



County of Simcoe's
Economic Development &
Tourism COVID-19 Recovery
Plan

January 2021

Introduction

In December 2019, the world saw the emergence of a new coronavirus, known as COVID-19. This new coronavirus strand was different from past coronaviruses like Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), as this strand travels faster and has more severe symptoms. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared an international pandemic with numerous countries including Canada stopping all non-essential travel into and out of the country. While the health challenges posed by COVID-19 are immense, the economic challenges presented are unprecedented. In March 2020, the Provincial Government announced the immediate closure of non-essential businesses and work from home measures to slow the spread of the virus. In addition, physical distancing measures requiring workforce and customers to be at least 6 feet (2 metres) apart, and the temporary elimination of group gatherings were implemented. In the summer of 2020, the Province of Ontario implemented a phased approach to re-open the economy to limit human interactions. Until a vaccine is available widely, the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to impact how human interaction occurs.

Through COVID-19 the local, national and international economies have changed, pivoting to adapt to these changes is needed for businesses to be able to survive and grow in these uncertain times.

In response to the initial COVID-19 closures in March 2020, the County of Simcoe's Economic Development Office (EDO) conducted Business Impact Surveys to determine how to best support the local economy. The Business Support and Economic Stimulus Action Plan was created and implemented to address the most immediate and pressing issues to help the local economy stay active. The Plan was approved by the Economic Development Sub-Committee of County Council on April 23, 2020, and updates were later approved on June 9 and October 13, 2020.

In September and October 2020, EDO in partnership with Tourism Simcoe County (TSC) undertook fifteen (15) focus groups within the geographic quadrants of North, South, East and West Simcoe with the key sectors of manufacturing, tourism, agriculture and entrepreneurship (technology/innovation) to determine what initiatives, supports and programs could be optimized to help with recovery efforts. The overall goal was to develop a plan that would move beyond immediate support initiatives and instead focus on developing strategies for long-term recovery effects in the local region.

Simcoe County EDO/TSC COVID-19 Recovery Plan

This Plan is meant to respond specifically to the needs of Simcoe County businesses during the uncertainty presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has in many cases accelerated trends that were already taking place, such as technology adoption, or further highlighted barriers being faced by regional businesses, such as access to broadband internet. As a result, there is a correlation between some of the goals and actions in this plan and the 5-year Economic Development Strategy Update, as many of these short-mid-term actions fit within the longer-term vision to drive economic prosperity in Simcoe County. This Plan is meant to be the immediate priority; however, the longer-term impacts and positioning of objectives and actions in the context of the broader economic development strategy update should be considered in its implementation.

This Plan identifies specific goals, objectives, and actions which will be further refined through the EDO and TSC Workplans for 2021.

EDO and TSC Working Together

This Plan relates to both the County's Economic Development Office (EDO) and Tourism Simcoe County (TSC). With common goals and partners, as well as a high level of expertise on both teams, both parties would benefit from an integrated approach to executing this Recovery Plan. It is recommended that the EDO and TSC meet regularly (suggested bi-weekly) to discuss progress on strategy activities and seek input from each other on continued implementation. Many of the activities in this Plan will cross multiple sectors. The EDO will take the lead on activities for all sectors, with the exception of tourism, including those that cover more than one sector, unless otherwise discussed. Tourism can be defined as the activities undertaken by visitors, also known as the visitor economy. The tourism industry encompasses all activity that takes place within the visitor economy. TSC will take the lead in promoting, supporting, and development/implementation of any tourism-specific activity, given their level of expertise in the field and connections to the operators. For activities that cover all sectors, the EDO should consult with TSC to gather feedback and insight on development and implementation of activities. It is recommended that an annual workplan is developed for each department to clearly articulate roles, responsibilities, and define where consultation is required before moving forward.

Goals

Goal 1: Continue to provide businesses with the tools, resources and connections they need to remain dynamic and grow in today's uncertain and ever-evolving environment.

Why?

- As of August 2020, the Canadian economy has been significantly impacted by the pandemic, causing massive job loss and sending consumer confidence to its lowest levels yet. While there was a significant recovery in terms of jobs and consumer confidence by the end of summer 2020, there is still a high level of uncertainty as COVID-19 numbers continue to rise.
- Businesses still face several significant challenges in areas where the County can have a limited impact without engaging multiple levels of government. There is a need for the County to advocate on behalf of the needs of the business community. Examples include broadband internet and funding programs for automation, innovation and technology adoption.
- Businesses noted that through the pandemic they have had to adjust their product/service lines, processes, and customers multiple times and continue having to do this. Businesses want more support, information, and resources to help them adapt. In particular, more training related to technology and automation.
- Many businesses have noted an increased opportunity to build their business locally, regionally, and/or globally, however the businesses indicated that their organizations do not have a good sense how to achieve this and what resources are available. Areas of interest for growth or upgrading included supply chain opportunities, as well as product/service/process/innovation/experience development and partnership opportunities.
- Businesses are indicating that there have been growth and expansion opportunities but one of the biggest remaining barriers is access to labour. The access to labour has been magnified due to COVID-19 as absenteeism levels are higher with the quarantines, lack of childcare spaces and Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) benefits.
- There has been a significant increase in domestic tourism activity and there is an opportunity to improve Simcoe County as a top-tier destination for visitors.
- During focus groups, a few businesses mentioned that supports were needed in specific areas, where local, provincial or national support was already present. While other businesses indicated there was too many notifications being sent out about new programming/supports. Communicating with businesses needs to continue to be a key objective for all partners.

Objective 1: Facilitate the development of business to business (B2B) connections that create opportunities for learning, innovation and collaboration.

Actions:

- Provide opportunities for businesses to connect in virtual spaces to share information focusing on industry needs and to explore collaboration opportunities.
- Identify potential opportunities for collaboration and value chain connections.
- Facilitate connecting businesses for strategic alliance, joint ventures and other opportunities.
- Explore with partners, opportunities to adapt existing mentorship programs to focus on the development of a COVID-19 resiliency (or recovery/pivoting) mentorship program.

Objective 2: Work with partners to offer educational events and tools to support and, where possible, enable businesses to effectively respond to and monitor existing and future business opportunities under the high levels of uncertainty created by COVID-19.

Actions:

- Maintain a portal of COVID-19 business support resources, information, learning opportunities, and sector trends.
- Promote and create additional resources to enable increased technology, automation and innovation adoption in response to COVID-19.
- Provide on-going support to the business community to get online and access e-commerce opportunities.
- Continue to provide education and support to tourism operators regarding product experience development.
- Engage the municipal and regional partners, where appropriate, in the development, design and promotion of resources and tools. Update municipal and regional partners regularly on activities and progress and provide recognition and opportunities for shared reporting to partners.

Objective 3: Increase marketplace share for the regional business community on a business to business (B2B), business to consumer (B2C), and tourism basis.

Actions:

- Support identification of regional business supply chains and support the connection of local suppliers/buyers.
- Connect existing tourism operators with outdoor assets and ancillary businesses.
- Promote Simcoe County as a four-season destination through marketing programs highlighting how to visit the County safely.
- Expand the Made in Simcoe County campaign in alignment with the provincial government's Made in Ontario program and showcase more B2C and B2B opportunities through the campaign.
- Provide information to help businesses identify opportunities in new marketplaces.
- Promote online platforms and resources that help businesses connect to local residents.

Objective 4: Be an advocate for the needs of the regional business community to address challenges and leverage opportunities.

Actions:

- Continue to advocate to other levels of government and regulatory bodies around challenges and opportunities facing regional businesses. This should include, but not be limited to: critical need for broadband infrastructure, access/funding for health and safety, funding for innovation and technology adoption, and programs impacting labour supply.
- Continue to work with regional and provincial partners such as Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC) to advocate regional or provincial issues in a uniform voice.

Objective 5: Support employers to attract and retain their workforce through periods of uncertainty created by COVID-19.

Actions:

- Offer information and support through subject matter experts related to the health and safety of employees including mental health/employee morale.
- Continue on-going workforce attraction and retention initiatives.
- Work with employers, provincial government, health care partners to explore ways to address return to work and other workplace concerns.
- Work with local post-secondary institutions and employers to explore new mechanisms to facilitate hands-on training for skilled trades.

- Provide information and resources for employers regarding best practices for remote working and remote hiring.

Objective 6: Improve destination related infrastructure to enable increased visitation to the region's recreational assets and tourism businesses.

Actions:

- Work with municipal and regional partners to improve the quality of regional trails for all recreational pursuits including signage, trail standards and trail connectivity.
- Support municipalities and operators in improving their wayfinding signage.
- Explore the introduction of new digital infrastructure, such as geofencing, to facilitate visitor movement and spend with tourism operators.

Objective 7: Work together with municipal and regional partners and the business community to build awareness of COVID-19 related programs, resources and supports.

- Engage municipal and regional partners to identify communications gaps and develop appropriate solutions. Give consideration to engaging the business community for additional input as appropriate.
- Work with municipal and regional partners to implement communications tactics.
- Measure and evaluate tactics regularly to ensure methods are effective and adjust as needed.
- Engage the business community to connect with their business peers to create awareness about available resources and their benefits.

Goal 2: Leverage targeted investment attraction opportunities that arise from COVID-19.

Why?

- Research indicated there is interest from multinational corporations in creating additional resiliency into their supply chain. This means those businesses will look to regionalize manufacturing inputs to ensure availability should future shutdowns of a geographical nature occur.

- Research also indicated that there may be an exodus from office space in highly dense urban areas to semi-urban or more rural areas to better facilitate social distancing and access to facilities in a safe manner.
- There is increasing demand to visit Simcoe County from the domestic tourism marketplace.

Objective 1: Continue to pursue and support strategic investment attraction opportunities that arise as a result of COVID-19.

Actions:

- Support supply chain needs and potential expansion opportunities.
- Encourage new tourism business investment to respond to the increased demand from domestic tourists.

Objective 2: Participate in opportunities with provincial and federal agencies, and other relevant partners, involved with trade and investment to promote Simcoe County businesses.

Actions:

- Identify new and existing export opportunities for regional businesses.
- Create awareness of opportunities for businesses to promote themselves.
- Act as a facilitator, where needed, to make introductions between regional and global businesses for the purposes of establishing new sales channels.