

Introduction

In September/October, staff met with municipal staff from across the region to determine their 2024 markets, activities and the gaps they most relied on Central Counties Tourism (CCT) to fill. This information played an integral role in determining the priorities for the organization when the Board and Staff met to plan out fiscal 2024-2025.

Every year, more and more businesses and organizations within the region are recognizing the importance and benefits of positioning themselves to attract and retain visitors. Central Counties Tourism is recognized as the industry expert for all things destination development and, as such, stakeholder engagement continues to grow. There is concern that, under the current model, the organization may not be able to sustain its ability to deliver quality support.

Fiscal 2024-2025 will be a year of transition for the organization as it develops more cost recovery and revenue opportunities so that it can continue to deliver its core service to an ever-expanding stakeholder base. There is intrinsic value in the services provided by Central Counties Tourism and delivered through organizational excellence. CCT also has the luxury of being able to focus 100% of its attention on growing the visitor economy, providing opportunities to act as a Destination Development and Management Organization for regions and municipalities that may not have internal capacity to do so.

The 2024-2025 Business Plan builds on the successes of previous years and demonstrates CCT's commitment to a bottom-up, all of industry approach to destination development. The organization believes that the goals and objectives are achievable and will help stakeholders build their capacity to collectively grow the visitor economy.

2024-2025 Assumptions

The following assumptions have been taken into consideration in the development of this business plan:

- Provincial funding will remain unchanged
- The economy will be in a slow-down, if not a recession
- Provincial and Federal Grants for tourism will be minimal or non-existent
- There will be an increase in Ontarians traveling within Ontario and international trips to Ontario
- Consumer price sensitivity will increase

Based on those assumptions, CCT believes our stakeholders will experience:

- Continued front line staff shortages
- Increased costs (operating, fixed, taxes and cost of goods sold)
- Challenges ensuring their marketing/communication efforts are effective
- Difficulty remaining relevant through social media channels (changing algorithms)
- Increased access to capital (but at a much higher borrowing rate than in years past)
- Decrease in time to focus on growing/expanding their business including working with other businesses to build a destination

2024-2025 Municipal Priorities

Almost all communities within CCT have growth of the visitor economy as part of their 2024 plans. The following are the ranked results of the types of activities they will focus on to grow visitation, the tactics they will use to grow visitation and what gaps they want CCT to help fill.

Municipal Areas of Focus for Growing the Visitor Economy in 2024

1. Festivals and Events
2. Routes / Trails
3. Art / Culture / Heritage
4. Downtowns / Retail
5. Sport Tourism
6. Family Activities
7. Agri-Tourism / Rural
8. Cycling
9. Outdoor Adventure
10. Culinary Tourism
11. Film Tourism
12. Multicultural
13. Business Tourism
14. Group Tourism
15. Indigenous
16. Wellness

Tactics Municipalities will Focus on to Help Grow the Visitor Economy in 2024

1. Website
2. Social Media
3. Print / Radio / Television
4. Festivals & Events
5. Networking Events / Stakeholder engagement
6. Influencers
7. Research
8. Route / Trail Development
9. Wayfinding Plan
10. Downtown Revitalization
11. Dedicated Staff
12. Newsletters / E-blasts to consumer database
13. Infrastructure upkeep and development
14. Red Tape Reduction

CCT Supports Municipalities Require to Help Grow the Visitor Economy in 2024

1. Funding Support
2. Social Media Amplification
3. Research
4. Industry Equipping
5. Experience Development
6. Influencers
7. Photography / Videography
8. B2B Networking
9. Resident Sentiment
10. Website Support
11. Wayfinding
12. General Marketing
13. Partnership
14. Marketing Co-Ops
15. Community Tourism Planning

Green indicates an alignment with CCT board & staff in terms of the best opportunities to support stakeholder growth and success.

2024-2025 Priorities

CCT's overarching priority is to continue to grow and deliver its core business services to stakeholders so that they have the capacity to increase the impact of the visitor economy on communities across the region. Central Counties Tourism believes in a bottom-up approach to tourism and, as such, builds much of its business plan around business and municipal priorities – supporting their growth focus and filling the gaps where possible. The 2024-2025 priorities, and the actions and tactics to support them, reflect what the organization has learned through one-on-one conversations, stakeholder feedback and surveys.

Business Model & Sustainability

Priorities: Increase stakeholder engagement through B2B channels and CCT-led networking opportunities
Grow funding to maintain and increase core deliverables
Zero-base budgeting
Explore the feasibility of completing an internal I.D.E.A. audit to understand organizational gaps

Role: Be the recognized regional leader and experts on growing the visitor economy
Research and implement stakeholder programs that include cost recovery
Lead efforts to increase the amount of funding available to CCT (grants, sponsors, etc.)
Lead the sustainable growth of the organization and the services it provides

Policy/Advocacy

- Priorities: Municipal understanding of the importance of the visitor economy
 Municipal / Regional investment in the visitor economy
 Increasing resident sentiment
 Pan-Regional collaboration
- Role: Lead discussions with municipal staff and council regarding the visitor economy
 Advocate for municipal programs and supports that invest in visitor growth
 Support stakeholders and municipal staff on their quest to increase resident sentiment
 Lead communication of growth successes

Research

- Priorities: Geo-Fencing for individual stakeholders, BIAs, Municipalities, etc.
 Municipal data insights for product/market/investment development
 Data collection partnerships so that we can collectively tell compelling stories (ROI)
 Champion evidence-based decision making by ensuring stakeholders know how to interpret and utilize the information
 Cost recovery
- Role: Educate stakeholders on the research services CCT offers and their benefits
 Lead aggregate data collection, analysis and reporting for the region
 Support stakeholders' understanding of how to interpret and utilize the data
 Support the development of new tools and datasets to further the understanding of the visitor economy and how to grow it.

Industry Equipping

Priorities: Develop and source learning opportunities to fill gaps identified by stakeholders
 Provide access to learning & skills development opportunities
 Deliver hybrid events to encourage collaboration and the sharing of local inspiration
 Share research & trends, and showcase learning & funding opportunities led by others

Role: Lead the development/implementation of relevant learning opportunities for stakeholders
 Connect stakeholders to other learning opportunities
 Lead the feedback loop to gather insights for better education delivery
 Trusted, go-to source for validated industry information and guidance

Product & Experience Development

Priorities: Increase the number of stakeholder-led routes and experiences
 Engaged stakeholders taking part in CCT-led routes and experiences
 Support CCT consumer campaigns by developing compelling trails and experiences

Role: Lead stakeholder understanding of the advantages of route development
 Lead the connection of and collaboration between stakeholders
 Lead the development of CCT-led routes and experiences
 Support consumer campaigns by connecting stakeholders to themes and itineraries

B2C Marketing

- Priorities:
- Collaborative approach with tourism partners
 - Target audience reframing
 - Seasonal campaign evolution
 - Adherence to guidelines and strategic vision
- Role:
- Be the experts in consumer tourism marketing and communication trends
 - Lead the regional content creation and successful implementation of consumer campaigns
 - Support stakeholders through strategic marketing and communication

B2B Marketing

- Priorities:
- Sustained engagement and participation in the stakeholder development and tourism growth initiatives of Central Counties Tourism
 - Communicate the importance of the visitor economy
 - Engaging with industry thought leaders
 - Personalized communication
 - Video Marketing
- Role:
- Be the experts in B2B tourism marketing and communication trends
 - Provide stakeholders with engaging, relevant and implementable content and information
 - Lead the communication of success stories to emphasize the importance of the visitor economy
 - Support stakeholders, through B2B resources/content, grow their capacity

Executive Summary

Central Counties Tourism's bottom-up approach to destination development really took hold in fiscal 2023-2024. The year was punctuated by several defining successes that demonstrate the results of CCT's efforts to engage, inform and support its stakeholders.

Community Tourism Planning: CCT facilitated the development of another three Community Tourism Plans (CTP), which demonstrates municipal understanding of the visitor economy on the vibrancy of their communities. 2023-2024 marked the year that EVERY municipality in Durham Region is working under a CTP. Municipal investment in the visitor economy continues to grow through programming, staffing and budgets.

Partnership Program: The 2023-2024 partnership program was oversubscribed by as much as four times the available funds. At the same time, the quality of the investment projects increased as well, as more and more stakeholders, through their engagement with CCT, have a better understanding of what they need to do build their capacity to attract and retain more visitors. Partner investment to grow the visitor economy in 2023-2024 was close to \$600,000, supported by \$379,000 from Central Counties Tourism, provided through the Government of Ontario. It is an incredible ROI that, once tallied, will result in more tax revenue than the investment by CCT.

Research: Across the province, CCT is recognized as a leader when it comes to providing timely, relevant and implementable analysis of data from several different sources. One of the highlights from this past fiscal was the ability to provide each municipality a top-line economic impact from visitors in 2022. As a teaser, just the overnight visitation within York, Durham and Headwaters was over \$3 billion.

Industry Relations Managers (IRM): Central Counties Tourism's biggest strength is its people and stakeholder's access to us. The IRM team have proven to be incredibly important to both the CCT team and the stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is at an all-time high thanks in big part to the IRM team. They connect stakeholders to all of the incredible resources CCT offers to help them build their capacity. At the same time, because of their in-depth knowledge of the stakeholders in their region, they are able to support the content development for the marketing team, which leads to amazing campaigns, which drives people to the stakeholder locations, which get them even more engaged. New this fiscal, the IRM's have been hosting networking events, bringing stakeholders from a geographic area to meet and learn about each other's businesses. This has led to the successful development of several informal partnerships and formal routes that are all stakeholder-driven. These new partnerships and products help grow the destination and continuation of this practice is a priority in 2024-2025.

Augmented Reality: Experience enhancement through the use of technology was something that many of our stakeholders told us they would love to utilize but it was much too expensive for them to implement. In 2023-2024, CCT funded the development of a brand-new proprietary technology that made augmented reality programming accessible to all stakeholders. The augmented reality "tour guide" can be customized and used by almost every stakeholder – from a go-kart operator using it to do an orientation to a municipality animating each story in a 30+ stop historic tour. All for a fraction of what it would cost to purchase a fully rendered augmented reality experience.

CCT's engagement with its stakeholders and municipal partners means that each business plan reflects what we are being asked to deliver to help build capacity and grow our destinations throughout the region. CCT conferred with staff from every municipality within its borders to determine priorities for this fiscal. There are two success stories right there: 1) CCT has a great working relationship with municipalities who rely on us as industry experts, and 2) every municipality is working on growing the visitor economy through investment and collaboration.

Fiscal 2024-2025 will continue to focus on strong destination development, supported by stakeholder-led routes and other collaborations. When businesses have control over their projects and have "skin in the

game”, the chances of the project succeeding increase dramatically. To support stakeholders through the process, CCT is launching a Route Development Toolkit on its learning lab portal. This free workshop guides stakeholders through the entire process of creating collaborations to drive mutual growth between partners and is broken into bite-size digestible pieces to make the process as engaging as it is informative and useful. It is a win-win for both the stakeholders and the destinations they represent, providing more reasons for people to visit, more often, and from further away.

Advocacy for and education about the importance of the visitor economy is something that our municipal partners would like CCT to take the lead on. As destination development sees success through increased visitation, resident sentiment decreases. CCT will focus attention on educating residents about the importance of the visitor economy for the vibrancy of their communities. This will not be a one-year project and is expected to be a staple as visitation to our communities continues to grow.

CCT is a service provider for municipalities, organization and businesses involved with growing the visitor economy. Engagement with and growth of our network of stakeholder increased dramatically in 2023-2024 with the addition of a formalized B2B communications program. CCT is continuing to grow our B2B efforts to further match stakeholders to the myriad of resources we provide to help them grow their capacity.

Of course, one of the services we provide is helping stakeholder reach a broader audience. Extensive market and trend research was conducted in the development of the 2024-2025 consumer marketing and communications plan. CCT continues to be at the forefront of tourism promotion and, through collaborative efforts with stakeholders, will increase consumer engagement and visitation to the region. In addition, CCT will explore the possibility of becoming a paid third-party service provider for municipalities and regions that may not have the internal resources to fully execute marketing and communications efforts. The organization is fully focused on growing the visitor economy, which is something that most municipalities do not have resources to do.

The entire 2024-2025 business plan builds on the successes the organization has had over the past 10 years. It will deliver results for our stakeholders, who, in turn, will deliver projects, programs and experiences that will grow visitation and have a positive economic impact across the region.

Central Counties Tourism's own resources are stretched to the point where there is concern that it won't be able to match the demands from its ever-growing base of engaged stakeholders. One of the shifts the organization is making is to be more proactive at finding new opportunities for funding and becoming more sustainable, so that we can continue to deliver the core resources our stakeholders have come to rely on. This means that some more of the non-core resources will become pay-to-play so that we can recover some of the delivery cost and reallocate those funds back to core stakeholder resources.

2024-2025 is going to be another banner year for the region as CCT supports the projects and plans of our partners as they work to build destinations and grow the visitor economy. The below plan is both ambitious and achievable and the staff look forward to delivering against the goals and KPI's outlined in it.

Defining Success for Central Counties

Each of the Community Tourism Plans that CCT facilitates starts with a question: “What does tourism success look like for [name of the community]?” While there are many variations of specific success measures, there are some underlying similarities in all of them. It is those similarities that define what success is for Central Counties.

- 1) Businesses understand the importance of the visitor economy on the vibrancy of their communities and collaborate with each other to create more reasons for people to visit more often and from further away.
- 2) Residents understand that visitors are adding money to the tills of their favourite places to eat, shop and visit, often making the difference between the businesses being solvent or having to close. The collaboration (not competition) between businesses creates a growing pride of place with residents who then become ambassadors, welcoming visitors and helping connect them to the great things to see and do.
- 3) Municipalities invest in infrastructure that makes communities more visitor friendly and connects destinations within its borders and beyond. Staff and council understand that there are no walls between their municipality and those they border and start to work on projects that build an even bigger destination which will appeal to a larger audience willing to travel greater distances to get there.
- 4) Destinations within Central Counties deliver amazing guest experiences that build reputation and brand. Strategic and targeted marketing & communications, coupled with word of mouth, propel visitor growth across the region.
- 5) Sustained and increasing visitation prompts investment in new businesses that further support the visitor economy and bring full time employment to the region.
- 6) Visitors become residents who increase a captive workforce which prompts investment in non-tourism businesses to open in the region.