



PORT COLBORNE

TOURISM STRATEGY AND TACTICAL PLAN

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1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this tourism strategy is to define the City of Port Colborne's role in generating visitor demand and leveraging the benefits of the tourism industry for community prosperity. Small municipalities, like Port Colborne, are keen to be champions for tourism because it can enrich social life, expand the economy, and be developed with minimum impact if planned and managed in a collaborative, cooperative, and creative manner. None of these benefits are easily realized, however, without a willingness to strive for better.

Twenty years have passed since the City had a strategy to which it could turn for direction on tourism. During that time, the City has witnessed the coming and going of many corporate strategic plans. Bringing tourism into alignment with the goals and priorities of the current strategic plan, which extends from 2023 to 2026, is very important. Therefore, this tourism strategy and its accompanying tactical plan charts a course toward a vision of becoming “a healthy and vibrant waterfront community embracing growth for future generations.”

In-depth document analysis formed the basis for the actions that should be prioritized over a three-to-five-year period. This analysis comprised a review of the 2003 “Vision 20/20: Community-based Tourism Strategy,” as well as the findings from an online survey and industry partner interviews. One thing is clear: while progress has been made, more work remains to be done.

Sometimes it can seem like, by doing this, that, and the other, tourism in Port Colborne will boom. The hardest part about building consensus for this new strategy has been deciding how to layer an abundance of ideas, hopes, and concerns—all of which were valid in their own right—into a tool that can be feasibly implemented in the medium term. For anyone who believes their suggestions were overlooked or not addressed, the conversation isn't over yet. This is a beginning and not the end.

1.1 Community Participation

There is no question about it: people visit Port Colborne. The arrival and departure of tourists over the decades has almost certainly drawn a range of reactions from the local community, such as enthusiasm, apathy, annoyance, and hostility. Tourism is known to stir up these kinds of emotions. This is often due to fears that the influx of tourists might cause unwanted changes. It is understandable for Port Colborne's residents to be cautious about tourism, and to suspect whether the goal is to grow tourism so much so that their quality of life will deteriorate. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The “us vs. them” mentality is unfortunately all too common in the tourism industry. Examples from around the world of uncontrolled mass tourism have saddled the

industry with a bad reputation for taking more than it gives back. The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. Tourism in Port Colborne should not develop in isolation from the needs and wants of the community. Scenarios in which tourists enjoy all the benefits while the community bears all the costs are neither an accurate nor a universal representation of tourism. For tourism to serve its intended purpose, it must have linkages to the community and contribute positively to residents' lives.

Moving forward, space will be opened up for continuous dialogue around differing viewpoints, managing expectations and timelines, and negotiating how to proceed given the resources available. Inclusive interactions between the City and community members, both with direct and indirect interests in tourism, will steadily build awareness of what is taking place with respect to tourism. Empowering the community to participate in overcoming obstacles with solutions will also foster a sense of harmony, thereby strengthening everyone socially and economically in the process.

→ see Tactical Plan: 3.1 Relationships & Collaboration

1.2 Quality of Place Infrastructure

Municipalities like the City of Port Colborne, tasked with providing public services primarily for residents, rely on their infrastructure to meet the basic necessities of visitors and tourists as well. The tourists' choice to pre-plan or contemplate a spontaneous visit to Port Colborne says something about the destination's attractiveness. Although this factor is not strong enough on its own to motivate travel, Port Colborne does possess positive attributes (see [Appendix A](#)) that strengthen outside perceptions, elevate its appeal, and make the small town a worthwhile place to consider visiting or returning to visit.

Based on its review of the City's 2018-2028 Economic Development Strategic Plan, the 2020-2030 Parks & Recreation Master Plan (PRMP) notes, "the importance of improving residential quality of life through community enhancement of recreational, cultural, and social opportunities as a way to attract and create additional economic activities" (p. 26). Even though infrastructure improvement projects are important for tourism, this strategy defers making any recommendations due to the significant costs associated with such projects.

As financial, human, and operational resources become available, the City of Port Colborne should look to the following (physical, recreational, and cultural) assets—as listed in the PRMP—and their effect on Port Colborne's attractiveness as a tourism destination:

- Accessibility to the waterfront, trails, parks, and at City-owned facilities for water-based and land-based activities
- Public parking, washrooms, wayfinding signage, Wi-Fi access points, and electric vehicle charging stations

Each of these items affects the quality of life for local residents and the quality of experience for visitors and tourists. Opportunities to fill gaps by increasing supply or introducing new assets are expected to be brought forward annually for Council consideration. It can only be Council who, on behalf of their constituents, provides the necessary political support and financial means to realize these opportunities.

The state of Port Colborne’s infrastructure influences its present performance and future development as a tourism destination. While the scope of infrastructure management is broad, spanning large-scale strategic initiatives and small-scale operational tasks, the ongoing involvement of tourism staff in infrastructure projects remains key. This is because any shortcomings in infrastructure will have a bearing on staff’s ability to deliver optimal economic development outcomes for Port Colborne.

→ see Tactical Plan: 3.1 Relationships & Collaboration

1.3 Public-Private Partnerships

Despite what the City has done and is doing to invest in and renew infrastructure, cooperation with the private sector must be recognized as the essential element that will gradually move the tourism needle. Several types of public-private partnerships (PPPs) exist (e.g., attraction development and diversification), and they vary in terms of involvement and risk. What most of them have in common is that the private sector expects to cover their costs and benefit from an adequate ROI (return on their investment), increased revenue or market share, or greater brand recognition. The context setting and demand generators sections of this tourism strategy delve a little deeper into the background for why PPPs could give a push to a destination like Port Colborne, which lags in its tourism development progress. Encouraging an enabling environment for PPPs can take some pressure off the City to develop the draws that will entice visitors and tourists to seek out Port Colborne.

→ see Tactical Plan: 3.2 Product Development

1.4 Funding & Data

Generally speaking, what comes between the small municipality and its desire to bolster the visitor economy is a reality that consists of limited tax sources, pressing social and environmental issues, and growing uncertainties. Having the capacity to

sustainably fund tourism, which includes implementing the actions in this strategy, can be a big challenge. Tourists' spending doesn't directly compensate governments for the costs they have incurred to generate tourist activity and attract more visitors. And yet, governments at all levels feel a sense of responsibility to be the primary source for financing the budgets of tourism programs or destination marketing organizations (DMOs; private financing and self-generated revenue sources play a complementary role).

As Council approves the City's annual capital and operating budgets, they should also determine the financial feasibility of funding this strategy's tactical plan. Using Port Colborne-specific tourism data to inform the decision-making process will be difficult, if not impossible, without the appropriate methods for data collection and analysis. Navigating around this roadblock will require having additional financial resources and fostering better information-sharing practices in order to effectively measure the tourism industry's performance and set new benchmarks for visitation.

→ see Tactical Plan: 3.3 Destination Branding & 3.4 Budgetary Allocation

2.0 Context Setting

The genesis of this new tourism strategy for the City of Port Colborne comes from the people—residents, entrepreneurs, municipal officials, City staff, and community volunteers—who have laid the foundation for the development and promotion of Port Colborne as a visitor destination. In their view, tourism's positive contributions underscore the need for a strategic, multi-year roadmap. Also, they recognize that for tourism to be taken seriously as an economic pillar, the first step must be to look inward before finding new ways to lead outward.

Tourism in Niagara has been lucrative for medium-to-large corporations and small enterprises centered around the iconic Niagara Falls and the exceptional terroir of Niagara wine country. The path to tourism development in the southern part of the region, within which the tourism product supply is notably more independent and nascent, has been less linear. The resulting picture in south Niagara leans toward small-scale tourism, where grassroots operators working in niche markets and lightly populated areas are detached from the highly commercial and fiercely competitive clusters found in Niagara's northern towns and cities.

Port Colborne and its neighbouring municipalities are closed off from the anchor attractions for which the Niagara brand is widely renowned and celebrated. Attempts at capturing a small percentage of the market—under the assumption that tourists visiting the region's most popular destinations would also be interested in visiting Port Colborne—have continually been a tactic that may or may not be

bearing fruit. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that, provided they are familiar with Port Colborne and influenced by a specific special interest, visitors who find themselves close by or in an adjacent municipality are fairly receptive to stepping into Port Colborne.

The market share and competitiveness of Port Colborne as a visitor destination can be increased by capitalizing on its strengths as a place where visitors live like the locals. Shaping this strategy document around the concept of slow tourism was rationalized as the best fit for a small town with a lifestyle that, in many ways, resembles the places embracing slow as their unique selling proposition. The slow philosophy as it relates to tourism is about a set of priorities that aim to balance sustainable growth with higher seasonal dispersal and visitor yield.

Location is both Port Colborne's greatest strength and weakness. Historically, Port Colborne has benefited from being on the Welland Canal and Lake Erie and in close proximity to the US-Canada border, large populations centres such as the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA) and Western New York (WNY), and heavily visited destinations like Niagara Falls and Niagara-on-the-Lake. On the other hand, the lack of a direct connection to Highway 406 and the 400-series provincial highway system has long burdened Port Colborne with perceptions of being "off route," "out of the way," or inconvenient to reach.

Even with its secluded status, Port Colborne has a small supply of commercial overnight accommodations within its boundary (see [Appendix B](#)) and a well-known absence of medium-size branded hotel properties. Past studies and reports have referred to this characteristic as a deterrent to attracting tourism investment and capitalizing on market sectors like sport and wellness, festivals and events, and business (or MC&IT – meetings, conventions, and incentive travel) tourism.

The differentiating features that set Port Colborne apart from other destinations in Niagara and Ontario are fundamentally geographic in nature: location, landscape, and scale. Depending on the visitor's reason for coming to Port Colborne, which may prompt either the need or the want to stay overnight in non-commercial or commercial accommodations, the average length of stay is short. This observation—reflected in regional statistics, with 62% (2019) and 66% (2021) of annual visitors being same-day—doesn't consider the seasonal and short-term rental markets that spike in Port Colborne during the peak season (i.e., July through September).

Small towns on the Great Lakes are plentiful in Ontario. From this perspective, Port Colborne has its work cut out if it aims to out-position the competition. The solution won't be found in skillful marketing or award-winning advertising campaigns. Two bodies of water intersect in one place, making the Welland Canal a major point of interest for Port Colborne. Yet, this man-made marvel seems to fall short of being

anything other than a spectacular sight to see. Fresh ideas and strokes of creativity are needed to bring out aspects of the canal that go beyond superficial stop-and-look interactions. Otherwise, its appeal becomes short-lived and out-of-touch with the emotional connection that visitors today are searching for.

2.1 Demand Generators

One can argue that engaging in a single activity or multiple activities is the reason why a visit to Port Colborne would be compelling. Tourists possess an intrinsic desire to travel for the purposes of experiencing a place that they find attractive. During the consideration phase of the intent-to-travel process, it is crucial for tourists to perceive the destination as offering a diverse mix of activities to satisfy their interests, needs or desires (e.g., personal, social, cultural, educational, etc.). The motivation to embark on the journey often arises from a quest for fulfilment that can't be satisfied within the home environment.

The primary draws that have been known to pull people away from their homes for a half or full-day visit to Port Colborne represent, in no particular order, the following:

- Participating in water-based activities^A
- Visiting family, friends or relatives^B
- Cycling^B
- Attending Canal Days Marine Heritage Festival

A: May include going to the beach and swimming, boating and sailing, fishing, boarding and surfing, water or jet skiing, kayaking and canoeing, scuba diving or snorkeling, etc. on Lake Erie and/or Welland Canal

B: May also include water-based activities and land-based activities like ship watching, dining, shopping, entertainment, arts, culture, heritage, and other recreational pursuits (e.g., sport, golfing, hiking, walking, etc.)

Note: It is assumed that at least a part of the visiting family, friends or relatives (VFFR) experience is taking place at a private home, cottage, or seasonal trailer located in Port Colborne. With the exception of the VFFR draw, Port Colborne's other primary draws are mainly seasonal.

To put it plainly, not every asset in a destination exerts the kind of pull factor that would entice potential visitors to travel and experience it. This highlights the significance of the interplay between demand and supply, particularly the availability of supply (see [Appendix C](#); note that a good portion of Port Colborne's

supply is managed or operated by the City). Notwithstanding the number of water-based activities that can be pursued along Port Colborne's waterfront, visitors usually provide their own means (e.g., boat, canoe, kayak, paddleboard, or jet ski) of participation. The same holds true for certain land-based activities, such as cycling.

The biggest barrier to advancing Port Colborne's tourism industry has been an inability to organize its existing supply to be market ready for visitor consumption in pre-organized or self-guided formats. On the whole, tours are either sparsely accessible or entirely nonexistent. The City's shortfall in this space was repeatedly mentioned in the 2018-2028 Economic Development Strategic Plan, which pointed to Port Colborne's "disconnected" and "fragmented" tourism assets that aren't cohesively linked together. Furthermore, the City's previous tourism strategy from 2003 notes a "lack of depth and breadth...[and] critical mass of tourism products" to sustain an adequate length of stay.

Port Colborne is well-suited for off-the-beaten-path discovery and adventure, hence its label as "a hidden gem." However, the destination doesn't measure up in providing thematic packages or diverse itineraries featuring compatible forms of activity from which potential visitors can freely choose. Overnight tourists, and same-day visitors to some extent, tend to be more plan-oriented than spontaneous. They are quite sophisticated in wanting to know what they can do, when they can do it, where it is happening, and how (or with whom) it is going to happen. The failure to deliver in this aspect oftentimes results in missed opportunities to maximize spending and increase length of stay.

2.2 Slow Tourism

In a departure from conventional tourism strategies that call for numerous tourism niches to be developed, slow tourism was singled out as an overarching concept that can be used to shift Port Colborne into a stand-alone destination with a distinct identity. Originating in Italy's slow food and slow city movements, this notion of tourism as travel with mindful intention is focused on consumer markets that prefer the uniqueness of places with a variety of leisure environments and a welcoming community of residents.

Defined more by what it isn't than what it is, slow tourism doesn't put tourists into a box, as if they engage in particular types of travel that are completely different from general travel patterns. Rather, it refers to mature, well-travelled consumers who seek out experiences to decelerate from "their quick-paced, hectic everyday life"¹ by expressing the important values that a slow pace provides. Additionally, this consumer group is driven by a single activity or a series of activities² that allow them to make meaningful connections with the destination's people and culture.

Key Characteristics of Slow Tourism³

- Taking time to journey to and visit the destination
- Minimizing environmental impacts and reducing carbon footprint
- Seeking escape and detachment, rest and relaxation or revitalization, self-reflection and enrichment or fulfillment, novelty, discovery and learning, social interaction, engagement and reconnection
- Conserving the locals' quality of life by enjoying the moments spent connecting with the local people and culture
- Consuming authentic, quality products and supporting local businesses
- Respecting natural, historical, and cultural resources by immersing oneself into the local landscape

¹ Husemann, K. C., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2019). Consumer deceleration. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 45(6), 1142-1163.

² Oh, H., Assaf, A. G., & Baloglu, S. (2016). Motivations and goals of slow tourism. *Journal of Travel Research*, 55(2), 205-219.

³ Bulleted list compiled from various sources of tourism research (see **References**)

Port Colborne has many qualities that could appeal to consumers who have the flexibility to travel short distances for an experience of not just the small town's scenic waterfront but also the handful of activities on offer. As special as these qualities may be, slow tourism in Port Colborne will struggle to unlock its full potential unless the following areas of weakness are addressed.

1. Insufficient quantity of tourism-ready experiences
2. Disjointed and poorly packaged tourism products
3. Limited number of tourism products that reflect a unique experience
4. Dearth of tourism operators and new public-private partnerships
5. Stagnant levels of tourism product development
6. Over-reliance on seasonal tourism

Until such a time when Port Colborne is successfully thriving in one or more tourism niches—whether that be cycling tourism, heritage tourism, cultural tourism or nature-based tourism—slow tourism holds promise as a guiding framework for overcoming such weaknesses and giving Port Colborne, comparatively speaking, an advantage. Although not a silver bullet, it can help encapsulate the destination's varied offerings and, with well-crafted messaging, promote them in a standout way.

Recognizing its power to persuade, serious attention must be given to engineering a distinct identity for Port Colborne that can live in the minds of potential visitors. Anything seen to be out of character will likely cause confusion, come across as generic, or give the impression that Port Colborne is pretending to be something it

isn't. Perception is a subjective reality, a product of the mind as it tries to take in the destination's physical and abstract attributes against a frame of reference that includes other destinations. In practice, honing in on this identity and articulating it are sure to be challenging endeavours. That's because Port Colborne is not always and forever the same. Its identity is a living entity that will inevitably bend and mould to the shape of the changes taking place now and in the future.

3.0 Tactical Plan

Achieving the City of Port Colborne's desired results involves taking a realistic approach to what can be done over three to five years. Just like there is no one-size-fits-all formula for developing tourism, there is no end to the work of leveraging best practices and innovations in tourism marketing and management to improve the status quo. It is an iterative process that implies continually reviewing and refining every output on account of its contribution to the bigger picture. The City's tourism coordinator will be accountable for the strategy's execution according to the general timelines that have been assigned to each action.

3.1 Relationships and Collaboration

If it is true that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, then the success of this tourism strategy requires collective ownership. Building synergies between all the destination-wide partners—those who embody touchpoints for visitors and tourists, including the tourism coordinator, other staff at the City doing front-line work, tourism and non-tourism businesses, community and special interest groups, and local residents not affiliated with a group—will be the basis on which prosperity emerges. Only when everyone views their roles through a tourism lens, or sees themselves as links on the same chain, can more be accomplished.

The tourism coordinator should be tasked with actively representing the interests of Port Colborne's tourism industry at the federal, provincial, and local levels. This responsibility includes maintaining strong ties to the Tourism Partnership of Niagara (TPN), the regional tourism organization (RTO). Furthermore, partnering with Port Colborne's business improvement areas (BIAs) and Chamber of Commerce, as well as organizations like the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority and the Niagara Aspiring Global Geopark, can lead to shared time and expertise, an extended supporter network, and the prospect of an elevated reach via co-marketing initiatives or joint projects.

RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLABORATION			
Item	Action	Timeline	Goal

1.1	Develop and implement processes for cross-functional and cross-departmental collaboration to ensure tourism considerations are always kept in mind	Year 1	To align the actions in this strategy with the operation of City-owned tourism assets or attractions by sharing information, keeping open lines of communication, and minimizing duplication
1.2	Facilitate mutually beneficial partnerships that address needs, fill gaps, and stimulate market demand	Years 1 through 5	To explore opportunities to remove the barriers blocking growth in visitation and yield
1.3	Advocate for mutual cooperation between the region's tourism destinations	Years 1 through 5	To cross-promote complementary tourism experiences, disperse and relay visitors across Niagara, and extend overall length of stay
1.4	Host an annual tourism forum and co-host training workshops bi-annually or quarterly on tourism-related topics like service quality and staffing, product development, and certification programs	Years 2 through 5	To create dialogue and positive solutions in support of Port Colborne's tourism development aspirations To improve perceptions of tourism in the community and work toward continued alignment with resident expectations
1.5	Run a resident ambassador program and engagement campaign	Years 2 through 5	To instill pride and an eagerness to share their town with visitors—including visiting family, friends, and relatives

A Note on Destination Management & Visitor Services

All of the elements that make Port Colborne an attractive place to live, visit, and invest must be managed over the long-term and integrated with the underpinnings of this tourism strategy. Visitors have high expectations, and in a perfect world these expectations would be met, if not exceeded, every single time. As this strategy draws near the five-year mark, it would be wise for the City to begin shifting its focus toward destination management.

In general, destinations are multifaceted places with a wide range of businesses and operators. These entities not only have needs of their own, but they also cater to visitors with varying standards of service quality. By exercising some oversight over Port Colborne's tourism partners, the City can position itself to have better control over the quality of the visitor experience. Just to be clear, this doesn't imply that City staff will be micro-managing every aspect of the service environment until it becomes standardized across the board. Rather, the objective is to promote the consistency of service delivery and preserve the integrity of everyone working hard to advance Port Colborne's tourism industry.

The bricks-and-mortar visitor information centre (VIC) model that the City operated for many years is arguably due for a transition to something which has more of an ability to intercept visitors and tourists while they are in the destination. In the context of delivering cost-intensive services vis-à-vis the rapidly expanding use of digital devices for on-demand and real-time access to information, there is a case to be made for adapting the familiar VIC model into a dynamic omnichannel network. Optimizing this network to be responsive to the search behaviours, habits, and preferences of a broad spectrum of demographic groups is key.

The transition away from a VIC will require the commitment of visitor-facing partners throughout Port Colborne to collaborate on a holistic service delivery approach. A lengthy period of trial and error is expected to occur until the right systems and balances are found. Not all changes will involve replacing traditional tactics with modern methods, nor will there be demands for partners to quickly respond to an everchanging marketplace. To be as agile as possible, information tools and resources must be coordinated to come from a unified source or central hub that can be conveniently and reliably accessed in high contact locations.

This is as opportune a time as any to recalibrate what is happening on the ground in Port Colborne. Even in an era of technological disruption and evolving consumer behaviour, local knowledge still holds relevance. If anything, encouraging a culture of knowledge sharing is more vital than ever. Seeing as tourism is a reputation-dependent industry, and that the effects of negative word-of-mouth could erode all the good work being done in Port Colborne, a willingness to share will go a long way in shaping visitor satisfaction. That's the payoff for being on the same team. Without teamwork, mutually beneficial outcomes will be all but impossible.

3.2 Product Development

Port Colborne is relatively well-rounded in its base of seasonal tourism assets, covering several themes centred around recreation, culture, and heritage. This variety captures the quiet energy that the small town has harnessed to entice new visitors and keep familiar ones coming back. Accessible waterfront lands—notably, Nickel Beach, Sugarloaf Marina, and downtown Port Colborne—are undoubtedly the clusters where visitor activity is at its highest. Even though tourism in these areas has gradually improved over time, it still pushes ahead at a lagging pace. Any number of causes could be to blame for this lack of movement. However which way the circumstances are viewed, they mustn't distract from what is clearly a shortage of tourism operators.

As tempting as it may be to capitalize on the bevy of opportunities that the tourism industry presents, in Port Colborne's case, there is some catching up to do. Fostering an entrepreneurial climate that allows the private sector to access and utilize Lake Erie and the Welland Canal for water-based activities is quite possibly the biggest gap of all (see [Appendix D](#)). The addition of Splashtown's inflatable water park to Nickel Beach serves as a good example of what happens when entrepreneurs are given the license to flourish. This kind of originality breaks inertia and it also steers clear of the copycat trap befalling many destinations.

Instead of letting market forces decide the rate at which Port Colborne matures as a visitor destination, the City has to accept more responsibility for stimulating investment and encouraging greater participation from the private sector. The building blocks to a City-led product development program start with research and analysis. This is unquestionably the best approach for identifying the types of product that reflect both what the market wants and what won't be replicated in nearby destinations. Here, the imperative for differentiation can't be overstated.

Demand for niche or special interest tourism products is about as high as it has ever been, perhaps due to the increasing substitutability of most destinations. To gain a superior market position over others, or merely to stay competitive, destinations offer as much choice as possible by supplying a vast abundance of products and services. Having said that, this does not necessarily mean destinations are aiming to provide something for everyone. The stakes are simply too high for successful destinations to ignore the threats posed by not standing out from the crowd.

Guiding entrepreneurs toward establishing niche tourism products that cater to new, emerging, and different market segments is a bold and risky move. It takes a great deal of creativity and innovative thinking to supply Port Colborne with tourism products that either reinvent existing assets or introduce entirely new assets which wouldn't be easy to imitate. To this end, the product development program should

have a funding component to incentivize the creation of offerings and experiences that differentiate Port Colborne from the closest destinations in its competitive set.

Product areas to avoid would be those tourism niches which, regionally speaking, are so built up that trying to go head-to-head with the dominant players is likely to end in disappointment. For instance, culinary or food tourism is one obvious area. Unfortunately, there is no magic formula to developing a one-of-a-kind product that matches market preferences and trends. All product development opportunities should look to market intelligence and sound research to determine feasibility, and the City has a part to play in adhering to some basic principles (e.g., competitive differentiation, unique selling proposition, positioning, scale, impact, sustainability, and community and tourism partner support) to ensure the product proposal conforms with this tourism strategy.

Similar to community improvement plans or CIPs, product development programs make financial incentives available to co-invest in private sector entrepreneurship and expand the destination’s tourism product range. The City’s ability to attract outside investment relies on the availability of not only capital but also other factors such as land, labour, and infrastructure. Integrating prerequisites like supportive policy and regulatory frameworks, robust branding and marketing practices, a good base of local tourism attractions, and indicators of movement toward rising visitor demand are equally crucial. What it comes down to is that Port Colborne must inspire confidence. Otherwise, the private sector has no qualms about taking their business to places where the conditions for scalable growth look more promising.

Proactive intervention is one of the few strategies at the City’s disposal to help boost its attractiveness. No amount of marketing will be able to disguise the shortcomings of Port Colborne’s insufficient critical mass of things to see and do. By coming to terms with this reality, as well as the notion that the bulk of tourism development should be undertaken by the private sector, the likelihood of realizing triple bottom line (i.e., economic, social, and environmental) returns for both resident and visitor populations increases exponentially. Then, as the popularity of its products grows, Port Colborne may finally find itself on the path to enjoying higher tourist yield, visitation that stretches into the off-peak or shoulder seasons, and a medium-size branded hotel or larger quantity of commercial accommodations.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT			
Item	Action	Timeline	Goal
2.1	Introduce a program with funding to support experiential product development	Years 2 through 5	To bolster Port Colborne’s portfolio of tourism products and achieve differentiation

3.3 Destination Branding and Marketing

Dipping in and out of the promotional and advertising space over the years, Port Colborne’s market presence has been inconsistent and weak. What is needed is a tourism brand—separate from the City’s brand and symbolizing the essence of the Port Colborne lifestyle—that corrects the course and generates awareness and recognition in selected target markets. While the “Niagara’s South Coast” brand is an acceptable starting point, it must be further unpacked and more fully fleshed out in order to gain momentum.

Beyond a logo and slogan, a strong destination brand communicates the types of experiences available to tourists through curated images, visual designs, and verbiage expressing the destination’s personality traits. The messaging conveyed in visual and verbal representations should come to life in a form that cuts through with authentic originality. That way, the brand stays true to its values and doesn’t make promises it can’t deliver. Once the core elements of the brand are in place, a set of step-by-step processes must be followed to strategize for future marketing action.

An annual marketing plan would lay the groundwork and the stepping stones necessary to achieve Port Colborne’s short and long-term goals. The implementation of this plan, encompassing integrated marketing communications such as digital and traditional advertising, public relations, publicity, sales and promotions, and merchandising, along with year-long monitoring and a year-end performance review, will be essential for evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of the funds invested.

DESTINATION BRANDING AND MARKETING			
Item	Action	Timeline	Goal
3.1	Develop the Niagara’s South Coast brand identity through a toolkit or playbook	Years 1 through 2	To communicate the brand story and build a base of support and enthusiasm within the resident and business communities
3.2	Develop an annual destination marketing plan with campaigns targeting the Port Colborne community, Niagara residents, and the high-yield drive market	Years 1 through 5	To enhance awareness and influence consumers at the intent and consideration phases of their path to purchase

3.3	Create engaging itinerary-based print materials and optimize them to be digital tools that can be accessed across multiple channels	Years 1 through 5	To inform or educate and inspire action to extend length of stay or increase spending activity
3.4	Continue developing written and visual assets in alignment with the marketing plan	Years 1 through 5	To grow a library of content to serve to target audiences
3.5	Collect visitor data from mobile phones or devices through surveys and/or analytics services in order to understand Port Colborne’s existing visitor markets	Years 2 through 5	To produce and analyze current data that can be used to benchmark performance and guide decision-making

3.4 Budgetary Allocation

Having the financial structure to support this tourism strategy is in a lot of ways the difference-maker. The situation is complicated by the fact that the City of Port Colborne’s budgets and funding allocations can fluctuate from year to year due to external factors and internal decisions around maintaining and improving the delivery of municipal services. Consistent and reliable funding for tourism, not exclusively but especially in small municipalities, is the exception and not the rule.

Fortunately, the City has doubled-down on its commitment to tourism by having a dedicated staff person and by implementing the provincially legislated transient accommodation tax, better known as the Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT). Even though there are other funding sources available outside of the MAT—for example, grants from federal and provincial governments as well as the RTO, revenues from marketing, events, and membership fees or dues—these traditional funding mechanisms are volatile and susceptible to fluctuations.

Every action item in this tourism strategy has been given an estimated cost in order to verify the viability of moving forward. With the exception of two items that are one-time investments in branding and marketing plan development, the majority of them can be adequately funded by the City’s tourism operating budget—which is transferred annually to Niagara’s South Coast Tourism Association (NSCTA). In addition, it is incumbent upon the City to sustain the NSCTA. This is because, owing to its status as a not-for-profit destination marketing organization (DMO), it can access financial resources and form strategic partnerships with greater flexibility than the City.

Making do with the current tourism operating budget will restrict the City from deploying the tactics and campaigns that would be laid out in an annual marketing plan, and it surely won't allow for a product development program to get off the ground. The same barrier also applies to utilizing data collection methods to measure progress and gauge whether the goals in this strategy are actually being met. If the City isn't adding value by taking these specific actions, it becomes significantly more difficult for the City to be seen as delivering any kind of real value with respect to tourism. On a positive note, though a budgetary gap exists, there is a positive outlook. City staff have already begun transitioning to funding mechanisms, such as the MAT, to lessen dependence on the tax levy.

BUDGETARY ALLOCATION			
Item	Action	Timeline	Goal
4.1	Augment application of the MAT by casting a wider net	Years 1 through 5	To have a stable funding source for tourism marketing communications, product development, and data collection

ACTION PLAN – ESTIMATED COSTS			
Item	Action	One-Time Cost	Annual Cost
1.1	Develop and implement collaborative processes	—	N/O
1.2	Facilitate mutually beneficial partnerships	—	N/O
1.3	Advocate for mutual cooperation between the region's tourism destinations	—	N/O
1.4	Host an annual tourism forum and co-host bi-annually or quarterly training workshops	—	N/O
1.5	Run a resident ambassador program and engagement campaign	—	0
2.1	Product development program	0	\$25,000*
3.1	Develop the Niagara's South Coast brand identity	0/\$\$*	—
3.2	Develop an annual destination marketing plan	0/\$\$\$*	0
3.3	Create engaging multi-channel itinerary-based materials	—	0
3.4	Continue developing written and visual assets in alignment with the marketing plan	—	0

3.5	Collect visitor data	—	\$\$\$*
4.1	Augment application of the MAT	—	O
A	Staff – Tourism Coordinator	—	O
B	Deployment of marketing plan	—	\$50,000*
Totals		\$35,000	\$82,500
N – Nominal		\$\$ – \$5,000-\$9,999	
O – Operating budget		\$\$\$ – \$10,000+	
* – Estimate only		<input type="checkbox"/> – Requires funding (support)	

Appendix

Appendix A: Characteristics of Port Colborne's Appearance

- Attractive heritage landscape and picturesque waterscape;
- Small town character with an originality and charm found in elements that have been maintained, restored or enhanced;
- A storied history owing to the presence of the Welland Canal;
- Clean, safe and secure, with few visible signs of major social issues;
- Friendly, hospitable residents that reflect a sense of community pride;
- Reputable small businesses with relatively affordable prices and positive attitudes toward tourism; and,
- Good transportation infrastructure and easy to move in or around with little to no congestion.

Appendix B: Accommodations Inventory

Type	#	# of Rooms
Bed & Breakfasts	1	4
Inns	3	17
Motels	4	72
Resorts & Campgrounds	2	2,038 sites
Short-Term Rentals <i>(excluding Inns)</i>	200+ (estimate)	Unavailable

Appendix C: Availability of Tourism Assets

Category		Available
Shopping & Dining	Retail & Boutique Retail	▣
	Restaurants & Breweries	▣
Heritage, Arts & Culture	Port Colborne Historical & Marine Museum	▣▲
	Roselawn Centre & Lighthouse Festival	▣
Special Events	Canal Days Marine Heritage Festival	○
Water & Land-Based Recreation	Nickel Beach & Centennial-Cedar Bay Beach	○
	Sugarloaf Marina & Boat Launch	○▲
	Multi-Use Trails	○▲
	Parks & Conservation Areas	▲
	Golf Courses	○
	Sun Retreats Sherkston Shores	○
Attractions and facilities for visitors with niche interests	Vale Health & Wellness Centre	▣
	Port Colborne Public Library	▣
	L.R. Wilson Heritage Research Archives	▣
	Humberstone Speedway	○

	Horseplay Niagara	▣
	Port Colborne Farmers' Market	○
	The Shrinking Mill	▲
<p>▣ Availability subject to operating hours ○ Seasonally available ▲ Limited private sector participation and programming (e.g. tours)</p>		

Category		#	Asset
Shopping & Dining	Retail Trade, Restaurants & Breweries	≥160	Downtown and Main Street Business Districts
Heritage, Arts & Culture	Museums & Archives	2	Port Colborne Historical & Marine Museum and L.R. Wilson Heritage Research Archives
	Cultural Facilities & Groups	5	Port Colborne Public Library, (Friends of) Roselawn Centre, (Friends of the) Port Colborne Lighthouses, Lighthouse Festival, and Port Colborne Operatic Society
	Art Galleries & Studios	3	O's By the Water Gallery, Summerhayes Studios – The Art Guild, and Chris de Laat Fine Art Photography
Special Events	Annual Festivals	1	Canal Days Marine Heritage Festival
Water & Land-Based Recreation	Public Beaches	2	Nickel Beach and Centennial Cedar Bay Beach
	Harbours & Marinas	1	Sugarloaf Marina
	Boat Launches	1	H.H. Knoll Lakeview Park
	Multi-Use Trails	3	Welland Canals Parkway Trail, Friendship Trail, and Gord Harry Conservation Trail
	Parks	32	H.H. Knoll Lakeview Park and Lock 8 Gateway Park
	Conservation Areas	3	Humberstone Marsh, Morgan's Point, and Mud Lake
	Golf Courses	2	Port Colborne Country Club and Whisky Run Golf Club
	Sports Complexes & Facilities	2	Vale Health & Wellness Centre and T.A. Lannan Sports Complex

	Resorts	1	Sun Retreats Sherkston Shores
	Motor Sports Venues	1	Humberstone Speedway

Appendix D: Asset Gaps

Asset Area	Gap
Arts & Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performing arts limited to Roselawn Centre’s theatre and Lakeshore Catholic High School Public art galleries moving away from bricks-and-mortar locations to home-based studios
Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpretive, educational, and interactive experiences limited to the grounds of the Museum and Roselawn Centre No heritage programming at Bridge 21, Port Colborne Lighthouses (except during Canal Days), and for buildings or homes of historical and architectural significance
Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-directed activities limited to the local conservation areas No site-specific educational programming, except as provided by Horseplay Niagara
Cycling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undersold due to a scarcity of private tour operators and public-private initiatives to cross-promote packages or bundles that can incorporate neighbouring municipalities
Location	Gap
Downtown and Main Street business districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities limited to shopping, dining, and passive recreational use of the West Street promenade Inadequate public access points and welcoming spaces along the Welland Canal for recreational use or cultural programming Dwindling supply of public art galleries and studios, and disconnected scattering of public art A visitor hub only for Canal Days and select community events (like the Farmers’ Market) as well as during the Great Lakes cruising season
Sugarloaf Marina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underutilized as a key access point to Lake Erie and by private tour, excursion, and sightseeing operators
Nickel Beach & Centennial-Cedar Bay Beach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Isolated activity that hasn’t yet succeeded in extending length of stay in Port Colborne or increasing visitor expenditures

Glossary

Demand generator – Refers to the element that serves as the main purpose for attracting a tourist to a destination

Market Readiness – Refers to operations that are ready to welcome and serve visitors or tourists

Niche Market – Refers to a small part of a large market that has a need or want for a specific product or service that isn't mass produced

Tourism product – Refers to a combination of tangible and intangible elements that create an overall experience with emotional and sensorial stimulation

Tourist – Anyone who stays at least 24 hours in Port Colborne or the Niagara region

Visitor – An excursionist who stays less than 24 hours in Port Colborne or the Niagara region

Visitor economy – Refers to the dollars spent by visitors and tourists outside the resident tax base

Yield – A concept associated with attracting different market segments, encouraging spending, and generating repeat visitation on the basis of the quality, value, and variety experienced by the visitor

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