MUNICIPALITY OF KINCARDINE

Tourism Strategy Engagement Report



Presented Sept. 30, 2026

This Engagement Report summarizes the key & recurring ideas, themes and concerns most relevant to the Municipality of Kincardine's Tourism Strategy gathered from people participating in engagement activities ('participants').*

Engagement activities, from which findings emerged, included:

- 1x in-person workshop with 45 participants representing businesses, realtors, and/or local organizations ('business participants')
- 1x in-person workshop with 16 staff from various departments ('staff participants')
- 1x virtual workshop with 7 special event organizers ('event participants')

The report includes:

- A presentation of engagement themes;
- A high-level Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis; and
- Areas of recommendations for the Municipality to consider in developing the Tourism Strategy.

**While these key themes represent points and perspectives and perceptions heard repeatedly throughout the engagement period, they do not necessarily reflect all the views of all people engaged.*

PART I: Engagement Themes and Takeaways

TOURISM PRODUCT, EXPERIENCES AND MARKETING

Thinking beyond downtown Kincardine

While Station Beach is recognized as a core tourism asset, there is an appetite to expand the local tourism narrative beyond the downtown Kincardine and the beach. Participants see an opportunity for the Municipality to meaningfully consider assets and experiences more broadly as a way to strengthen tourism appeal, including trails and outdoor experiences (i.e., cycling), nearby golf courses, and charming communities such as Tiverton. The Township of Huron-Kinloss's "Secrets of the Back Forty" was referenced as an example of how the Municipality of Kincardine's narrative might be shaped.

Thinking beyond summer

There is an interest in attracting visitors year-round to sustain business support in the shoulder seasons. While business owners acknowledge that their success relies strongly on summer sales, they would like to see more tourism arrivals beyond one season.

However, there is a perception that the Municipality is currently lacking things to do in the off-season to engage visitors, which participants said calls for attracting new businesses to fill gaps, and considering "unconventional" approaches to local activations (i.e., extending activations or events over multiple week/weekends so to make them less weather-reliant). Some also said collaborative discussions between event leaders, businesses and local organizations may reveal other opportunities.

Though some see Kincardine as a potential four-season destination, others noted that weather and road conditions present major barriers to reliable/successful tourism growth in the winter season, saying primary off-season opportunities lay in spring and fall.

FOR REFERENCE!

Click to see "Five ways to grow shoulder season tourism."

Expanding businesses, hours and availability

Participants said operating hours are a challenge, since most businesses along Queen St. close at 5 p.m. and many restaurants remain closed on Mondays, which affects the visitor experience and limits spending opportunities. Still, they acknowledge that extended hours can strain small businesses' staff capacity, and that finding labour is a challenge given the lack of affordable housing.

Overall, there is a sense that there is "not much to do" when bad weather hits; participants

highlighted a noticeable lack of activities and events for teenagers, young adults, and young families. They pointed to a need for more diverse experiences to encourage visitors to stay longer and spend more; currently, they said, even locals look to neighbouring communities for entertainment. Specific examples of what they'd like to see included an escape room or roller rink ("things to do on a rainy day").

While participants want the Municipality to incentivize non-service businesses to open downtown to address these gaps, they agreed businesses need more consistent local patronage to succeed as well.

Connecting the beach & downtown

Participants said there is an opportunity to connect the beach more meaningfully to the downtown commercial centre during summer months, noting that currently, many visitors stay at the beach without visiting local restaurants and businesses. Some suggest more strategically placed maps and information boards near the beach that outline what people can find "up the hill," and/or shuttle transportation to move people beyond their primary destination.

FOR EXAMPLE!

The Township of Centre Wellington offers a free Downtown Shuttle Program–a bus that connects visitors to key points within Elora and Fergus on weekends during peak season. It is funded in part by a number of sponsors, and each includes a tourism ambassador to provide visitor information to riders. The Municipality of Lakeshore, in Belle River, ON, recently completed a pilot project, the Beach Bus, offering free shuttle service between the Atlas Tube Recreation Centre and Lakeview Park West Beach, from late June to mid-September. While this particular pilot aims to address parking challenges, it provides an example of a municipally-led pilot shuttle program to achieve a tourism-centred objective.

Activating & maintaining Station Beach

Some participants said the beachfront can be better activated through services, activities, firepits, and concession stands or a market, and event organizers see an opportunity to better use waterfront spaces like Reunion Park, Robson Park, and other underutilized sites. Some view the lack of current waterfront activation as a missed opportunity, though Municipal staff pointed to the existing challenge of beach maintenance, noting that current capacity does not allow them to keep up with maintenance (e.g., washrooms, garbage) given how busy the beach has become. They also noted how garbage is often dumped at the beach, pointing to a need for improved bylaw enforcement to prevent undesirable behaviours.

Because parking at Station Beach remains free while neighbouring municipalities charge fees, staff expressed concern that Kincardine is treated as "the cheap place to leverage" for

large groups, who ultimately don't face parking fees when accessing Kincardine's shared spaces and are also not going into the downtown core to spend money in the local economy.

Notably, initiating paid parking was referenced as an opportunity to grow Municipal revenues that can be redirected to enhancing staff capacity.

Balancing tourism growth and protecting the Kincardine identity

Participants see a need to balance growth with protecting Kincardine's small-town charm, history, and traditions. They said that, contrary to more commercialized beach destinations in Ontario (such as Grand Bend), Kincardine offers a more relaxed, progressive, and inclusive atmosphere. As such, a demand for slow and careful growth was a recurring theme ("quality over quantity," with respect to visitors).

Some proposed it is important to define how much tourism the Municipality wants, and suggested regenerative approaches. They see an opportunity to centre resident needs in tourism development planning, so new offerings, events, and amenities improve local quality of life while maintaining the welcoming, authentic environment that draws visitors to the community.

Improving maps, signage, visitor information & marketing

With a sentiment that once people discover Kincardine, they love it, a key idea raised was a need for more marketing content and efforts (including beyond the summer) to grow brand awareness of Kincardine as a destination and to help visitors effectively plan a successful visit through information sharing, packaging, and itineraries. Key markets identified included the GTA, Hamilton & the Golden Horseshoe, and Guelph.

Some participants said they would like to see more signage along Highway 21 to promote Kincardine as a destination. One person acknowledged that there is one small billboard, "but it does nothing to draw spending." Participants also saw an opportunity to improve access to visitor information—including maps, a community calendar, and activity highlights in key spots such as the beach, downtown and Victoria Park. One person suggested a mobile tourism information centre, as an idea. Radio was mentioned as another channel through which to promote Kincardine and things to do while visiting.

FOR EXAMPLE!

Check out Tourism Orangeville's approach to visitor information. The Town has established self-serve kiosks at key indoor and outdoor locations, where visitors can find maps, brochures, and a digital kiosk to guide their journey.

Existing and potential visitor markets

There was some discussion about a need to understand/define who the Kincardine target visitor is. Anecdotally, participants said they are seeing more seniors than ever and fewer young families compared to the past. This may inform various approaches for the Municipality; for example, it may suggest an opportunity to invest in family-focused marketing efforts, and, if seniors are a primary visitor group, it informs how visitor information is made available (i.e., hard copy visitor information rather than QR codes).

Participants said arrivals to the Marina are also an untapped market; they see expensive boats sail in and see an opportunity to draw people into the community to engage and spend money. Some say the same is true for Bruce Power contractors, who could be better engaged to explore the community and local businesses, though some suggested that they are too transient to be valuable visitor prospects.

Finally, some see an opportunity to focus on enticing return visits; for example, attracting a summer visitor to return in the fall or spring.

Investing in arts, culture, heritage & community gathering

Kincardine's Scottish heritage and landmarks are central to local identity, and there is a desire to preserve and promote traditions such as the pipe bands, the Saturday night parade, and sites like the Walker House Museum and Lighthouse. Participants also see opportunities for more public programming and gathering spaces, and for injecting art into public spaces, including Municipal gardens. Further, some would like to see investment in an indoor performing arts centre and gathering space for live music and performances, that could also be the go-to back-up option if weather disrupts planned outdoor events. These focus areas are viewed as equally important for residents as they are to the visitor experience.

Festivals & events as tourism anchors

There is a sense that festivals and events are currently core tourism anchors, and help to attract first-time visitors to the municipality. Participants said it is important that they are aware of the experiences to be enjoyed throughout the community. As previously noted, there is an appetite to see events throughout the year; notably, business participants said they would also have more capacity to support event organizers if they were heading initiatives outside of the busy summer season.

Concerns about Victoria Park

Event organizers and municipal staff expressed concerns about Victoria Park, noting the site's wear and tear from the volume of activity hosted there. There is a view that events are outgrowing the venue, and while some advocated for site revitalization, others said it is time to explore alternate locations and rotate event locations. Municipal staff also emphasized the need to manage capacity and evaluate venue use more selectively moving forward, rather than approving every event request simply because the park has traditionally hosted them.

Back-up plans for weather-reliant events

Event organizers discussed that if weather conditions don't cooperate on the dates of their long-planned event, there is no ideal indoor space to move events if needed. They see limitations to the Davidson Centre and Centre for the Arts as options, because of the utilitarian nature of lack of artistic aesthetic, and the availability and capacity constraints, respectively. They would like to see an accessible indoor space that can serve contingency plans for summer event organizers while providing a venue for year-round events and activities.

Concerns about event sustainability

Some event organizers said that production costs have skyrocketed while grants and sponsorship dollars have declined, making sustainability a challenge. While they would ideally like to have enough funds to confidently plan years in advance, they are often making commitments (i.e., booking talent) without having a sense of whether dollars will actually be available to cover the costs. Acknowledging this is true for events throughout Ontario, organizers cautioned that this may affect the size and scale of what they're able to produce in the years to come. Participants said longer-term funding commitments would help alleviate this challenge.

Managing permitting and municipal processes

"Red tape" remains a concern for businesses and event organizers. One business participant said that despite efforts to expand their footprint, applications have been repeatedly rejected, affecting their growth and evolution. They see an opportunity for the Municipality to better support stakeholders with responsible development.

For event organizers, recent changes to municipal permitting are considered complicated, while the process for renting equipment is cumbersome and adds costs. (They specifically noted the new form for road closures is onerous and overcomplicated.) Emphasizing the value events bring to the community, they suggest enhanced municipal systems — for example, a partnership model with the Municipality that enables streamlined permitting, providing information & supporting grant writing/applications, and offering marketing support.

MUNICIPAL ROLES AND CAPACITY

The role of the Municipality's tourism office

Participants view the Municipality's tourism team as a central communicator and the core connector of Kincardine's tourism ecosystem, bridging local businesses, the BIA and Chamber, event organizers, and other community partners. A few specific opportunities presented by partners for the Municipality included:

- Supporting them in pursuing grant opportunities or identifying strategic partners (i.e., volunteers for event organizers, or if one business can fill a need identified by another)
- Educating local business owners and frontline staff on Kincardine's tourism assets and experiences/empowering the business community to serve as enthusiastic, unified brand ambassadors
- Communicating opportunities available to businesses and partners, relevant local news and disruptions (i.e., road closures), and other relevant topics
- Sharing the Kincardine story, and marketing to prospective visitors
- Hosting events for partners and businesses, focused on idea sharing, connection, & learning
- Being transparent about tourism efforts

Streamlining communications for businesses

Participants from local businesses and organizations noted that they receive a lot of information from many different sources, including the Municipality, BIA and Chamber. While they value the communication, the volume feels overwhelming to some who see an opportunity for a single, centralized communications channel and generally enhanced/better coordinated communications.

Tourism impacts on staff capacity & concerns for the future

Municipal staff discussed how tourism activity places demands on every municipal department. For example:

- Public Works manages road closures, patios, signage, and set-up & take-down for special events.
- Community Services & Facilities oversee the "first impression," creating inviting public spaces; maintaining parks, pavilions, public toilets, etc.; and supporting special events. *Note: Because Public Works & Community Services personnel are present in the community, they are often asked for direction and recommendations, acting as unofficial, on-the-ground ambassadors while also fielding community complaints.*
- Communications oversees event announcements and promotions, road-closure notices, emergency safety messaging, fielding questions, and sharing community stories, among other responsibilities.
- The Building Department processes and approves tent permits, sign permits, and manages building code considerations.
- Economic Development works largely with downtown businesses, encouraging

participation in the Community Improvement Program and leveraging tourism as part of the appeal to attract new investors.
- Finance reviews and approves the budgets for tourism activities, reviews special event contracts, and manages taxation for seasonal residents.
- Legislative Services & Bylaw focuses on bylaws and enforcement, traffic and parking, accessibility, heritage and more.
- Emergency Services plays a major role in reviewing special events, supporting water safety programs, inspecting food trucks, etc.
- IT ensures guests have access to public WiFi and digital information.

Given these impacts across departments, staff participants expressed concerns about the Municipality's structural and financial capacity to support tourism growth—let alone existing demands—and questioned how much the local tax base can absorb escalating costs.

Staff concerns related to special events

Staff participants revealed how every department touches events in some way. Though they recognize the value special events bring to the community, staff participants emphasized how these events affect parks, roads, and facility crews, who manage the physical labour required, including road closures, equipment pickup and drop-off, utility hookups, continuous washroom maintenance, and pre- and post-event cleanup—all of which require staff overtime and strain operational bandwidth for day-to-day work. The idea of developing a data framework to measure actual staff costs associated with supporting events was discussed, so to better understand real and measured impacts.

They also noted that existing Special Event Committee debriefs often feel like reactive "patching" rather than core problem-solving due to limited department bandwidth and budget constraints. Participants said stronger director-level leadership and coordination across municipal departments—including public works, communications, and enforcement—could ease pressures, though a long-term management plan backed by adequate budgetary allocations is the ideal solution. They emphasized that, as the Municipality considers investing in tourism, it must properly account for the real operational costs of hosting visitors and events, including infrastructure and staffing.

Bylaw enforcement

Bylaw enforcement is seen as a critical operational gap among staff participants, particularly downtown during summer months. They said that the current approach—which engages contracted enforcement officers in the winter and student patrols in the summer—lacks sufficient authority and capacity. Downtown parking enforcement is especially an issue, as participants shared that, while three-hour parking limits and signage were introduced to influence behaviour, inconsistent enforcement makes the rules largely ineffective. They see a need to align municipal policies and budgets to better support full-time, in-house enforcement alongside clear communication and management plans.

PART II: SWOT

This Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis is based solely on what emerged from the engagement sessions and is intended to support the Municipality in developing a more thorough SWOT, alongside other research and analysis.

Strengths

- The Municipality of Kincardine features a shoreline on Lake Huron, iconic sunsets, 42 kilometres of multi-use trails, and a unique geographic layout where a walkable downtown core connects directly to the beach and waterfront.
- The 200-year history rooted in Scottish settlement provides a distinct cultural anchor, celebrated through pipe bands, the Saturday Night Parade, historic landmarks (Walker House, Lighthouse), and flagship marketing.
- The beach is an asset, especially since it is not overrun with visitors the way some nearby beach towns are.
- There are strong events with strong leadership, well supported by the local business community, and providing value to the community.
- Events benefit from hands-on assistance from municipal staff across parks, recreation, public works, communications, and tourism personnel.
- The Municipality of Kincardine is viewed as a collaborative community where visitors can find rest & rejuvenation.
- The Municipality of Kincardine's location well positions it to attract people from major markets (i.e., Toronto, Golden Horseshoe, Guelph, KW, etc.), particularly for events.
- There are strong local retailers and restaurants.
- Businesses are open to growth, change, and progress.
- There are other communities in the municipality with offerings that complement that which can be found in downtown Kincardine.

Weaknesses

- Tourism activity is largely limited to summer months.
- Queen St. businesses close early (5 p.m.) and many restaurants remain closed on Mondays, restricting local spending.
- There is a lack of things to do, particularly indoor-based activities and activities for youth and young adults.
- There is a sense of disconnection between the beach and the commercial centre; visitors at Station Beach and the marina rarely transition into the commercial core to spend money.
- There is a sense that nuclear industry contractors arrive mid-week and depart on weekends without participating in local events, while out-of-region supply chain companies rarely contribute to community sponsorship pools.

- Events rely heavily on good weather, and there is a lack of indoor spaces to serve as contingency plans or to host off-season events.
- There is a lack of signage on Highway 21 to draw attention or interest in Kincardine.
- The over-concentration of events at Victoria Park has caused site deterioration.
- There are major gaps in bylaw enforcement, particularly around parking and waste management.
- There is a lack of confidence regarding the sustainability of events, largely due to growing costs, and funding constraints.

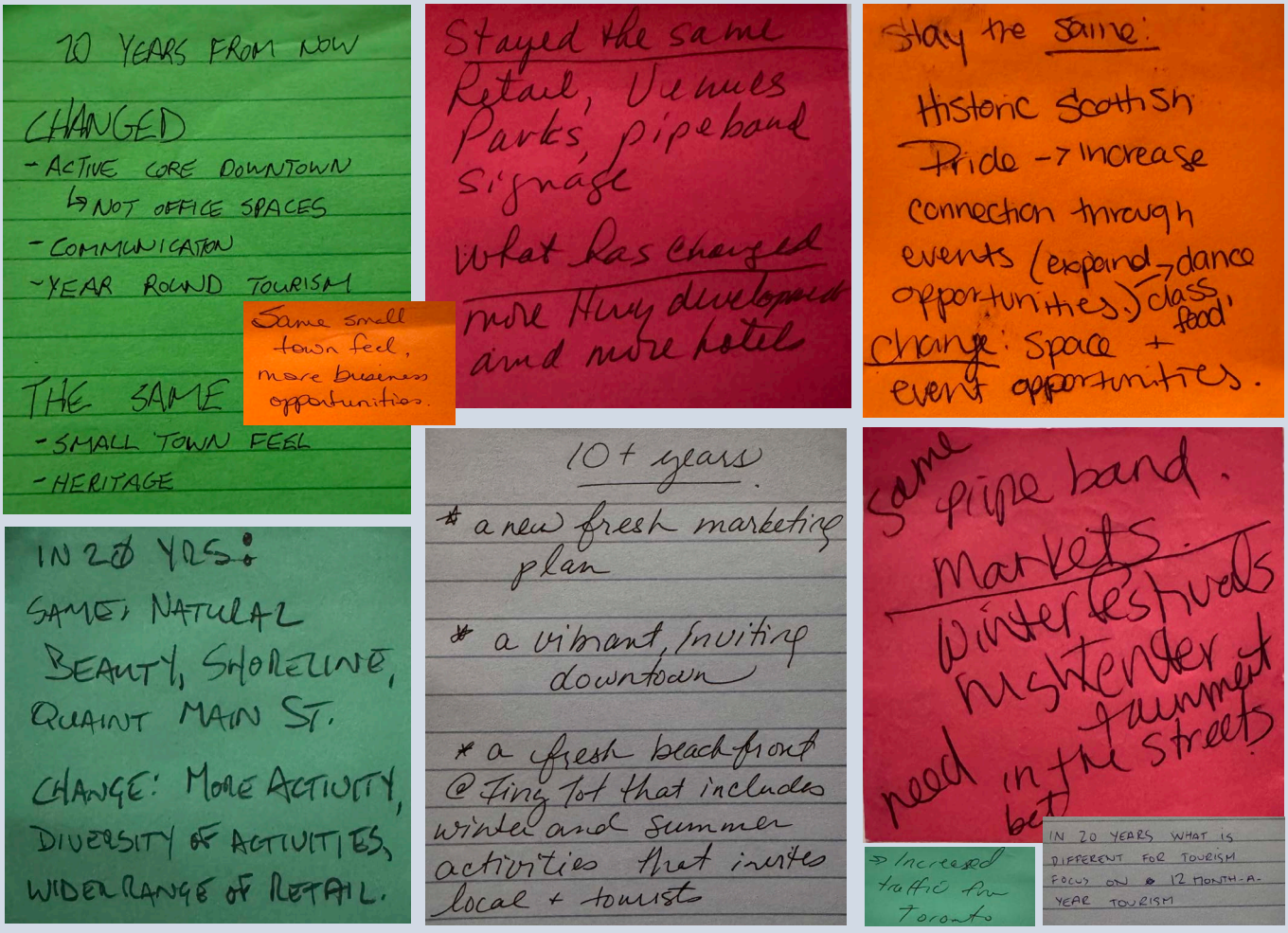
Opportunities

- Expanding the tourism season beyond the summer months.
- Expanding the tourism narrative beyond the town of Kincardine, including nature and trails (including cycling), golf, small communities, etc.
- Engaging existing "visitors" (i.e., marina-based arrivals, Bruce Power contractors) to visit the downtown commercial centre and explore the municipality more broadly.
- Attracting new businesses to Queen St. through incentives, focusing on experience-oriented operators/those that offer indoor-based activities & entertainment venues (i.e., "things to do on a rainy day").
- Establishing a tourism ambassador program (i.e., with high school students & businesses).
- Expanding marketing content and investments to attract visitors and guide visitor spending while they are in the municipality.
- Enhancing maps, signage, and visitor information resources (online and in-destination).
- Bridging gaps between event organizer capacity and Municipal staff capacity, and streamlining internal processes connected to festivals & special events.
- Examining processes and policies for events & festivals, and exploring opportunities for streamlining/accessiblity for the sake of event organizers.
- Expanding spaces to sit and gather informally.
- Exploring opportunities for events in the off season.
- Educating Council and staff on the value events and festivals bring to the community.
- Engaging regional organizations and leaders to support local events and generate opportunities (i.e., Community Foundation of Grey-Bruce).
- Enhanced visitor information content & services.
- Improving communications with businesses, including improved/streamlined communications with businesses between Municipality, Chamber and BIA.
- Examining municipal barriers to business expansion and improvement, & exploring solutions.
- More arts and culture-based businesses and venues.
- Enhanced bylaw enforcement, including parking enforcement.
- Regular tourism-centred check-ins and collaboration for Municipal staff.

Threats

- Winter weather and unpredictable road conditions limit the feasibility of a strong winter tourism season.
- Funding limitations and uncertainty threaten the sustainability/viability of long-standing events.
- Internal systems/capacity do not currently exist for effective tourism management.
- Escalating event production costs combined with shrinking corporate sponsorships and government grants threaten the long-term viability of local events, which are a tourism anchor.
- Lack of affordable housing hinders businesses and tourism operators from recruiting minimum-wage and seasonal staff.
- Quick-paced tourism growth would disrupt Kincardine's small-town character and overwhelm local infrastructure & capacity.

We asked: Looking ahead 10 years, what would you like to see change, and what would you like to stay the same? Here are some responses:



PART III: Areas of recommendation

Based on engagement findings, the Municipality may consider the following areas of recommendation as it develops its Tourism Strategy within the broader context of other qualitative and quantitative research findings. (Those marked with '*' indicates a recommended priority area of focus.)

Destination development & management

- Consider the actual need for tourism investment versus capacity and resource demands, and clearly define the Municipality's vision for tourism. Prioritize incremental tourism growth to respect staff capacity constraints and preserve local identity. Define the Muncipality's key target market, to inform marketing and broader tourism development efforts.*
- Revisit opportunities to implement visitor-focused fees, such as paid parking and a Municipal Accommodation Tax, to expand funds available to address tourism development needs & municipal capacity constraints, without impacting the tax base.*
- Explore opportunities for activating the waterfront. Prioritize pilot projects as an initial channel through which to test ideas and opportunities.*
- Explore opportunities to connect the waterfront more directly to the commercial centre (i.e., through shuttle services, informational/directional signage, maps, etc.).
- Explore opportunities for developing shoulder-season programming and events in collaboration with partners (i.e., BIA, Chamber, Bruce County, RTO 7). Consider how to leverage existing tourism product by introducing "signature" local events, routes, trails, and experiences to promote in spring and fall.
- Consider how the Municipality can effectively leverage, activate and/or enhance existing assets to improve the visitor experience and entice greater visitor spending.
- Define a tourism ambassador program that may involve summer students, community services and public works staff, local community leaders, and businesses/front line staff.

Business attraction & support

- Work with the BIA and Chamber to define opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of communications.*
- Collaborate with the BIA to educate downtown businesses on most profitable operating hours, and to explore solutions to common challenges, rooted in mutual support (i.e., staff sharing to address capacity limitations when considering extended hours).
- Establish regular (quarterly or biannual) sessions with local businesses, with a specific tourism focus (education, training, etc.).
- Consider creating pathways that encourage local entrepreneurship, particularly to address gaps in activities and to enhance the visitor experience (including seasonal and year-round).
- Better promote and encourage utilization of the Spruce the Bruce CIP program for Product and Experience Development, to support the new experiences within existing businesses.*

- Develop a community tourism investment guide highlighting key tourism opportunities in the region, particularly for shoulder season experiences.
- Provide a business investment concierge service to support the development of critical tourism-related businesses through planning and development processes (internally and with external partners). Develop criteria to define what qualifies a business for this support.
- Consider engaging with residents to determine what they see to be missing attractions or experiences within the community (i.e., via survey), to guide experience development/ investment attraction efforts.

Brand awareness, marketing & visitor information

- Develop a Content and Marketing Plan that:
  - Defines the target market/core audiences, and how to effectively engage them.
  - Showcases visitor experiences throughout the Municipality, and throughout the year (this includes messaging, itineraries and campaigns that connect downtown Kincardine to other experiences in the municipality—nature, cycling, golf, small towns—in addition to content that focuses on downtown events and experiences in the summer season).*

    Note: Given the current perception that there is a "lack of things to do," consider leaning into the quiet appeal of Kincardine as a key message in the initial Tourism Strategy implementation period.
- Explore opportunities for enhanced wayfinding/signage along key corridors.
- Invest in enhancing the user experience and presentation of the KincardineWelcomes website.*
- Enhance the Municipality's library of visitor information (events calendars, maps, itineraries, etc.) and consider mobile and self-serve approaches to visitor information access in-destination.*
- Consider engaging with residents to determine what they see to be missing attractions or experiences within the community, to guide experience development/investment attraction efforts.
- Develop targeted communications and marketing strategies for residents to encourage community participation and local spending.

Events

- Work collectively with staff and event organizers to identify mutually beneficial tactics that streamline processes (internally and with external parties), minimize resource constraints, simplify applications where possible, and position all parties involved for success. For example, consider implementing:
  - a dedicated, limited (i.e., 4 weeks) intake period for event applications.
  - a small collection of public space set-up options/templates/maps that event organizers can choose from*
- Explore opportunities for alternate outdoor and indoor event locations/venues.
- Explore opportunities for supporting events while diversifying the local tourism narrative to anticipate shifts in the changing event landscape.

Developed by tante consulting inc. & Oosterbaan Strategy