Table of Contents

Introduction 02
Assumptions 03
2025-2026 Municipal Priorities and CCT Supports 04
2025-2026 Business Plan Priorities 05
Executive Summary 09
Defining Success for Central Counties Tourism 13

Introduction

In the first half of 2024, visitor spending within the borders of Central Counties was estimated at $1.8 billion, including $502 million from international visitors. This represents an 11% year-over-year growth and produced approximately $130 million in provincial sales tax.

The impact of the visitor economy is large, and a very integral part of maintaining and growing the vibrancy of our communities. The role of Central Counties Tourism is to support stakeholders in their efforts to build capacity to increase their success while growing the visitor economy.

Prior to the Board of Directors meeting in September of 2024 to set the priorities for this plan, staff circulated a stakeholder survey and met one-on-one with many of its municipal and DMO partners to learn more about the challenges they are facing and how they would like CCT to support them.

This is the third year that CCT has implemented this approach, and we attribute much of our continued and increasing stakeholder engagement on the fact that we listen and implement programs designed to fill gaps and build capacity. The 2025-2026 priorities are a direct reflection of what stakeholders have told us they need for their continued success.

2025-2026 Assumptions

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

- Provincial funding will remain unchanged
- The slow economy will remain unchanged for most of the fiscal before a slight improvement
- Provincial and Federal support 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)
- 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

2025 Municipal Priorities

Almost all communities within CCT have growth of the visitor economy as part of their 2025 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 2025

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

Tactics Municipalities will Focus on to Help Grow the Visitor Economy in 2025

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

CCT Supports that Municipalities have Requested for 2025

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

2025-2026 Priorities

CCT's overarching priority is to remain relevant to the stakeholders it supports by providing timely, relevant and implementable tools that fill gaps and provide them the capacity to grow their success. CCT believes that growing the visitor economy starts with operators and works it way up. As such, the 2025-2026 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: Industry Relations and Engagement
Partnership Program Review (making it clearer)
Grow revenues to maintain and increase core deliverables
Zero-base budgeting
Business and Governance Excellence

Role: Connecting Stakeholder to CCT resources so that they are more successful
Be the recognized regional leader and experts on growing the visitor economy
Research and implement stakeholder programs that include cost recovery
Lead revenue growth (services, products, grants, sponsorship)
Lead the sustainable growth of the organization and the services it provides

Policy/Advocacy

Priorities: Share CCT's successes, leading with ROI and impact
Municipal understanding of the importance of the visitor economy
Connect the visitor economy to broader economic development initiatives
Educating residents so they understand the importance of the visitor economy
Pan-Regional collaboration

Role: Champion communication about the impact of the visitor economy
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 educate residents
Create opportunities for pan-regional sharing

Research

Priorities: Communicate Trends
Build Research Literacy
Champion evidence-based decision making by ensuring stakeholders know how to interpret and utilize the information
Cost recovery

Role: Lead dissemination of visitor analytics and trends
Lead aggregate data collection, analysis and reporting for the region
Support understanding of what questions stakeholders want answered and how to interpret and utilize the data to do that
Support the development of new tools and datasets to further the understanding of the visitor economy and how to grow it.

Industry Equipping

Priorities: Coaching
Provide access to learning & skills development opportunities
Host events that educate and inspire, supporting new relationships and collaboration
Showcase learning, funding, and accreditation opportunities led by others

Role: Lead the development/implementation of relevant learning opportunities for stakeholders
Connect stakeholders to other learning opportunities (sustainability, getting sponsors, etc.)
Maintain feedback loop to gather insights for better education and program delivery
Trusted, go-to source for validated industry information and guidance

Product & Experience Development

Priorities: Maintain and refresh current products and experiences
Support stakeholder-led route development
Grow AVTR1 Subscriptions
Support CCT consumer campaigns by connecting existing stakeholder experiences to create compelling routes

Role: Lead stakeholder understanding of the advantages of route development (Learning Lab)
Support consumer campaigns by connecting stakeholders to themes and itineraries
Lead growth provincial participation in Golf in Ontario
Support stakeholder route development and growth

B2C Marketing

Priorities: Collaborative approach with tourism partners
Target audience reframing
Seasonal campaign evolution
Adherence to guidelines and board direction

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, share research & trends
Engaging with industry thought leaders
Personalized communication

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

Investment Attraction

Priorities: Pilot tracking business investments (new businesses opening, expansions, etc.) taking place in the region to communicate the important role the industry plays within communities
Grow municipal investment in tourism through the facilitation and implementation support of Community Tourism Plans and Wayfinding Plans
Leverage stakeholder investment through the partnership program
Provide visitor insights to communities to demonstrate the value of the visitor economy

Role: Support investment by providing research and other information that informs investment decisions
Support investment through the implementation of community tourism and wayfinding plans

Executive Summary

Central Counties Tourism has hit a wall when it comes to capacity. Over the past several years, the organization has surged forward, developing new supports for stakeholders to assist them achieve success for themselves. For many of the programs CCT offers, there is a cost associated – both financial and resource. As stakeholder engagement grows, so does the cost to deliver them.

The dilemma is a perfect Catch-22. Financial support for tourism has been stagnant (and reduced) since the RTO model was introduced more than ten years ago, meaning there are less resources available to grow the pool of stakeholders who understand their place in developing a vibrant visitor economy. However, to create a critical mass of stakeholders who believe in growing visitation to their communities and willing to champion tourism as an economic driver, Central Counties needs to engage more stakeholders and support them as they become part of the fabric of the visitor economy. The stronger the story of the importance of support for this industry, the better the chances that policymakers will increase support for its continued growth.

The workaround for Central Counties Tourism is to grow revenues beyond what is provided by the Province so that it can increase its capacity to support stakeholders. The 2025-2026 Business Plan maintains current service excellence while focusing on growing products and services that provide revenue streams for sustainability.

The organization is well-positioned to deliver this plan based on several successes in fiscal 2024-2025. These include:

AVTR1: CCT's augmented reality platform was refined and piloted, making it ready to bring to the broader regional market.

IRM Team: The role of the IRM team and their priorities were refined, leading to them being able to focus on what is most important – stakeholder engagement and connecting them to the supports provided by CCT.

Marketing: CCT is always at the forefront of trends and works to integrate them into consumer communications, connecting more potential guests to our stakeholders. Identified trends for 2024-2025 and solutions to implement against them, will result in more consumers learning about our stakeholders. Moreover, work is being done to allow stakeholders to potentially license / tap into new technologies being developed to increase marketing effectiveness.

Sponsorship: The asset matrix and potential sponsor list developed in 2024-2025, coupled with learning at the 2025 Tourism Symposium about making an organization a good sponsorship candidate, position CCT for success as it works at developing new revenue sources.

Partnership: Refinements to the partnership program are based on feedback from stakeholders applying, the IRM team and the application evaluators. The goal is to ensure that the process is easy to understand and that all projects have a high ROI on the co-investment.

Governance: The new ONCA-compliant by-laws and letters patent recognize that CCT can support growth of the visitor economy beyond its borders. This allows for additional revenue sources from current supports already offered including research and community tourism planning.

Promotion: CCT began to "toot its own horn" in 2024-2025, making sure that the business successes of the organization were shared with municipalities, DMO's and the Province. CCT is collecting more "good news" stories this fiscal, with the goal of communicating the impact of tourism.

Fiscal 2024-2025 prepared the organization to move further down the path of self-sufficiency. 2025-2026 marks the first year of a long process growing the organizational resources, which will allow CCT to engage with and support even more stakeholders, leading to more success at growing the visitor economy.

These successes will be documented, aggregated and communicated to the policy makers in an effort to bring the Tourism Portfolio the recognition it deserves. The hundreds and hundreds of stakeholders that will benefit through implementation of this plan is a testament to the important roll CCT plays in helping build capacity to grow the visitor economy. That is our reason for being.

This plan has a direct impact on visitor readiness while starting down a road of sustainability that ensures the organization will be able to support more and more engaged stakeholders for years to come.

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.