

Visitors suggest improvements for Wollaston

Oct. 16, 2018

By Jim Eadie

What is FICE??

Recently, Wollaston Township residents received a flyer in the mail from their municipal Economic Development Committee asking that very question. This committee of council is made up of volunteers who advise council on ways to improve the economy of the township.

According to local businesswoman and committee chairperson Karen Challinor, the committee is working as hard as it can to implement projects outlined for 2018 in the current community based strategic plan.

On that list was FICE, better understood as the First Impressions Community Exchange program offered to municipalities and supported by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs.

The Wollaston committee, along with other interested residents, were asked to make several unannounced visits to prepare a detailed report on their first impressions of the community. Westport, Ont. was chosen for Wollaston's visits. In return, volunteers from Westport conducted the same visits to Wollaston and Coe Hill during 2018, and on Oct. 2 brought and delivered their report to the public at the Coe Hill Legion.

According to the OMAFRA website, people who visit communities for the first time can offer fresh perspectives and unique insights about services, transportation, accommodations and tourist attractions.

The report was presented by Westport residents Cynthia and John Pringle, business owners; Gerald Schwinghamer, town councillor; and Carmel McCartney, a senior citizen.

Eight people visited the area from Westport on three separate occasions between April 22, and May 23, according to their report.

The very detailed report was submitted in writing, but each of the four participants spoke. Here are some of the highlights:

The township office was easy to find, neat and tidy, staff was very helpful, and there was local information available. Maintaining a high level of cleanliness is important for any office, which is why many will use services such as [Green Facilities](#) to ensure that their office always remains tidy. Also noted the volunteer fire department, and the public school. Did not notice the library beside the school.

Downtown has good infrastructure, for example the street has good foundation and has not been neglected. Not a lot of places to sit and rest. Very welcoming feel, but some difficulty deciding where the downtown was exactly ? took a while to get our bearings. Suggestion that downtown businesses closed for the season, or just the day have signs indicating when business will be open again, instead of having the ?out of business? look. A lot of vacant buildings. Impressed with the amount of small business, and specialty shops.

Learned more about the town at the café. The food was great, the people were great, the bread was awesome.

In Westport all roads go through our town. Tourism drives our local economy. Coe Hill is off the beaten path, and you have to have a reason to come here, a highlight and then draw attention to it. For example, local support for Heritage Centre. That was a nice surprise.

The value of more active B&B's locally to make up for lack of accommodations. Has solved the Westport problem related to tourism. They house people, provide local income, and will put local events on their web listings.

Senses of the town: the smell of fresh baked bread; ?No Hill like Coe Hill? sign was striking; finger-pointing sign is a nice touch. Nice quiet little town.

Outstanding features: The café with their food, environment, and information ? seemed like a tourist information centre. The local campgrounds looked great and inviting even in the off season visit, draw a lot of people to the town. Barn chef, and Tin house.

Grocery store in town. Use them, or lose them.

Fairgrounds and outdoor rink clean and tidy.

Opportunities: Development and marketing of the Heritage Museum; specialty foods; using a camping theme to better brand the town; large special event such as Blackfly Day on May 24 as a suggestion. Suggestions: Continue to promote beautification, flowers, banners and gardens. Local businesses supported, and closed businesses maintained. A hard look at signage, and pay attention to sightlines and the visual experience.

Copies of the report are available by contacting the Wollaston Township office Coe Hill.Schwinghamer, and Carmel McCart