
HALDIMAND COUNTY

Memorandum EDT-M01-2020 Update on COVID-19 Business Recovery Efforts For Consideration by Council in Committee on October 27, 2020



To: Mayor Hewitt and Members of Council
From: Lidy Romanuk, B.A., EcD., Manager of Economic Development & Tourism

The purpose of this memo is to provide Council with a brief update on the Economic Development and Tourism's COVID-19 Business Recovery Strategy following Report EDT-07-2020, and a previous update that was circulated via email in late July 2020. These key priorities were identified to support local businesses through the ongoing stages of the pandemic and were developed in consultation with the Business Development and Planning Advisory Committee in May 2020.

As of June 8, 2020, Economic Development and Tourism staff began to implement strategies in four priority areas; the following updates are related to these efforts:

1. Marketing/Advertising

- Execution of business recovery marketing strategy including:
 - In-house development and widespread distribution of “Your Guide to Sourcing Local Food”, a 4 page pull-out featuring restaurants, farmers markets and farm stands. The pull-out ran in The Sachem in July and was paired with sponsored digital advertisements, a radio ad produced in-house and featured on 92.9 the Grand, and a webpage.
 - In-house development and widespread distribution of “Your Guide to Unique Local Shopping & Wellness”, a 4 page pull-out featuring locally made products, as well as wellness services that help relax, restore and rejuvenate. The pull-out ran in The Sachem in August and was paired with sponsored digital advertisements and a webpage.

Both of the above mentioned features included the development of a collaborative marketing program which shared advertising costs between the County and participating local businesses.

 - In-house development and widespread distribution of “Road Trip Haldimand”, a reversible map featuring two self-guided driving routes: ‘South Haldimand Lakeside Ride’ and ‘West Haldimand Route’. Both routes highlighted historical insights, photo ops and interesting businesses and stops along the way. The insert ran in the Haldimand Press in September and was paired with sponsored digital advertisements, a radio ad produced in-house and featured on 92.9 the Grand, and a webpage.

Full size, coloured copies of each of these marketing pieces have been included in the Councillor folders for interest/information purposes. Businesses were engaged in the opportunity and EDT staff have received inquiries about what features will be developed next, as they saw value in the opportunity.

- Participation in the Ontario Culinary Alliance's ‘Great Taste of Ontario’ as mandated in Haldimand's Fed Dev Ontario, Regional Recovery Relief Fund (RRRF) agreement. Each season, Tourism Haldimand will submit a new local passport listing and three accompanying itineraries. The passport program is designed to guide visitor planning and inspire future trips.

The first round of the passport and itineraries were recently released and have been shared by some of the featured businesses.

- To help businesses promote “Shop Local”, Haldimand has created a graphic element (below).



Chambers, BIAs, Board of Trade as well as local businesses are being encouraged to use this graphic element to unite the efforts of all sectors of the business community in promoting local. Haldimand businesses are free to use the graphic in any customer-facing promotions including on-line, in advertising, signs, flyers and brochures. The graphic has been used by local businesses, for example it was included in print promotions for a local restaurant. In addition, the Caledonia BIA (one of our partners) has included it in some of their social media posts.

- Continued strategic use of social media for tourism focusing on positive “open for business” messaging, sharing content from local businesses and emphasizing shop local opportunities/partnerships.
- Onboarding of a full-service boutique creative agency “Tango Creative Group” to assist in the implementation of digital solutions for Haldimand County Economic Development and Tourism, including the execution of memorable marketing campaigns. To date, they have facilitated digital campaigns for Road Trip Haldimand and are launching creative for Digital Main Street – Digital Service Squad & Local Vendor Request both in print and social media by the end of October. Planning is underway for a shop local holiday campaign.
- On going communication and consultation with the Marketing/Advisory committee that includes representatives from Business Improvement Areas, Chambers, Business Development and Planning Advisory Committee, Grand Erie Business Centre and Economic Development and Tourism staff.

Marketing campaigns continue to be modified as necessary to reflect the current realities. All campaigns are in line with current local guidelines, and are targeted to local and neighbouring communities. Messaging reminds travellers to “consult with public health guidelines for safe travel practices” and to follow all of the precautions, including wearing masks indoors when physical distancing is not possible, frequent hand washing, maintaining physical distancing, as well as limitations on gatherings and travel. Alternative messaging includes planning for future trips.

The above marketing campaigns and the advertising services that have been retained are primarily funded through the \$167,000 grant Haldimand County received from Fed Dev Ontario (RRRF) in partnership with the Tourist Information Association of Ontario. These funds are to be directed to supporting the tourism sector and businesses that are connected to this sector.

2. Resources and Information Provision to Local Businesses

- Development of a Haldimand source list for personal protective equipment (PPE); including posting the resource online at BusinessHaldimand.ca.

- Haldimand County, Economic Development and Tourism (EDT) has partnered with the Grand Erie Business Centre to offer the Digital Main Street Program. Digital Main Street assists main street businesses to reach their potential by adopting digital tools and technologies to increase their online/digital presence. This includes things such as digital assessments, updates to their google my business profile, 360 photography of the business, social media strategies, e-commerce and website development supports. Additionally, the Digital Service Squad can assist businesses in applying for a Digital Transformation Grant, which provides further access to training and guidance, as well as a grant of up to \$2,500 to assist with digital transformation costs incurred by the business. Four (4) contract staff have been hired within the EDT Division and will be working on this project until late February 2021. EDT was successful in obtaining \$94,000 in Digital Main Street funding for this project (including all wages) through Fed Dev Ontario and the Province of Ontario in partnership with the Ontario Business Improvement Association. To date 40+ Haldimand businesses have indicated an interest in learning more about the program, and as of October 21st the Digital Service Squad has received 29 leads via their referral platform, completed 9 digital assessments, and provided 5 full consultations including one business that has completed the required training to apply for the digital transformation grant.

The Digital Service Squad has already received feedback from business owners such as:

“Having you here gives us hope for our business especially during the pandemic.”

“We are always looking for ways to improve our website and as our online sales have picked up, we are excited to work with the DSS team to find new solutions.”

“I think it is great that Haldimand County and the Grand Erie Business Centre are able to provide this free service to local businesses. With the help of the DSS I am applying for the Digital Transformation Grant to help my goals come to fruition.”

- Economic Development and Tourism is also reaching out to populate a list of Haldimand vendors who provide technical services to small businesses to further support Digital Main Street programming. The intent is to refer local businesses to Haldimand vendors where possible.
- Haldimand County is celebrating Small Business Week virtually by offering 8 online workshops and webinars throughout the week of October 19-23. Online workshops and webinars are being offered in partnership with the Brantford Brant Business Resource Centre (BRC); all sessions are free and open to all local business owners within Haldimand. Topic highlights include: Market Research, Remote Selling, Tax Seminar with the Canada Revenue Agency, Managing Stress, and a keynote address with John’s Crazy Socks – entrepreneurs that grew a bootstrapped start up to a \$5 million dollar business in less than three years. The availability of these free resources has been promoted to local business via paid social media advertisements, direct correspondence to key business groups through the Haldimand Business Network, organic posts on the Haldimand County Corporate Facebook account, a media release and a newsletter campaign.

3. Outreach to Local Businesses

- Business Retention Survey: Between June 15 and July 24, 879 businesses were contacted to complete COVID-19 Impacts Survey; of these, 151 completed a telephone survey. In total, 175 businesses received the survey in a digital format, with 32 completions. Out of those survey completions, 114 businesses requested EDT follow-up, all of which have been completed. The following insights were gleaned:

Recommendation #1: When speaking to business owners, staff found anecdotally that many businesses were in the process of recovering from initial impacts. Business owners were re-opening or planning on how to re-open, but their major concern was regarding how to get people back in their stores safely. In order to address this, staff took the following actions:

- Creation of additional content on Haldimand County's Business Haldimand webpage including sector specific best practices related to COVID-19; federal, provincial and local funding programs and resources; free toolkits and webinars; and key contacts including the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit and local business centres.
- Haldimand County received funding from Fed Dev Ontario through the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario to invest in a number of marketing initiatives to promote local businesses and tourism to Haldimand County residents and neighbouring jurisdictions. To date EDT has 7 digital campaigns and 3 print campaigns, completed or in market; with several more in the planning stages.
- Staff have partnered with local experts to offer eight virtual workshops to businesses who are struggling via the Small Business Week priority.

Recommendation #2: Businesses are interested in making health and safety upgrades to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, they just need help staying informed. In order to address this staff took the following actions:

- Updated health and safety information via the Business Haldimand webpage including links to funding opportunities for health and safety expenses, municipal by-laws pertaining to businesses health and safety and information regarding where individuals can source personal protective equipment. Staff continue to support businesses by providing resources to open and operate safely and address business inquiries regarding these concerns.
- In addition to keeping the BusinessHaldimand.ca website updated with the resources mentioned above, staff are continuing conversations with local partners (including Haldimand's Business Development and Planning Advisory Committee and the Haldimand Business Network) to assess gaps in health and safety information. Over the course of the pandemic these groups have been essential in identifying gaps and setting priorities for businesses needs early on in the business recovery process.

Recommendation #3: There is a disconnect between businesses awareness of government programs and their willingness/ability to access them. Many businesses were reluctant to seek out government funding as they felt they could survive without it; and many businesses who did apply were unsuccessful in receiving funding. In order to address this staff took the following actions:

- Staff have provided resources on the BusinessHaldimand.ca website as to why receiving help from the government and local business organizations during this difficult time is important both fiscally and from a mental health perspective (instead of choosing to face obstacles alone and unequipped). EDT is exploring the possibility of developing a marketing campaign to reach these business owners. The objective of the campaign will be to remove the stigma associated with reaching out for help and to promote local available resources.
- Connecting directly with impacted businesses, as appropriate, to promote grant releases and funding such as the local Regional Recovery Relief Funds facilitated through the Grand Erie Business Centre.

- Businesses also indicated they have had challenges with using technology to adapt to the current business climate, but were unaware of where to turn for assistance with this. To address this need, Haldimand County has applied for and successfully received funding to participate in the Digital Main Street Program which provides funding and on-to-one consultation (via the new Digital Service Squad) to assist businesses with everyday technology challenges. This is a joint partnership with the Grand Erie Business Centre (GEBC).

4. Regulation/Program Enhancements

- Review of the existing Community Improvement Program (CIP). EDT investigated if funds would be suited for reallocation to assist businesses with physical infrastructure improvements required as a result of COVID-19 safety protocols. It was determined to pause moving forward with this initiative at this time due to staff capacity and timing, and given that any changes to the program would be very limited in scope (in terms of what can be funded) and the fact that grants cannot be applied retroactively (with most businesses already having completed their retrofits).
- Promotion of the Southwest Ontario Tourism Corporation (SWOTC) 'Safe Openings' Program. The program allowed tourism operators within Ontario's Southwest to be reimbursed for a portion of their safe opening expenses (i.e. PPE). The program allowed for expenses up to \$1,000 (pre-tax) rebate for items purchased to meet safety requirements to allow the safe re-opening of their business. Reimbursements were retroactive to April 1, 2020 and an intake took place on a first-come-first-served basis starting on September 15th. All funds available were allotted and of these applicants, 7 Haldimand businesses were successful in receiving funds from this program. SWOTC is currently sourcing additional funding, which may make an additional intake possible in late 2020.
- Exploration of an online shopping option to establish a centralized Haldimand Marketplace for artists, artisans, small retailers, tourism experiences/services. This will compliment the work of the Digital Service Squad by establishing a collaborative venue for those businesses with existing e-commerce sites and those created through the Digital Main street program. Earlier this year, Economic Development and Tourism reached out to the three Chamber of Commerce organizations that receive funding from the County to operate the Tourist Information Centres in Cayuga, Caledonia and Dunnville. The purpose of the outreach was to confirm whether the Tourist Information Centres would be opening for the Summer of 2020 and if they would be hiring a summer student. Further, a request was made to redirect these funds to promoting businesses through an online community marketplace. Unanimous support was received from all three organizations to redirect a total of \$12,000 (\$4,000 from each organization) for this purpose.

In closing, supporting the restarting of Haldimand's local economy through focusing on the above priorities will remain EDT's top focus. Staff is placing a continued focused effort on providing the resources businesses need in a single information point: BusinessHaldimand.ca. Key marketing activities as well as business engagement via the business retention program will continue. New service/product offerings such as a the collaborative Haldimand Marketplace for local businesses and technical supports through Digital Main Street programs, will continue to provide direct support to Haldimand businesses in the coming months.

Economic Development and Tourism continue to implement marketing tactics designed to create demand for local products and services and assist the business sector to market to new and existing customer bases, as geographically appropriate at the time. There are several new campaigns currently in the works. Coming up, staff are working on the development of a

Haldimand Holiday Wish Book that features unique products, gifts and experiences that are available to purchase for the gift-giving season. While still in early stages, staff are considering the development of an image rich booklet that will be mailed to each household in Haldimand and followed up with a significant paid social media campaign and featured on TourismHaldimand.ca.

Moving forward, staff continue to support local businesses in pivoting their services, products and method of delivery to meet new challenges and changing needs of customers and the environment within which we do business.