Sales

The Great Canadian Wilderness travel agency (TICO #50027320) is moving from experimentation toward a more disciplined conversion model. Current priorities include stronger landing pages, qualified lead generation, paid search, Meta remarketing, attribution, overnight product and transportation-enabled packages. Management noted that moving a visitor from inspiration to an actual transaction is changing how the organization approaches destination marketing and performance measurement.

Package development and testing have included the Boardwalk to Bakery e-bike experience, Muskoka Bay experiences, the Fall Colours Motorcycle Tour and transportation-linked products. Management reported the first two-night package sale and confirmed that the organization is now transacting as a travel agency. At the same time, operational capacity remains limited to roughly six or seven active packages because each package requires significant partner coordination, inventory management and TICO administration.

The Board discussed the financial model and the balance between growth and risk. Management advised that current margins are largely covering launch and administration costs and that 2026 will produce only modest earned revenue while the model is tested. Directors also discussed increasingly short booking windows. Operators on the call reported significant last-minute booking behaviour, which will require further discussion on November 5 regarding inventory-release timing and the organization's willingness to assume room-inventory risk.

FlixBus and Visitor Transportation

Management described transportation as a destination-development priority that supports visitor access, geographic dispersion, workforce and student mobility, newcomer access, overnight stays, reduced vehicle dependency and new package development. The Toronto-Muskoka-North Bay service has moved beyond its seasonal pilot toward year-round operation, Parry Sound remains connected through the Toronto-Sudbury corridor, and additional community stops are under discussion.

Explorers' Edge has executed a corporate reseller agreement with FlixBus, allowing transportation to be incorporated into travel-agency packages and creating a margin on eligible ticket sales. The relationship is also producing communications and international-market opportunities. The initial public-relations campaign generated 88 media hits, an estimated reach of 19 million and approximately \$707,000 in estimated PR value. Management also reported ongoing dialogue concerning Burk's Falls and potential First Nation stops, with a community-first approach being used before any location-specific discussion proceeds.

The wider mobility strategy continues to consider Air Canada Landline and Muskoka Airport, Ontario Northland/Northlander, Parkbus, South Algonquin event shuttles, private transportation providers and EV/Charge & Discover opportunities. Management emphasized that the intention is to complement, rather than duplicate, transportation work being led by other organizations.

Visitor Intelligence and Municipal Accommodation Tax

The Visitor Intelligence Program is intended to connect content and marketing activity to what happens after the click - including package interest, visitor movement, visitor behaviour and economic outcomes. Current tools include Visitor Exit Surveys, geofencing, QR-enabled touchpoints, Google Analytics, Google Tag Manager, package transactions, partner reporting and national tourism data sources.

The September Exit Survey sprint was active in Muskoka Lakes, Bracebridge, Gravenhurst, Huntsville and Parry Sound, with Gravenhurst and Parry Sound generating the strongest early response. Management has redirected some Meta spending toward remunerating operators that help distribute the survey through guest communications, customer databases and post-stay channels. The Board will consider whether a single regional Exit Survey, with geography identified through the survey itself, would be a more sustainable model in future.

Management also raised the longer-term opportunity for municipalities and MAT organizations to co-invest in visitor intelligence where the data provides demonstrable local value. The objective is to avoid duplicating research infrastructure while creating stronger evidence for product, marketing and destination-development decisions.

Indigenous Relationships and Reconciliation

Management reported continued progress in Indigenous relationship-building, emphasizing listening, community direction, reciprocity, cultural integrity and longer-term collaboration. The work is being approached as a learning journey rather than an Explorers' Edge-led Indigenous tourism strategy. Community dialogue is also guiding how the organization approaches transportation opportunities and future tourism-product development.

The Indigenous youth engagement initiative brought together youth and Knowledge Carriers through Rosseau Lake College, Wasauksing, Shawanaga, Wahta, YMCA Camp Pine Crest and school-board participation. A draft roadmap is being completed for Board review and may support future funding and continued youth engagement. Management also reviewed the Wiigwassi Jiimaan / birch-bark canoe partnership, including public interpretation, visitor experiences and Truth and Reconciliation programming. The project is being positioned as community-led learning and cultural continuity, with Explorers' Edge acting as a partner and supporter.

Inclusive Tourism and Workforce Development

Inclusive tourism continues to be integrated into the organization's destination-development and workforce lens. Work includes the completed destination audit, Rainbow Registered accreditation, operator engagement, Diva Dialogues, Pride-related programming and future strategic planning. A proposed Muskoka Business Week session would connect inclusion with workforce attraction, retention, entrepreneurship, leadership and stronger communities.

Staff also outlined the next phase of Women in Tourism programming. Following Know Your Worth, Tell Your Story, the organization is exploring a school-based mentorship pilot that would bring women tourism leaders into local schools for panel and small-group discussions. The intent is to move from a single event toward an ongoing workforce-development pipeline and introduce students to local tourism career pathways.

Strategic Planning, Governance and Forward Planning

Management described the organization as entering an important strategic-planning period. Research and learning now include the destination audit, Indigenous engagement, visitor intelligence, transportation pilots, MAT partnerships, Partnership Program experience, workforce programming and travel-agency testing. The Board was asked to begin considering where Explorers' Edge should lead, convene, enable and advocate - and, equally, which activities should not remain within the organization's direct scope.

Stakeholder sessions are planned for November 3 and 4 in advance of the full-day Board planning session on November 5. The November 5 session is expected to focus on what has been learned from the current Business Plan, which initiatives should scale, what requires partnership rather than ownership, and what should form the backbone of the next three- to five-year strategy. Peter Coish is expected to participate in the planning discussion, particularly around marketing evolution, conversion and attribution.

The AGM is scheduled for September 29. Management reported that three Board candidates are under consideration and asked directors to forward any additional prospective candidates promptly. Orientation of incoming directors will be completed in advance of the November planning session. Organizational-readiness work is also continuing in HR documentation, policy and procedure modernization, procurement and invoicing, AI policy, office safety, technology migration, partnership reporting and financial administration.

Priorities for the next 90 days include reconciling active partnerships, increasing Visitor Exit Survey participation, delivering Indigenous programming, advancing FlixBus and other transportation opportunities, completing the Gravenhurst mid-project reporting, convening the Regional Trails Forum, developing Muskoka Business Week programming, advancing Women in Tourism mentorship, building the 2027 package pipeline and beginning the next strategic-planning cycle.

In Camera - Governance & Stakeholder Matter

Adjournment

Motion: To adjourn the meeting.

Moved by: Hood

Carried.