
HALDIMAND COUNTY

Report EDT-01-2025 Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy
For Consideration by Council in Committee on March 18, 2025



OBJECTIVE:

To present to Council the draft Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy (VES), and to outline the steps taken to identify opportunities for activating the Grand River as a tourism destination.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. THAT Report EDT-01-2025 Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy be received;
2. AND THAT the Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy 01-2025 be approved;
3. AND THAT the recommendations associated with the implementation and next steps as outlined in Report EDT-01-2025 be approved.

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Respectfully submitted: Mike Evers, MCIP, RPP, BES, General Manager, Community & Development Services

Approved: Cathy Case, Chief Administrative Officer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

As part of ongoing efforts to enhance Haldimand County's appeal as a tourist destination, Economic Development and Tourism (EDT) with input from the Haldimand County's Business Development and Planning Advisory Committee (BDAPAC), initiated the development of the Visitor Experience Strategy (VES) with a special focus on the Lower Grand River, being the segment of the river that runs through Haldimand from Caledonia to Port Maitland.

In early 2024, EDT was successful in receiving \$25,000 from the Tourism Development Fund to put towards the development of the VES with additional financial support from BDAPAC, Ontario's Southwest (OSW), and the Grand Erie Business Centre (GEBC).

The Visitor Experience Strategy (VES) will act as a planning and investment tool that will help guide staff in enhancing tourism in Haldimand County by improving visitor engagement and maximizing the potential of the Lower Grand River. The VES provides a clear framework with a phased implementation plan, outlining short, medium, and long-term recommendations. In addition to the VES, the strategy includes the introduction of three new 'Business in a Box' concepts designed to enhance visitor engagement and local economic growth. These concepts focus on a Cultural Experience, a River-Adjacent Culinary Experience, and an Outfitters Experience, each tailored to leverage the region's unique heritage, natural assets, and tourism potential. These business cases are designed to streamline the process for aspiring entrepreneurs by providing a ready-to-launch framework that includes resources, tools, and guidance needed to establish and operate a visitor-focused business.

At this time, Council is asked to approve the VES as a guideline for future service delivery and to inform future capital and operating budget proposals. Council is also asked to approve the recommended implementation plan and next steps identified within Report EDT-01-2025.

BACKGROUND:

The Grand River is not just a natural feature—it's a historical and cultural landmark, spanning 280 kilometers through Southern Ontario. It serves as the central axis for Haldimand County's tourism potential, offering opportunities for eco-tourism, cultural immersion, and nature-based recreation. The Grand River's vast biodiversity and rich history positions it as an ideal tourism draw. The region offers diverse recreational experiences—boating, fishing, hiking, birdwatching—while also preserving its cultural traditions.

The 2017 Council approved Tourism Strategic Action Plan identified that one of Haldimand County's most valuable natural assets—The Grand River—was being underutilized to its greatest potential, and that developing and animating the waterfront and connecting it with Haldimand's various communities would help to achieve much of what the County needs to do to become a successful tourism destination. Since then, Tourism Haldimand (part of Economic Development and Tourism Division), serving as the destination management organization, has been diligently advancing various programs and initiatives to support the tourism sector locally. These initiatives include the From Great to Grand Experiential Development Program (2022), the Tourism Innovation Lab's Spark Program (2022 and 2024), Grand River Rafting Partnership (2024), and ongoing (since 2017) Experiential Tourism training in collaboration with Ontario's Southwest along with increased marketing of these experiences.

Tourism is a key economic driver for Haldimand County, and the Grand River represents a significant yet underutilized asset in the County's tourism landscape. Numerous river systems across Ontario have integrated tourism into their economic models, but Haldimand's Grand River remains largely disconnected from the downtown cores and local tourism infrastructure. The intent of the Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy (VES) is to provide direction on activating and enhancing tourism along the Lower Grand River—characterized as the segment of the river running through Haldimand from Caledonia to Port Maitland—transforming it into a vibrant destination that celebrates Haldimand County's natural beauty and cultural heritage. The strategy aims to boost economic growth, enrich community life, and enhance visitor experiences, all while ensuring environmental sustainability. Key initiatives include improving river access, expanding recreational activities, and promoting cultural and historical attractions to attract a diverse range of visitors and encourage overnight stays. This framework serves as a roadmap to position Haldimand County as a premier destination for nature-based tourism, fostering local economic development.

As part of the VES, the "Business in a Box" concepts were developed to harness the Grand River's potential as a sustainable tourism asset. These actionable, well-researched, and fully formed business models are designed to attract private sector investment by equipping entrepreneurs, investors, and operators with ready-to-launch opportunities. Each model provides practical frameworks, strategic insights, and the tools needed to support informed decisions and successful ventures, contributing to the growth of Haldimand County's tourism sector.

ANALYSIS:

The County engaged KLB Consulting (KLB) for this project. KLB has significant experience across Canada working with other municipalities on tourism strategies and tourism-related projects. KLB has knowledge of Haldimand County having previously worked locally on the Great to Grand Program that

was launched in 2022. The build of the Visitor Experience Strategy (VES) consisted of two distinct inputs – Key Background/Industry Review and Stakeholder Consultations.

Key Background/Industry Review:

The initial phase of the project involved comprehensive desk research, aimed at gathering existing data and insights on the environmental, cultural, and economic aspects of the Grand River and its surrounding areas. This research included reviewing historical documents, previous tourism studies, tourism target segments, environmental reports, and strategic plans from various related projects. By analyzing this wealth of information, KLB was able to identify key trends, opportunities, and challenges that form the foundation of our strategic planning.

The VES builds on these findings by integrating a comprehensive framework that includes the essence of place, key demographic insights, historical context governance and ecological considerations, and target marketing segments. It also features comparative and Strength Weakness Opportunity Threat (SWOT) analyses, an overview of community assets, and input from key stakeholders. Informed by extensive community consultation, the VES outlines actionable short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations to guide implementation and achieve strategic goals.

Stakeholder Consultations:

During the development of the VES, KLB Consulting (KLB) completed a series of detailed stakeholder and community consultations recognizing the importance of local knowledge and community input. With the support of County staff, KLB engaged key stakeholders and regional tourism organizations to gather valuable input and feedback. These consultations were key to ensuring that the strategy reflects a collaborative vision and aligns with the broader regional objectives moving forward. These engagements were designed to capture a wide range of perspectives from local residents, business owners, environmental experts, and Indigenous representatives.

Consultations for the strategy included meaningful engagement with Six Nations of the Grand River, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA), local businesses, and additional organizations involved in the recreational use and stewardship of the river. Methods used included online surveys, in-depth one-on-one interviews, and targeted focus groups. The in-person targeted focus groups included meetings with Haldimand’s Business Development and Planning Advisory Committee (BDAPAC), businesses and a meeting that included staff from across numerous divisions. Each consultation session was structured to facilitate open dialogue and gather substantive feedback on the community's vision and expectations for tourism development along the Grand River.

Key themes that emerged from the feedback on the Visitor Experience Strategy (VES) included:

- **Sustainability & Environmental Protection (30%):** Emphasized integrating sustainable practices—such as regenerative tourism and conservation—to protect and enhance the Grand River’s natural environment.
- **Community Engagement & Inclusivity (25%):** Highlighted the need for broad, inclusive participation in tourism planning, particularly among Indigenous groups, ensuring local benefits and diverse voices.
- **Infrastructure & Accessibility (20%):** Addressed the demand for improved transportation, access points, and facilities to accommodate a growing number of visitors and residents.
- **Economic Development & Tourism (15%):** Focused on leveraging tourism as a driver of economic growth, job creation, and support for local businesses.

- **Cultural Heritage & Education (10%):** Stressed the importance of showcasing and integrating the area’s rich cultural heritage—especially Indigenous history—and implementing educational programs.

Recommendations and Implementation Plan:

The draft VES outlines an implementation plan with short, medium and long-term recommendations. The recommendations and implementation plans are intended to be flexible, recognizing that they will evolve over time as resources and partnerships become available. The implementation plan will guide staff in prioritizing annual workplan initiatives to ensure a river focus for the next 5 to 10 years with the purpose of growing the tourism sector and maximizing the offerings along the Grand River. Collaboration with local businesses, Indigenous communities, and tourism organizations will be essential to realizing the vision. It is understood that not all initiatives may be achievable and that review and prioritization of recommendations over time in alignment with broader County priorities will be required, including careful review of budget limitations/implications. Below is a summary of the recommendations and proposed implementation plan for consideration. An additional column has been added that addresses the effort/cost for each recommendation and identified as follows:

1. Minimum staff effort/cost implications – anticipated to be able to be accommodated in annual work program with existing resources.
2. Moderate staff effort/cost implications – needs to be balanced with other priorities; likely can be accommodated with existing resources or the additional costs are overall fairly minor.
3. Significant staff effort/costs implications – project needs to be made a priority for annual work program with advance (multi-year) planning; additional resources and/or capital investments would be required.

Recommendations: Short Term (1-3 Years):

Recommendation 1: Implement a Tourist Feedback Mechanism

Establish Feedback Channels

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|-------------|
| Online Surveys: Reinstate mobile-friendly feedback forms on the tourism website; include QR codes on signage key locations. | Minimum |
| Physical Feedback Methods: Install suggestion boxes and provide printed feedback cards at visitor centers, attractions, and accommodations. | Moderate |
| Collaboration with Local Businesses: Re-establish partnerships with restaurants, accommodations and similar businesses to gather feedback through incentives and co-marketing. While pre-COVID partnerships saw limited participation, engagement can be boosted with strategies like co-marketing, 'community champion' recognition, or simplified digital feedback tools. | Moderate |

Share Feedback with Stakeholders:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Data Compilation: Aggregate and analyze feedback to identify trends and improvement areas. | Minimum |
| Regular Reporting: Provide quarterly reports to local businesses via email newsletters or meetings, outlining actionable insights and recommendations. | Minimum |

Recommendation 2: Foster Local Business Support and Collaboration

Collaborative Marketing:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Networking Events & Workshops: Facilitate opportunities and leverage existing Tourism Network Meetings for idea-sharing, joint marketing, and partnership development. | Minimum |
| Collaborative Opportunities: Encourage combined offerings in packages and itineraries combining river activities with accommodations and surrounding attractions. | Moderate |
| Business Toolkit Promotion: Raise awareness of online resources for marketing, branding, and operational guidance through newsletters, social media, and webinars. | Minimum |

Support Development of Itinerary-Building Tools:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Guidance and Support: Inform and support businesses in securing upcoming grants to develop itinerary building apps or online platforms. Provide guidance on tool development, enhancing both visitor planning and local business visibility. | Significant |

Explore Options for Short-Term Rentals (STR):

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Policy Exploration and Compliance Support: Research best practices, explore potential of Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT) options, collect feedback and offer advisory services to property owners looking to explore alternative accommodation strategy. | Moderate |
| Education & Resources: Develop and offer workshops, templates, and online tools for regulations, safety standards, and hospitality best practices. | Moderate |

Secure Private Investment for Business Cases:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|---|
| Investor Engagement & Marketing: Develop high-quality materials that communicate the financial and community benefits of each "Business in a Box" model, and employ tailored, persona-based marketing to engage targeted investors at key regional events and exclusive presentations. | Significant (initiated in 2025 as part of the BDAPAC workplan and budget) |
| Networking & Success Showcasing: Host invite-only events and intimate roundtable discussions while highlighting successful tourism investment case studies through local and industry media. | Significant |

Investor Relationship Building:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Investor Engagement & Collaboration: Assign a dedicated EDT liaison to manage inquiries and track interactions, while partnering with local chambers, industry associations, and existing investor networks to jointly promote investment opportunities. | Significant |
| Local Ambassadors & Concierge Support: Engage community leaders as investment ambassadors to build trust and credibility, and leverage the Development Concierge Team for personalized logistical support and continuous investor feedback. | Significant |

Recommendation 3: Enhance Interactive Digital Engagement

Support Development of Digital Experiences:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|---|
| Pilot Programs: Test augmented reality (AR) tours and interactive maps, collecting feedback to guide future initiatives. | Significant (however, a pilot project is being implemented in 2025 with Grand River Rafting and Grand Erie Business Centre) |
| Training & Recognition: Offer workshops on digital tools; and collaborate with local business organizations to recognize innovative tourism projects to encourage adoption. | Moderate |
| QR Code Signage: Install QR codes at key locations linking to historical, cultural, and ecological multimedia content. | Significant |
| Collaboration: Partner with local experts to curate accurate content; allow vetted third-party submissions. | Moderate |

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Accessibility: Consider multilingual content and alternative formats for inclusive visitor engagement. | Significant |

Recommendation 4: Enhance Marketing Focused on the River

Develop Targeted Marketing Strategies:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|-------------|
| Promotional Materials: Build on existing brochures and maps by enhancing visuals to better showcase river activities, attractions, and amenities. Distribute materials at visitor centers, events, trade shows, and online. | Moderate |
| Digital Marketing: Create a Grand River section on the tourism website with interactive maps, testimonials, and multimedia. Use social media and newsletters to promote events, and highlight local businesses. | Significant |

Support Branding Initiatives:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|-------------|
| Unified Messaging: Provide branding resources to local businesses and align promotional materials with corporate branding guidelines Grand River Style and Signage Guide to ensure consistency. | Moderate |

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Support Branding Initiatives:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|-------------|
| Unified Messaging: Provide branding resources to local businesses and align promotional materials with corporate branding | Moderate |

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| guidelines Grand River Style and Signage Guide to ensure consistency. | |

Recommendation 5: Promote Sustainable and Eco-Friendly Practices

Ecological Preservation:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Collaborate with the GRCA: Schedule regular consultations to align new developments with conservation efforts and protect sensitive habitats and continue to develop mitigation strategies, and adapt environmental requirements. | Significant |
| Sustainable Guidelines for Businesses: Develop a best practices manual on sustainable tourism supported by workshops and online resources. Establish eco-certification programs to recognize businesses that meet sustainability criteria. | Significant |

Install Educational Signage:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Interactive Elements: Create themed self guided trails and install interactive signs highlighting biodiversity, conservation tips, and local history, utilizing QR codes and multilingual content for enhanced visitor engagement. | Significant |

Sustainable Tourism Practices:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Waste Management: Continue existing waste strategy management in high-traffic areas and implement visitor management in sensitive zones. | Significant |
| Transportation Initiatives: Promote non-vehicle transportation (bike paths, walking trails etc.) to reduce environmental impact. | Significant |

Recommendation 6: Monitor and Adapt Policies to Support Tourism Growth

Review Regulatory Frameworks:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Policy Reviews: Continue regular audits of existing by-laws, zoning regulations, and permits, incorporating stakeholder input and comparing with best practices from similar municipalities. | Moderate |

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|-------------|
| Updates and Innovation: Consider amending zoning by-laws and flexibility to ensure they allow for diverse tourism-related uses and identify opportunities to streamline permit processes for businesses and events. | Moderate |

Medium Term (4-7 Years)

Recommendation 7: Enhance Access and Infrastructure

Improve River Access and Infrastructure:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Enhance River Access Points: Continued evaluation, and where feasible enhancement of all County owned boat launches and docks with safety, accessibility, and eco-friendly materials in mind. | Significant |
| Washroom Facilities: Continue to expand number of accessible washrooms with AODA-compliant features in high traffic areas. | Significant |
| Develop Accessible Launch Areas: Design accessible launch ramps to accommodate mobility devices, and where feasible transfer systems. Explore floating docks, and adaptative equipment. Ensure signage is clear, and utilize visual and tactile aids where feasible. | Significant |

Expand Parking Facilities:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|-------------|
| Parking and Alternative Transportation: Where feasible, expand and optimize parking near river access points, including spaces for trailers and accessible parking. Encourage alternative transportation such as bike parking and shuttle services. | Significant |

Enhance Signage and Wayfinding:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|---|-------------|
| Install Clear Directional Signage: Install clear, branded signs with maps, QR codes, and safety information near major routes and parks. Improve digital tools for navigation and real-time updates to guide visitors, and explore multilingual options. | Significant |
| Enhance Regulatory and Safety Signage: Clearly display any regulations, permitted activities and emergency information near public river access points. | Significant |

Recommendation 8: Strengthen All Season Tourism

Promote All-Season Opportunities:

| Key Actions | Effort/Cost |
|--|-------------|
| Targeted Marketing Support: Promote all-season river activities through various channels and partnerships with local businesses and organizations. Highlight unique experiences with engaging content, joint promotions, and high-quality visuals to attract visitors year-round. | Moderate |
| Encourage Experience Packages: Support the creation of all-season itineraries (e.g., winter retreats) and boost visibility through municipal platforms. Facilitate partnerships via Tourism Network Meetings and online forums. | Moderate |

Longer Term (7+ Years)

Business in a Box Concepts: Ready to Launch

As part of the Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy (VES), three (3) new “Business in a Box” concepts have been developed to support Haldimand County’s tourism goals by enhancing visitor experiences and drawing new markets. Designed to align with both the strategic recommendations of the VES and Haldimand County’s priorities, these inspirational business cases showcase opportunities to strengthen the local economy by attracting investment, and supporting sustainable growth in the region. The intent of the “Business in a Box” concepts is to have a readily available concept to market to entrepreneurs/investors highlighting opportunities for new business development in Haldimand County and along or adjacent to the Grand River.

Each business case provides insights into key areas such as project planning, business need and outcomes, risk assessment, and investment considerations. These documents offer guidance for due diligence, helping potential business owners or investors confidently evaluate the viability and scalability of these opportunities. The primary audience includes investors, entrepreneurs, and businessowners who are looking for tangible, ready-to-launch tourism ventures.

Tourism investment and attraction is a term of Council priority and has been identified within the terms of reference of BDAPAC. As such BDAPAC has committed a portion of their 2025 budget to the development of a targeted investor engagement strategy that will help to advance the “Business in a Box” concepts and strengthen Haldimand County’s position as a unique tourism destination. The investment attraction project will focus on promoting business opportunities to investors while attracting independent restaurant operators and boutique retailers to the area. Implemented through a phased approach over 2025/2026, the project will involve developing focused marketing materials, showcasing opportunities at key regional events, and hosting exclusive discussions to engage potential investors.

Business in a Box Concept 1: The Cultural Experience

The Cultural Experience is a three-hour guided adventure that emphasizes the rich history and heritage of the Lower Grand River through storytelling, seasonal exploration, and hands-on culinary workshops. It offers immersive interactions with local traditions, landscapes, and flavors, encouraging deeper connections with the region’s history and community. This small-group experience provides an authentic and adaptable tourism opportunity that evolves with the seasons while supporting community engagement and economic growth.

Key Features:

- **Immersive Storytelling:** Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, historians, and chefs, share engaging narratives that bring both Indigenous and settler histories to life.
- **Guided Exploration:** Expert led walks highlight how nature shaped local traditions, showcasing native plants and seasonal changes.
- **Hands-On Culinary Workshop:** Participants prepare and enjoy traditional dishes using locally sourced ingredients, connecting with the region's culinary history.
- **Small Group Format:** Groups of 8-15 ensure a personalized and interactive experience.
- **Seasonal Adaptability:** Activities evolve throughout the year, offering unique perspectives each season.

Target Markets:

- **Urban Escapists** seeking peaceful, educational getaways.
- **Cultural Enthusiasts** interested in history, storytelling, and traditional cuisine.
- **Newcomers** looking to connect with local heritage and community.
- **Corporate Groups** seeking team-building or cultural learning experiences.

Business in a Box Concept 2: The River Adjacent Experience

Shipped is a unique shipping-container-style charcuterie and wine bar located along the Lower Grand River, offering a premium dining experience with breathtaking waterfront views. Featuring locally sourced charcuterie, fine wines, craft beer, and mocktails, it provides a sophisticated yet inviting atmosphere where guests can relax and enjoy the riverfront setting. Designed with eco-friendly, scalable architecture, Shipped can expand to accommodate additional shipping-container businesses, such as cafés, boutiques, and art galleries, creating a vibrant riverside hub. With accessibility by boat and pedestrian-friendly walkways, this concept enhances the Lower Grand River waterfront, transforming it into a dynamic dining and cultural destination while supporting long-term economic growth.

Key Features:

- **Unique Dining Experience:** Enjoy a locally inspired menu featuring artisanal cheeses, fine wines, and inventive mocktails on a beautifully designed patio, offering a serene waterfront setting.
- **Eco-Friendly & Scalable Design:** Shipping-container construction creates a sustainable, modern venue with the flexibility to expand, allowing for additional businesses to join and enhance the waterfront destination.
- **Flexible Accessibility:** Easily accessible by boat or foot, making it an ideal spot for both adventurers and those seeking a relaxing riverside retreat.
- **Takeaway Options:** Offers a bespoke picnic experience, allowing guests to enjoy curated food and drink pairings at scenic locations throughout Haldimand County.
- **Vibrant Destination Hub:** Positioned as a catalyst for waterfront revitalization, inviting complementary businesses like cafés and boutiques to transform the area into a thriving cultural and culinary hotspot.

Target Markets:

- **Urban Escapists** looking for a tranquil yet chic retreat with local flavours.
- **Adventure Seekers** combining boating or riverside exploration with a convenient dining experience.
- **Day-Trippers** are attracted to the unique ambiance and Grand River views.

- **Corporate Groups & Event Planners** seeking intimate, picturesque spaces for team-building or private events.

Business in a Box Concept 3: The Outfitter Experience

RiverQuest Adventure Co. is an outdoor experience provider that invites visitors to immerse themselves in serene waterways, lush wetlands, and unique ecosystems. This outfitter experience offers sustainable, nature-focused adventures along the Grand River, combining guided kayak and canoe tours with unique, immersive attractions. Expert guides lead visitors through the river's winding waterways, sharing insights into its history, wildlife, and ecosystems. Beyond paddling, this experience features a floating cinema, where guests watch films under the stars from their kayaks, and a moving café, serving refreshments on the water. Land-based options, including road cycling and guided hiking and biking tours, provide additional ways to explore the landscape. RiverQuest is a one-of-a-kind outdoor adventure that enhances tourism while fostering a deeper connection to the Grand River and its surroundings.

Key Features:

- **Watercraft Rentals:** Kayaks, canoes, and paddleboards provide an accessible way to explore the Grand River, with options for all skill levels.
- **Unique On Water Experiences:** Offering activities like the floating cinema and floating café, RiverQuest provides one-of-a-kind outdoor adventures that blend nature with innovation.
- **Guided Adventures:** Expert-led eco-tours, fly fishing expeditions, and hiking/biking excursions offer immersive experiences showcasing the region's diverse landscapes and wildlife.
- **Community Integration:** Collaboration with local Indigenous communities and conservation groups enhances cultural awareness and environmental protection.

Target Markets:

- **Urban Escapists** seeking tranquility and connection with nature through unique activities like guided paddles or on-water dining.
- **Adventure Enthusiasts** attracted to fly fishing, road cycling, and kayak explorations.
- **Day-Trippers** drawn to accessible, family-friendly outdoor activities and the floating café.
- **Newcomers** looking to connect with the region's culture and community through engaging outdoor experiences.

Next Steps:

Staff will review and prioritize all recommendations outlined in the Visitor Experience Strategy (VES) over time, taking into account available resources, financial and budgetary constraints, organizational capacity, and alignment with broader County priorities. As a first step, staff have identified a phased approach to implementation through their work plan, focusing on immediate actions to be initiated in 2025, as well as short-term initiatives to be executed over the next one to three years.

Immediate Actions (2025):

- Complete Phase 1 of the Investment Attraction Project in partnership with BDAPAC to highlight business in a box concepts and other targeted engagement by developing investor-focused promotional materials (presentations, brochures, digital assets).
- Soft launch feedback forms and online surveys to gather insights from visitors and businesses and re-establishing partnerships with local businesses to distribute the feedback forms.
- Leverage the existing Tourism Network Meeting to offer workshops and professional development.
- Promote and update the existing Real Haldimand business toolkit through the website and an online marketing campaign.

- Continue to promote and support Grand River Rafting in launching a visitor dispersion digital app. Staff will continue to play a supportive role in assisting businesses that wish to on board these tools.
- Update and print select brochures to highlight river activities, attractions, and amenities and distribute at key tourism focused locations across the County.

Short Term Actions (2026-2027+):

- Begin Phase 2 of the Investment Attraction Project in Partnership with BDAPAC by engaging potential investors through outreach, networking, and participation in regional/national investment events. (Engagement will be contingent on economic climate and budget.)
- Staff to review and research best practices for Short Term Rentals (STR) in other neighbouring municipalities, and begin discussing next steps for STR guidelines with internal staff.
- Development of itinerary building tools (digital platform) with local businesses and supporting partnerships.
- Develop a social media content strategy for consistent river-focused posts, including business spotlights, event promotions, and user-generated content. Utilizing hashtags and paid ads to expand reach.
- Integrate co-branding templates for businesses into online marketing campaigns to ensure consistent branding and incorporate these templates into marketing plans for 2026/2027.

FINANCIAL/LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:

While the current report does not include any immediate budget implications at this time, it does outline a variety of recommendations that will impact future capital and operating budgets. Costs related to the continued implementation of recommendations in the short, medium, and long term implementation will become part of EDT’s annual workplan and incorporated into the existing divisional budget or included into future budgets for Council consideration and approval.

The Visitor Experience Strategy serves strictly as a framework for identifying potential opportunities and guiding future discussions. It does not commit the municipality to provide capital or operational funding for, nor endorse, any specific business case or initiative. Additionally, it does not establish or imply any formal partnerships, agreements, or obligations with external entities. Any future decisions related to funding or partnerships will be subject to separate processes, including necessary approvals, detailed evaluations, and formal agreements.

The location recommendations included within the strategy are intended as general guidance and have only been reviewed at a very high level. Interested proponents will have to confirm zoning requirements, property permissions and permits and conduct independent due diligence to ensure compliance and suitability with Haldimand or external agency regulations. No assurances on site suitability are provided as part of the VES or Businesses in a Box. Additional information can be requested once more specific details are provided to each location.

STAKEHOLDER IMPACTS:

The Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy development—led by consultants KLB Consulting and their team in collaboration with staff from Economic Development and Tourism division—has been informed by broad and extensive community stakeholders (local residents, business owners, environmental experts, and Indigenous representatives) and staff input.

The draft Visitor Experience Strategy (VES) and business cases were circulated to various internal staff from Haldimand County including representatives from Legal and Support Services, Building and

Municipal Enforcement Services, Planning and Development, Community Development and Partnerships, Facilities Capital and Asset Management, Engineering and Capital Works, Facilities, Parks, Cemeteries and Forestry Operations, Financial and Data Services, Environmental Operations, Customer Experience and Communication, and Emergency Services to evaluate potential impacts on operations, staffing, budgets, and other relevant factors prior to seeking Council approval. Staff from these divisions also played a key role in shaping the direction of the VES through participation in several workshops facilitated by KLB early on in the project development.

REPORT IMPACTS:

Agreement: No

By-law: No

Budget Amendment: No

Policy: No

REFERENCES:

None.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Draft Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy.
2. Draft Business in a Box: Ready to Launch Business Cases.
3. Lower Grand River Visitor Experience Strategy Presentation.