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SABA virtual event imparts timely and valuable advice

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By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At the South Algonquin Business Association virtual event held Feb. 4 via Zoom, participants at the event were treated to some valuable information and advice from Kate Monk from Explorers' Edge, Carolyn Barker-Brown from Community Futures, and Lori Marcil from Nature and Outdoor Tourism Ontario, to navigate the uncertain spring tourism season due to the ongoing pandemic. Each presenter also explained the steps their organization had taken to help tourism businesses through COVID-19.

SABA chair Gabriela Hairabedian and secretary Angela Pollak moderated the meeting, and thanked their guest presenters and everyone who was in attendance.

Kate Monk, the senior director of strategy and communications with Explorers' Edge was first to present. Explorers' Edge is the tourism organization representing the region that encompasses Algonquin Park, the Almaquin Highlands, Loring-Restoule, Muskoka, Parry Sound and South Algonquin. Funded by the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, it was founded in 2010 and is governed by a volunteer board of directors comprised of tourism operators.

Monk told them how Explorers Edge was helping tourism operators during both lockdowns, by getting information out to them, helping them make sense of it and constantly keeping in communication with them to help them address any issues and problems and motivating them to find new and creative ways to pivot their businesses to make money during COVID-19. To this end, they launched the Boxing Day resolution to motivate operators to push through the second lockdown and to persevere.

Monk told everyone about their new website, The Great Canadian Wilderness just north of Toronto, www.thegreatcanadianwilderness.com, which will be their universal brand, while Explorers' Edge will continue on as their business brand.

The Cottage Country Spirit Package was launched to promote local travel and to move people around the region as part of a partnership between Destination Canada and the provinces. Destination Canada invested $30 million in this initiative and Explorers Edge got a share of this grant to promote hyper local tourism within the regions it serves. The program provides incentives with vouchers for permanent and seasonal residents to use at local businesses like restaurants, shops, attractions and overnight accommodations.

Thousands of vouchers were distributed and spent at local businesses.

?They literally saved some operations from closing their doors. Some paid the rent with it. This program proved to be very popular,? she says.

Monk said the summer season was great for some of the tourism operators in South Algonquin, and that she feels domestic travel will probably only increase as time goes on with COVID-19, especially with the vast consumer audience the GTA provides.

Their Howl at the Full Moon virtual event on Jan. 28 was a successful way to help participants relieve stress and to win prizes in the process.

Fat Bike Fun Wheel promotion was a contest in partnership with various local radio stations, where callers could win prizes for revealing how they keep up their Cottage Country Spirit. package.

Travellers to the region were given exposure to local artists and musicians through the Winter Arts Collective, which helps these artists to make ends meet during the cold weather months.

The Campfire Comfort: Tales from Cottage County, where Explorers' Edge staff or regional tourism operators tell stories unique to their region. This entertained people and whet travellers' appetites for when travel is able to resume.

More Zoom meetings based on different products like paddling, photography, food and ATVs are also on the horizon, according to Monk.

Explorers' Edge has also gone into the travel agency business, so they can advertise and sell travel packages to domestic (and eventually international) consumers and take that revenue, process it and return it to the tourism operators. So far, executive director James Murphy had taken and passed the Travel Industry Council of Ontario course, and she was going to be taking it shortly.

Monk said they were also moving ahead with the social enterprise catalyst housing project. She said that the perception of tourism as employment is down 38 per cent, mainly because of housing and wages. So, she says there is a need to attract workers. To that end, they are working with Ryerson University and Georgian College to recruit people.

Monk mentioned they were also working with Humber College graduate students to research why urban students don't want to come and work in South Algonquin. Loneliness seems to be the prevalent reason uncovered so far, so Monk suggested the social scene in the region should be looked at. Another reason brought up was the lack of reliable and pervasive high-speed internet in the area, which not only would dissuade young people from coming up to South Algonquin, but would deter new businesses. This internet deficit also hampers the ability of existing businesses to use it to pivot their businesses during COVID-19 and also to apply online for programs and grants.

?There's a lot of foundational work still continuing. We are in a bit of a holding pattern but we're trying to retain those audiences so we can get going really quickly when we have to,? she says.

Next up was Carolyn Barker-Brown, loans officer and small business advisor with Community Futures Development Corporation of North and Central Hastings and South Algonquin, a community based non-profit organization. The Canadian government provides funding advice and support to a number of CFDCs across southern Ontario through the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario. They offer community economic planning and development, investment in local business and business development and counselling services. Through these efforts, these CFDCs help the province's rural economies expand and prosper. Their website is www.community-futures.ca.

Barker-Brown explained that her CFDC covered the area from Whitney, down to Madoc and Marmora and Tweed. They run the Regional Relief and Recovery Fund, which is run the same way as the Canada Emergency Business Account, with the same guidelines. She explained many businesses weren't able to get CEBA because their payroll wasn't large enough, but they can get RRRF. Businesses can get loans up to $40,000, and if they repay 75 per cent of it by the end of 2022, the other 25 per cent will be forgiven. It is a zero per cent loan with no payment until Dec. 31, 2021. This loan will cover all expenses incurred from April 2020 to March 2021.

The Local Initiative Program is an initiative they run to promote small scale projects by non-profits, municipalities and other groups to expand economic development efforts. The Rural Innovation Initiative Eastern Ontario, the Women's Entrepreneurship Strategy, retail makeovers and free workshops on a variety of topics are some of the other initiatives they offer.

Barker-Brown stressed to her audience that Community Futures was flexible with their financing options and did a lot of work with seasonal businesses.

?We will work with our clients to make sure that the financing solutions work for them,? she says.

Laurie Marcil, the executive director of the Northern Ontario Tourist Outfitters Association presented last, providing a brief overview of her organization and its achievements. NOTO was founded back in 1929 by outdoor tourism operators to create an organized voice for the industry in northern Ontario, and to present its interests to all levels of government. In the years since, they have broadened their mandate to include the interests of all nature and outdoor tourism operators across Ontario. More information on NOTO and their overall mandate can be found at www.noto.ca.

The first thing NOTO did when COVID-19 hit was to keep in contact with everyone in the industry to keep them apprised of the continuously evolving situation. This was done primarily through their free newsletter, and their publication, The Outfitter Magazine.

According to Marcil, the outdoor tourism industry was the first to develop stringent health protocols, vetted by the WSPS, to govern the sector and how it's run safely. This allowed NOTO to use that as a lobby tool to get government to allow them to reopen their businesses safely by showing the government they had these safeguards already in place.

Marcil said they were able to get the government to make changes to some programs based on feedback from their industry. Some businesses in the outdoor tourism industry couldn't apply to some of the programs because they had atypical payrolls, paying themselves with dividends. When NOTO pointed this out to government, they changed the application criteria.

NOTO got the deadline extended for the RRRF from March 31 to June 30 and have made promising strides to get the payback date for the loan pushed back 12 to 18 months, as 2021 looks to be as dismal as 2020 was with COVID-19. Marcil said it also looks like government will allow businesses to forecast to Sept. 30 and have their fixed costs be applied for and covered under the RRRF funding. They are still waiting to hear on another initiative they took on to have the hardest hit businesses qualify for more forgiveness on the RRRF loans.

Marcil said that NOTO was working on a recovery tool kit with resources to help outdoor tourism businesses. She mentioned that NOTO was behind using the available travel credits to promote provincial travel.

?We have something that people want, the outdoors. And how do we help our operators get through this? Some of them never had to think of marketing, they had their clientele from the U.S. forever and now they have to think about it, and there's a whole new educational piece we're having to do to help them out,? she says.

Marcil also spoke about the safe travel stamp, administered through the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario, which she felt would be very helpful to businesses when the borders to reopen and travel resumes.

?It's something operators should be looking into if they haven't already.?