

Schedule A to Bylaw 2019-030



Strategic Plan for Economic Development and Tourism

Submitted by:

Russ Grant, Economic Development Coordinator

Hastings Highlands Economic Development Champions Group

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Table of Contents

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
1. INTRODUCTION	6
1.1. Research and Information Gathering	6
1.1.1. Business Retention & Expansion Survey - 2015	
1.1.2. First Impressions Community Exchange - 2016	
1.1.3. Tourism Brainstorming Session - 2017	
1.2. Mandate	8
2. HASTINGS HIGHLANDS' CORPORATE VISION AND MISSION	8
3. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM <i>VISION AND MISSION</i>	9
4. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM <i>VALUES</i>	9
5. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM <i>PRIORITY GROUPS</i>	10
6. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM <i>STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND GOALS</i>	10
6.1. Marketing and Promotion	10
6.2. High-speed Internet	11
6.3. Business Attraction and Retention	11
6.4. Tourism Events and Volunteers	12
6.5. Housing	12
7. CONCLUSIONS	13



Strategic Plan for Economic Development and Tourism

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Karen Fischer Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Advisor

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Nancy Matheson Councilor and link to MHHBA

Carol Russell, MHHBA secretary, member Hastings County Economic Development and Tourism Advisory Committee, North Hastings Economic Development Committee Vice Chair, Hillview Farm & Studios co-owner.

Carla Van Balen Walter, owner Maynooth General Store, MHHBA Director

Amy West, MHHBA treasurer, owner West Pines Park Resort, Lake St. Peter

Claudia van Wijk owner and operator of Madawaska Kanu Centre and Owl Rafting

Taylor Grosklag who brought a youth perspective to our deliberations



Strategic Plan for Economic Development and Tourism

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Strategic Plan for Economic Development and Tourism is a “bottom-up” plan, building successively on five years of research, information gathering and consolidating of recommendations from over 50 local businesses through the comprehensive Business Retention and Expansion Survey, 10 residents and staff who took part in the First Impression Community Exchange and the 35 residents, staff, Councillors and business owners who volunteered their time and views in the Tourism Brainstorming Session. The resulting 154 total recommendations were consolidated by the Economic Development Champions Committee into the Economic Development and Tourism Vision, Mission, Values, Priority Groups and Strategic Priorities/Goals.

The Champions Committee suggests this Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan be in place for five years and reviewed periodically. This should include reports to Council and amendments based on new information or resources. This gives Hastings Highlands the flexibility to test the strategic priorities for goodness-of-fit 1) in our geographically very large and diverse area, 2) as Hastings County rolls out its new marketing plan, and 3) as an uncertain North American and world economy unfolds.

Hastings Highlands Economic Development and Tourism Vision: to be a unique, caring, progressive, economically self-sustaining community of communities rooted in our natural lake, land and forest assets. Celebrating a strong volunteer base, diversity of cultural backgrounds and superior lifestyle generating a mix of urban and rural opportunities.

Hastings Highlands Economic Development and Tourism Mission: to promote municipal economic vitality through creative business approaches, community strategies and collaboration with regional partners, based on innovation and entrepreneurship that foster quality growth and development. To retain a healthy, secure and sustainable environment, and promoting the best quality of life for the enjoyment of residents and visitors.

Hastings Highlands Economic Development and Tourism Values: economic development cannot take place in a values vacuum. It is particularly important that rural communities clearly identify the values they wish to preserve while growing. In fulfilling its economic development mission, Hastings Highlands will strive to maintain the following values: collaboration, comfort and familiarity, community commitment, enjoyment of simple things, radical inclusivity, respect for our natural environment, a safe environment, and a welcoming community spirit.

Hastings Highlands Economic Development and Tourism Priority Groups: this plan suggests an initial focus on four demographic groups that bring economic advantages to our area. The suggested priority groups are: businesses, both current and prospective, young families, young retirees, visitors -- provincial, national and inter-national.

Hastings Highlands Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Priorities: the Champions Group found the following five priorities rose to the top and are seen as strategic for economic development and tourism.

Marketing and Promotion - *It is crystal clear that the #1 economic development and tourism challenge for Hastings Highlands is that people simply do not know what or where Hastings Highlands is even when they are here. It is vital to address this gap.*

High-speed Internet - *Affordable, accessible and unlimited high-speed internet across Hastings Highlands is critical to attract new businesses and residents.*

Business Attraction and Retention - *A thriving business community is an indispensable magnet for economic development and tourism.*

Tourism Events and Volunteers - *Events are a cornerstone to attracting visitors to our area and key to an overall tourism strategy. How we work with our volunteers in promoting and presenting events is also a key to our success in organizing successful events.*

Housing and Accommodation - *Accessible, affordable housing and accommodation is the foundation upon which attraction of new businesses, young families and young retirees rests. Bolstering our short-term rental accommodation is key to attracting visitors.*

In conclusion, Hastings Highlands is ready for growth and development. We are uniquely located to take advantage of people seeking relief from urban stresses, both permanently and for holidays. Canada is likewise being viewed world-wide as a stable, friendly place to visit and do business.

The biggest asset Hastings Highlands has is its pride of place. This is reflected in the values context put forward in this strategic plan. This pride also appears in the vision and mission, which focuses on positive growth, not just any growth.

This economic development and tourism strategic plan builds on a solid base of successful businesses currently in place, and a genuinely open and welcoming community. We are ripe for expansion. Through careful, thoughtful follow-through of this strategic plan, Hastings Highlands will move forward to a prosperous future.



Strategic Plan for Economic Development and Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Hastings Highlands' 2015 Corporate Strategic Plan established a goal: create a strategic plan specifically for economic development and tourism. This goal set in motion three years of research and information gathering to establish the foundation of this plan.

1.1. Research and Information Gathering

1.1.1. Business Retention and Expansion Survey - 2015

Preparation for this economic development and tourism strategic plan began in 2015 with the launch of Hastings Highlands' Business Retention and Expansion (BR+E) survey. Fifteen residents were trained to conduct face-to-face interviews. Over 50 businesses agreed to be interviewed. Each interview lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours. The responses the business owners provided were extensive and comprehensive.

Some of the key findings:

- **Hastings Highlands businesses were already dependent on intermediate technology (IT) in 2015.** Only 25% of businesses reported low/very low use of IT, while 35% reported high/very high use, with the rest of businesses reporting at least moderate use of IT.
- **The majority (60%) of these businesses looked regionally, nationally and internationally as their primary markets.** Only 40% of businesses primarily used local markets. Another 35% primarily used regional markets; 15% primarily used international markets and 10% primarily used national markets.
- **The annual yearly sales of these businesses were fairly evenly spread** from the high end (over \$1 million) to low (less than \$100,000). One in five businesses reported annual sales over \$1million!
- **Businesses were optimistic about the future.** A solid 50% of businesses foresaw sales increasing. One third had expanded their business in the previous year.
- **Their optimism was backed by plans to expand in next 18 months.** Fully 1/3 planned to expand in the forthcoming 18 months.

Conclusions: in 2015 the majority of businesses were already dependent on IT. Hastings Highlands must keep up, or businesses will suffer. Businesses were already finding Hastings Highlands to be an excellent place in which to conduct and grow their businesses beyond municipal boundaries. Hastings Highlands needs to support businesses for regional, national and inter-national growth.

1.1.2. First Impression Community Exchange, 2016

To obtain information on how Hastings Highlands appeared to outsiders, the municipality took part in a First Impressions Community Exchange project. This initiative is similar to a “mystery shopper” program. About 10 people from Hastings Highlands visited the municipality of Muskoka Lakes assuming roles such as a business owner looking to re-locate there, a single mother wanting to move there with her children, a tourist looking for a place to eat and stay overnight, etc. Likewise, Muskoka Lakes sent a similar group of role players to Hastings Highlands, and then provided a report of their experiences.

The key findings from this initiative were:

- **The visitors didn’t know what or where Hastings Highlands was.** They had to “google” us to find us. Upon visiting us, we appeared to be just a giant rural forested area, with little that stood out. People rush through on a series of highways to other more prominent places like Algonquin Park and Haliburton Highlands
- **We appeared to be run-down and shabby.**
- **Everyone was genuinely very friendly** – shopkeepers, residents, schools and municipal staff, all were very helpful, and went the extra mile to provide assistance.

Conclusions: Marketing is our biggest challenge. In the months since this project’s report was released, Council and staff removed and replaced dilapidated Scenic Route signs, out-of-date advertisement road signs, increased enforcement of housing and appearance by-laws, and local businesses improved their facades. Going forward it is important that Hastings Highlands’ residents and businesses retain our friendliness as part of our future growth.

1.1.3. Tourism Brainstorming Session, 2017

In 2017 the Maynooth & Hastings Highlands Business Association held a Tourism Brainstorming Session where 35 people spent the evening developing lists of recommendations to increase tourism in Hastings Highlands.

The key findings from this session include:

- **Marketing Maynooth and Hastings Highlands is vital.** This recommendation came in two parts: create a strong internet presence for Maynooth and Hastings Highlands. Today’s tourists rely on it. This recommendation was closely followed by the necessity for a hard copy comprehensive local guide containing a detailed map of area attractions, activities and businesses. Both the internet presence and hard copy directory must meet high urban design and delivery standards to really attract tourists.
- **Maynooth is the heartbeat of Hastings Highlands.** It has a Main Street with intriguing stores and architecture. It is where the two main highways intersect. It is the centre of municipal government. Plus, Maynooth offers gas, food and facilities that travelers need. The meeting attendees clearly supported a series of recommendations to make Maynooth more attractive to tourists. This included banners, access to public washrooms and following business hours.

- **Hastings Highlands surrounds Maynooth. It feeds Maynooth.** It has natural, outdoor and art attractions and services of its own that bring additional visitors and travelers to the area. The brainstorming attendees saw lots of room to expand Hastings Highlands’ offerings for tourists.

1.2. Mandate and Timing

The three reports from the aforementioned initiatives generated over 150 recommendations. Many are identical or very similar. A group representing a cross section of community interests was established as the Economic Development and Tourism Champions Committee – they were asked to carefully review the reports and from them recommend a Vision, Mission and Principles for ED/T, and then to establish the strategic priorities and goals of this plan.

The Champions Committee suggests this economic development and tourism strategic plan be in place for five years and reviewed periodically. This should include reports to Council and amendments based on new information or resources. This gives Hastings Highlands the flexibility to test the strategic priorities for goodness-of-fit 1) in our geographically very large and diverse area, 2) as Hastings County rolls out its new marketing plan, and 3) as an uncertain North American and world economy unfolds.

2. HASTINGS HIGHLANDS’ CORPORATE VISION AND MISSION

Hastings Highlands has an overall corporate strategic plan. The economic development and tourism strategic plan is complementary to the corporate vision and mission.

Overall Vision of the Municipality

Hastings Highlands will continue to be a vibrant progressive rural community working together to build a prosperous future, while fully realizing its motto “beautiful by nature.”

Adopted by By-law 2015-093 (November 18, 2015)

Overall Mission of the Municipality

Hastings Highlands will foster the development of a community that understands the importance of economic development and the natural landscape while enabling everyone to enjoy a desirable quality of life.

The municipality will achieve this through:

- embracing and enhancing honest and open communication,
- prudent infrastructure planning and management, and
- corporate integrity.

Adopted by By-law 2015-093 (November 18, 2015)

3. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM *VISION AND MISSION*

3.1 Vision for Economic Development and Tourism

To be a unique, caring, progressive, economically self-sustaining community of communities rooted in our natural lake, land and forest assets. Celebrating a strong volunteer base, diversity of cultural backgrounds and superior lifestyle generating a mix of urban and rural opportunities.

3.2 Mission for Economic Development and Tourism

To promote municipal economic vitality through creative business approaches, community strategies and collaboration with regional partners, based on innovation and entrepreneurship that foster quality growth and development. To retain a healthy, secure and sustainable environment, and promote the best quality of life for the enjoyment of residents and visitors.

4. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM *VALUES*

Economic development cannot take place in a values vacuum. It is particularly important that rural communities clearly identify the values they wish to preserve while growing. In fulfilling its economic development mission, Hastings Highlands will strive to maintain the following values:

- **Collaboration** – when a common purpose is identified, Hastings Highlands will share its experiences and resources with government bodies, local and regional organizations, businesses and individuals for the mutual benefit of all.
- **Comfort and Familiarity** – in reaching for new development, Hastings Highlands will preserve the ‘homey’ feeling of familiar spaces, people and traditions that are the bedrock of our current progress.
- **Community Commitment** – Hastings Highlands will work together as strong community of communities to make our area all it can be.
- **Enjoyment of Simple Things** – Hastings Highlands will evaluate new development against treasuring the simpler aspects of life with our neighbours and visitors.
- **Radical Inclusivity** – Hastings Highlands wants to be known as valuing everyone in the community and promoting diversity.
- **Respect for our Natural Environment** – all Hastings Highlands development proposals must respect the health and vitality of our land, lakes, rivers and air.
- **Safe Environment** – Hastings Highlands will assess development initiatives against a standard of promoting a healthy, safe environment for all.
- **Welcoming Community Spirit** – Hastings Highlands is known for greeting and engaging visitors and residents with an authentic welcoming spirit; this must be preserved.

5. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM PRIORITY GROUPS

This plan suggests an initial focus on four demographic groups that bring economic advantages to our area. This is not to suggest that other groups are unimportant, or that other groups do not deserve attention. This is solely a suggestion that these groups merit attention in planning for growth.

The suggested priority groups are:

- Businesses, both current and prospective. The more successful businesses there are within Hastings Highlands, the more income they generate and the more people they employ.
- Young families, their children are our future. Without families with young children we will lose our schools and become de-populated.
- Young retirees, with their time, skills and investments. The baby-boomers are retiring with better health and wealth and are looking for places like Hastings Highlands to fulfill their retirement dreams.
- Visitors, provincial, national and inter-national. Hastings Highlands' natural geology, geography and wildlife are very attractive to visitors from all over in Ontario, and Canada is more appealing to visitors from Europe and the far east as the world becomes more unstable.

6. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND GOALS

In consolidating the 154 recommendations from the research and information gathering, the Champions Group found the following five priorities rose to the top and are seen as strategic for economic development and tourism.

6.1 Marketing and Promotion

It is crystal clear that the #1 economic development and tourism challenge for Hastings Highlands is that people simply do not know what or where Hastings Highlands is. It is vital to address this gap while capturing their attention when they are here. We cannot attract new businesses or residents if we are unrecognized. Hastings Highlands is doubly challenged because Hastings County is likewise unknown, compared to other more prominent counties. Hastings County Council recently approved a new brand that fits perfectly with the directions and conclusions of Hastings Highlands' three reports mentioned above.

6.1.1 Marketing/Promotion Goals:

- Leverage the new Hastings County brand to create a strong Hastings Highlands identity.
- Introduce measures to make our downtowns and hamlets tourist friendly.
- Promote the best possible digital experience about Hastings Highlands by building Hastings Highlands.ca to urban standards and radically increasing local businesses' web presence.
- Bolster world-class experiential tourism in Hastings Highlands to attract provincial, national and international tourists.
- Collaborate with our county and regional partners to create an outstanding presence at provincial and national trade shows (such as the Snow mobile/ATV Powersports Show, Zoomer (active retirement) Show and the Cottage Life Show) to increase our presence to these relevant audiences.

6.2 High-speed Internet

Affordable, accessible and unlimited high-speed internet across Hastings Highlands is critical to attract new businesses and residents. 1) Our region is ideally located equidistant to Toronto and Ottawa. This means that IT-dependent businesses can benefit from locating here while being close enough to urban services and attractions to reach them regularly. 2) Families with young children and young retirees, two desirable demographic groups for future growth and tax base, require high-speed internet for daily life. Without it, they will not move here.

6.2.1 High-speed Internet Goals

- Advocate this vital need of ours with the County, provincial and federal governments and internet companies.
- Investigate alternative solutions.

6.3. Business Attraction and Retention

A thriving business community is an indispensable magnet for economic development and tourism. Hastings Highlands has a remarkable, and little-known number of successful local entrepreneurs. In addition, the growth of on-line shopping, the low cost of purchasing land, lower tax rates, our receptiveness to new businesses, lower labour rates and the benefits of our quality of life are all factors that attract new businesses and retain current ones.

6.3.1 Business Attraction and Retention Goals:

- Celebrate local entrepreneurs.
- Inspire and educate local businesses about expansion opportunities.
- Solicit potential new business ventures to locate here.

6.4 Tourism Events and Volunteers

Events are a cornerstone to attracting visitors to our area and key to an overall tourism strategy. Hastings Highlands must have a full year calendar of events that will appeal to and attract an optimum number of visitors and build our reputation as a four-season playground. Central to this is an energetic, passionate, stable volunteer base.

6.4.1 Tourism Event Goals:

- Assess the current suite of events in Hastings Highlands, and recommend 1) new events, and 2) the elimination or revitalization of current events.
- Work with regional partners to ensure events run throughout the years and to be in sync and complementary. This can include opportunities for cross-marketing.
- Determine and promote 'best practices' to support events' volunteers.

6.5 Housing and Accommodation

Accessible, affordable housing and short-term rental accommodation is the foundation upon which attraction of new businesses, young families and young retirees rests. There is a significant shortage of short-term rentals, long term rentals, starter and smaller homes, seniors' housing and affordable housing in the region. Hastings Highlands needs to work with other municipalities in the region to address these needs. This is a key to attracting young retirees, young families and home-based businesses. Larger businesses will not locate here, if there is no housing for their employees.

6.5.1 Housing Goals:

- Conduct a complete review and evaluate Hastings Highlands' current zoning bylaws and building code and identify necessary changes to promote creative housing solutions.
- Become a catalyst for generating new housing and renovation of current housing by identifying and supporting community, financial and construction partnerships.
- Conduct workshops and provide support to locals interesting in providing some form of short-term rental accommodation.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Hastings Highlands is ready for growth and development. We are uniquely located to take advantage of people seeking relief from urban stresses, both permanently and for vacation. Canada is likewise being viewed world-wide as a stable, friendly place to visit and do business.

The biggest asset Hastings Highlands has is its pride of place. This is reflected in the values context put forward in this strategic plan. This pride also appears in the vision and mission, which focuses on positive growth, not just any growth.

This economic development and tourism strategic plan builds on a solid base of successful businesses currently in place, and a genuinely open and welcoming community. We are ripe for expansion. Through careful, thoughtful follow-through of this strategic plan, Hastings Highlands will move forward to a prosperous future.