

HH looks to bolster economic development and tourism



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By Nate Smelle

Hastings Highlands council received a report from its economic development coordinator, Russ Grant at their Nov. 6 meeting regarding the municipality's Strategic Plan for Economic Development and Tourism Action Plan. Working in collaboration with a team of "Economic Development Champions," Grant has been instrumental in developing the plan since he first took on the role with Hastings Highlands in May 2018.

In the report, the economic development and tourism strategic plan is described as being "flexible." Designed to guide the municipality over the next three to five years, the plan is meant to be "adaptable to new ideas and circumstances as they unfold." Before the municipality begins pursuing opportunities for economic development, Grant said it is important for the community to identify the values it wishes to preserve while growing. The municipality's core values as defined by the team working on the plan include: collaboration, comfort and familiarity, community commitment, enjoyment of simple things, radical inclusivity, respect for our natural environment, safe environment, and a welcoming community spirit.

While putting together the plan, Grant said the team also identified four "priority groups" that have the potential to bring economic advantages to the area. The first group defined in the report is young families. Acknowledging that "children are our future," the plan recognizes how communities that do not have families with young children are at risk of losing their schools, and in turn becoming depopulated.

The second priority group listed in the plan is businesses. In order to encourage economic development the plan states that the municipality needs to promote both current and prospective businesses, because the more successful businesses there are within Hastings Highlands, the more income and employment they will generate.

Young retirees looking for a place like Hastings Highlands to settle and fulfill their retirement dreams are another of the groups given priority in the plan. Lastly, visitors from throughout Ontario, across Canada and around the world who "value the safe, relaxed and authentic rural environment Hastings Highlands has to offer" also made the list.

Taking into consideration the 154 recommendations to arise from the team's research and information gathering, Grant said they found five key priorities and goals. These include: marketing and promotion, high-speed internet, business attraction and retention, tourism events and volunteers, and housing and accommodations.

Following Grant's presentation, Karen Fischer, a member of the "Economic Development and Tourism Champions" team spoke on where the plan goes from here. Having worked with municipality over the past five years Fischer said she has seen the tremendous amount of work that has gone into developing a strategy for economic development and tourism. Now that the plan is in place, he said the next step for the municipality is implementation.

"Implementation is a financial commitment and a human resources commitment, and I think that it's something council needs to take a good look at right now," said Fischer.

"The timing is good because we are moving into budget discussions, and there will be budget implications with implementation.

This is really a fork in the road. We often hear people talk about plans that create dust on the shelf, and this is an opportunity to make sure that doesn't happen.?

Responding to challenges with implementation in regard to bolstering experiential tourism, accommodations, and access to high-speed internet raised by Councillor Dorothy Gerrow, Grant added 'It's a little bit like the climate crisis. Everybody is waking up today and saying 'oh gee, there's a problem.' Well, we've been talking about how there is a problem for a long time. Our sense is that there are some things that we need to start doing now so that when the time comes we'll be ready.?

Concerned that the municipality may not have the financial and human resources necessary to implement the plan, Councillor Alex Walder put forward the motion to amend the resolution on the table so that council has the opportunity to consider the costs associated with committing to the plan over the next five years. Walder's motion passed with the full support of council.