



PORT COLBORNE

Subject: Tourism Strategy and Tactical Plan

To: Council

From: Corporate Services Department

Report Number: 2024-145

Meeting Date: July 9, 2024

Recommendation:

That Corporate Services Department Report 2024-145 be received.

Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to present a tourism strategy and tactical plan for Council's consideration.

Background:

Port Colborne has attracted tourists for decades, with people choosing to visit Port Colborne for the purposes of pleasure and interest. Therefore, it is not surprising that tourism has been welcomed and embraced over the years. Canal Days Marine Heritage Festival is the best example of a time during the year when travel to Port Colborne reaches its peak. Were it not for this event, as well as attractions like the beaches, trails, Marina, Museum, Roselawn Theatre, West Street, and Welland Canal, tourism in Port Colborne might not be given much thought.

The City has an existing tourism strategy from 2003 that challenged Council and staff to develop and promote tourism in order to capitalize on the numerous benefits that tourism can provide. Now that 20 years have passed, staff feel it is time to update the tourism agenda and ensure this agenda is aligned with the priorities and goals in the City's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan. The value of having a new tourism strategy is that it can be used to frame the conversation around the role that tourism plays in economic growth, social well-being, and environmental conservation. Some key considerations are as follows:

- Tourism is a tool, a resource, and an avenue — it is neither perfect nor is it a magic solution — along which the City can deliver on its five strategic pillars;
- Developing tourism in Port Colborne should focus on infrastructure improvements that enhance the lives of residents and attract tourists, instead of creating attractions or new amenities exclusively for the latter group; and
- Characterizing tourism as something that will leave residents to bear all the (economic, social, and environmental) costs overlooks the importance of sustainable tourism development.

While a passive or laissez-faire approach to tourism may sound appealing, it won't maximize Port Colborne's potential as a thriving destination. That's because leaving tourism development entirely to industry stakeholders assumes they will take action, which may not be the case. Therefore, staff recommend that the City continue to be involved in tourism development and follow the lead of municipal governments across Ontario and Canada who have adopted innovative strategies for generating visitor demand.

Discussion:

Building on the City's commitment to sustainability in its past two strategic plans, the tourism strategy also integrates it as a core concept. Two pillars from the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan that have the closest relationship to the principles built into the new tourism strategy include: welcoming, liveable, and healthy community, and economic prosperity. Prioritizing sustainability continues to allow the City to find balance between addressing the needs and wants of the local community, while also attracting tourists and satisfying their demands. In fact, the better the City becomes at improving living standards and quality of life, the more attractive Port Colborne will be as a tourism destination. A "locals-first" attitude is echoed throughout most of the tourism strategy, ensuring that no unnecessary sacrifices have to be made just because the City is taking new steps to develop its tourism industry.

The tourism coordinator will be responsible for executing the strategy, working closely with staff in other departments and divisions to capitalize on Port Colborne's strengths, address its weaknesses, and improve areas where supply (i.e., tourism product) and demand (i.e., potential visitors and tourists) can be better aligned. Without going into too much detail, the most promising opportunities outlined in the strategy include:

- A. Relationships & Collaboration** – Maintain ongoing community participation and foster collaborative partnerships to build awareness and support for tourism;

- B. Product Development** – Establish new public-private partnerships to stimulate tourism product development, accelerate the creation of unique tourism-ready experiences, enhance appeal to tourism operators, and diversify Port Colborne’s offerings in order to have more year-round tourism and economic activity;
- C. Destination Branding and Marketing** – Utilize concepts like slow tourism as a framework to position Port Colborne as a stand-alone destination with a distinct identity and brand that can be marketed to consumers considering a visit to Niagara;
- D. Budgetary Allocation** – Leverage reliable funding sources, like the Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT), to support product development, marketing activities, and data collection.
-

Internal Consultations:

A copy of the tourism strategy and tactical plan was circulated to Economic Development staff for review and comment. It was also discussed in a presentation to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT).

Financial Implications:

The tourism strategy was written by the tourism coordinator, requiring only staff time for its completion. The strategy’s tactical plan (see section 3.4 Budgetary Allocation) contains a chart that breaks down the estimated costs of implementing 14 actions. The City’s tourism operating budget, funded by revenues collected from the Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT) and transferred to Niagara’s South Coast Tourism Association (NSCTA), is adequate to accomplish most of the actions outlined in the strategy.

However, there are three action items that would require additional funding support: 1) a product development program, 2) marketing activities, and 3) a visitor data collection system. Receiving the tourism strategy at this Council meeting doesn’t commit Council to funding these three items, rather it opens the door for further discussion during the annual budget approval process. A reformed MAT program and a revised by-law, as recommended in the strategy, could provide the funding necessary to support a product development program, marketing activities, and a visitor data collection system without the use of funds from the levy.

Public Engagement:

Notification about the creation of a new tourism strategy was presented to the public on December 1, 2023, through a project page on Let's Connect Port Colborne. An 18-question survey was made available for a period of six weeks, and it was completed by 29 people. The survey, along with the opportunity to do a one-on-one interview with the tourism coordinator, was extensively promoted on social media and over direct email.

The feedback received from interviews with tourism partners was combined with the feedback from interviews that had been collected during the completion of the Cruise Destination Business Case in 2020-2021. In total, 24 interviews were conducted.

The majority of those consulted throughout the engagement process believe that tourism is a good thing for Port Colborne. The survey results indicate a good understanding of the positive economic and social benefits that tourism brings to the community. Residents involved in both tourism and non-tourism related matters tend to have concerns about what generating more visitor demand will do to change the character of Port Colborne. Concerns of this type are very common in small destinations.

Even though public engagement was conducted to develop the tourism strategy, ongoing participation and support from the community are essential to its success. Civically engaged locals, regardless of their involvement in tourism, are encouraged to work together with those who have a direct interest or commercial stake in the industry. Whether they see it or not, most locals (e.g., permanent residents, seasonal residents or second home owners, business owners and entrepreneurs, and groups or associations) are part of Port Colborne's tourism product. Their attitudes towards tourism matter.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

The initiative contained within this report supports the following pillars of the strategic plan:

- Welcoming, Livable, Healthy Community
- Economic Prosperity

Conclusion:

Given Port Colborne's growing appeal, a well-defined three to five-year roadmap is crucial for the sustainable development of the tourism industry. The strategy and tactical plan attached to this report prioritize exceptional experiences and measured growth. Understanding that large influxes of tourists are not suitable for maintaining Port

Colborne's cherished small-town character, a more appropriate goal is to seek realistic improvements that will make Port Colborne a more attractive destination for attracting new visitors and encouraging return trips.

Appendices:

- a. Tourism Strategy and Tactical Plan

Respectfully submitted,

Greg Higginbotham
Tourism & Strategic Projects Coordinator
905-228-8064
Greg.Higginbotham@portcolborne.ca

Report Approval:

All reports reviewed and approved by the Department Director and also the City Treasurer when relevant. Final review and approval by the Chief Administrative Officer.