

REPORT TO COUNTY COUNCIL

Tourism Oxford's Tourism Growth Program (TGP) Application

To: Warden and Members of County Council

From: Chief Administrative Officer

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Council approve Oxford County's receipt of Tourism Growth Program (TGP) funding, pending grant application success;
2. And further, that Council authorizes the Chief Administrative Officer and/or Director of Corporate Services to sign all documents related thereto.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- The 2024 Oxford County Tourism division business plan included the development and initial implementation of a tourism plan. Budget included one-time funding and forecasted revenue from a grant program to assist with this work.
- November 2023, Fed Dev Southern Ontario Announced the **Tourism Growth Program (TGP)**.
- January 2024, Oxford County submitted a TGP application to assist with tourism plan development and implementation.

Financial Impact

The 2024 budget included \$20,000 in one-time funding for creation and implementation of a tourism plan and forecasted \$20,000 in revenue through a grant to help complete this plan.

The Tourism Growth Program provides 50% matching funds for approved projects meeting the eligibility criteria of the program. The Oxford County application requested \$114,600 in matching funds from TGP to be used for 2023-2026 expenses for eligible projects that started no earlier than March 29, 2023. Oxford County's contribution would be based on available funds from the 2023-2024 budget and 2023-2026 in-kind contributions. If the TGP application is approved for a

lesser amount, the plan and implementation budget will be adjusted accordingly to remain within the Council-approved 2024 Business Plan and Budget.

Communications

Information and recognition of the TGP grant will follow Fed Dev Southern Ontario’s communication guidelines.




The five-year plan will involve consultation with residents, visitors, tourism businesses, municipalities and regional sector contacts. Strategic Communications and Engagement will be engaged as appropriate including use of *Speak-up Oxford*, media releases and social media channels. Tourism Oxford newsletters (industry and consumer), social media channels and contacts databases will be used for outreach. Surveys, meetings and partner channels will be used to provide opportunities to engage with the planning process.

2023-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

Oxford County Council approved the **2023-2026 Strategic Plan** on September 13, 2023. The Plan outlines 39 goals across three strategic pillars that advance Council’s vision of “Working together for a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable future.” These pillars are: (1) *Promoting community vitality*, (2) *Enhancing environmental sustainability*, and (3) *Fostering progressive government*.

The recommendations in this report supports the following strategic goals.

Strategic Plan Pillars and Goals

PILLAR 1	PILLAR 2	PILLAR 3
		
Promoting community vitality	Enhancing environmental sustainability	Fostering progressive government
		<p>Goal 3.1 – Continuous improvement and results-driven solutions</p> <p>Goal 3.2 – Collaborate with our partners and communities</p>

See: [Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#)

DISCUSSION

Background

About the Tourism Growth Program (TGP)

Delivered by Canada's regional development agencies (RDAs), the Tourism Growth Program (TGP) provides \$108 million over three years to support communities, small- and medium-sized businesses, and not-for-profit organizations in developing local tourism products and experiences. The TGP contributes to the Federal Tourism Growth Strategy, which charts a course for long-term growth, investment and stability in Canada's tourism industry, from coast to coast to coast.

Eligible projects should provide added value to existing activities in the tourism industry and focus on business and economic growth. Priority may be given to projects that:

- Support the Indigenous tourism industry;
- Increase tourism benefits for communities by driving visitation from urban areas to rural areas;
- Support economic, environmental and cultural sustainability;
- Support active outdoor experiences;
- Extend the tourism season (e.g., new or expanded tourism offerings outside of the traditional high season); and
- Complement support provided through provincial programs.

Applicants can request up to a maximum of \$250,000 per project. Eligible project costs are shared between Fed Dev Southern Ontario and the applicant. An applicant's portion of the cost-share (i.e., 50% of eligible project costs) may be comprised of cash contributions and in-kind contributions from other project partners. Applications can include costs incurred between March 29, 2023, and March 31, 2026.

About Oxford County's TGP Application

Oxford County submitted an application for TGP on January 19, 2024 to develop and start implementation of a five-year tourism plan supporting 125+ business/organizations with product development in: sustainability, DEI, shoulder season, rural and outdoor tourism. This TGP application is to complete tasks that support existing work in the 2024 Oxford County Business Plan and Budget and to support further implementation in 2025-2026.

Comments

Benefits of TGP funding

When the 2024 Tourism Oxford division budget was prepared, the plan was to apply for the Province of Ontario [Tourism Development Fund](#), which funds plan and strategy work. The

Tourism Development Fund is expected to open for applications in April 2024. It will provide funding for projects completed by March 31, 2025. The 2023 program provided up to \$25,000 in funding with a partner contribution minimum of 10 percent.

Compared to the Ontario Tourism Development Fund, the TGP offers numerous benefits:

- It provides up to \$250,000 in matching contributions;
- It is a multi-year program providing funding not only for the plan creation but implementation of the plan up to March 2026;
- Oxford County and partner-matching contributions can be both financial and in-kind;
- The TGP will cover expenses from April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2026. The Oxford County TGP application includes January-March 2024 expenses and activities, whereas other grant programs will not cover these expenses.

Tourism Oxford TGP Project Proposal Activities

- **Five-year Tourism plan:** Develop the plan in 2024 and complete first-year recommendations in 2025 preparing Oxford County to meet Destination Canada's goals supporting rural and sustainable tourism that is welcoming to diverse visitors.
- **Technology improvements:** Meet increased demand for tourism with technology improvements for creating efficiencies in business and visitor digital customer service. Complete in 2024-2025.
- **Website improvements:** Evaluate and implement recommendations for the website to increase visitation, promote inclusion while simplifying content management. Complete the report in 2024 and implement in 2025.
- **Data-driven market research and analysis:** Complete a 2024 analysis of recent visitor data identifying future opportunities.
- **Become Sustainable Destination Certified:** Complete a three-year sustainable tourism plan in 2024 and complete first year of implementation in 2025.
- **Festival support:** Support festivals/events with event attendance reports that can be used to develop sponsorship fact sheets. This will help support long-term sustainability of our festival ecosystem.
- **Business training:** Provide tourism businesses with training to support tourism development.
- **Off-season marketing strategy:** Create and implement an off-season marketing strategy. Test strategies in 2024 and finalize programs for 2025.
- **Your Next Stop:** Facilitate new business collaborations in a new tourism itinerary product called *Your Next Stop* that will encourage visitation between nearby attractions. Businesses receive training and learn how to collaborate. *Your Next Stop* rural programs will launch in 2024. Urban *Your Next Stop* sites will be launched in 2025.
- **Photography and video:** Support development activities with photography and video in 2024 and 2025.

TGP Impact on Tourism Services

As a region experiencing growth, project sustainability is a priority in the TGP proposal. Some of the benefits to existing tourism services would include:

- Development of a five-year plan and initial plan implementation.
- Improvements to technology and the website, which will streamline business and visitor services. This will reduce staff time spent on website maintenance and phone/email visitor services while improving customer service.
- *Your Next Stop* will include revenue recovery to off-set advertising.
- Development of an off-season product will include measurement of results and seek out partnerships. January 2024 off-season campaign tests are already demonstrating results. A January restaurant campaign resulted in 452 prix fixe meals being ordered at five restaurants that experienced a 40% average increase in traffic during the campaign. A winter marketing campaign was launched in partnership with Destination Ontario and Ontario's Southwest.

The TGP project's long-term impacts will reduce pressures on staff workload, improve customer service and provide a clear path forward to support tourism management, development and marketing.

CONCLUSIONS

Receipt of the TGP will position Oxford County to complete the five-year plan and provide additional funds to accelerate its implementation. It will provide a clear path forward for tourism, aligning with national tourism trends to meet the needs of consumers. This work will support tourism attractions expanding their season, increase visitation, support event sustainability, provide partners with marketing assets and prepare attractions for future growth opportunities in tourism.

SIGNATURES

Report author:

Original signed by

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Approved for submission:

Original signed by

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