

RTO3: The Heart of Ontario

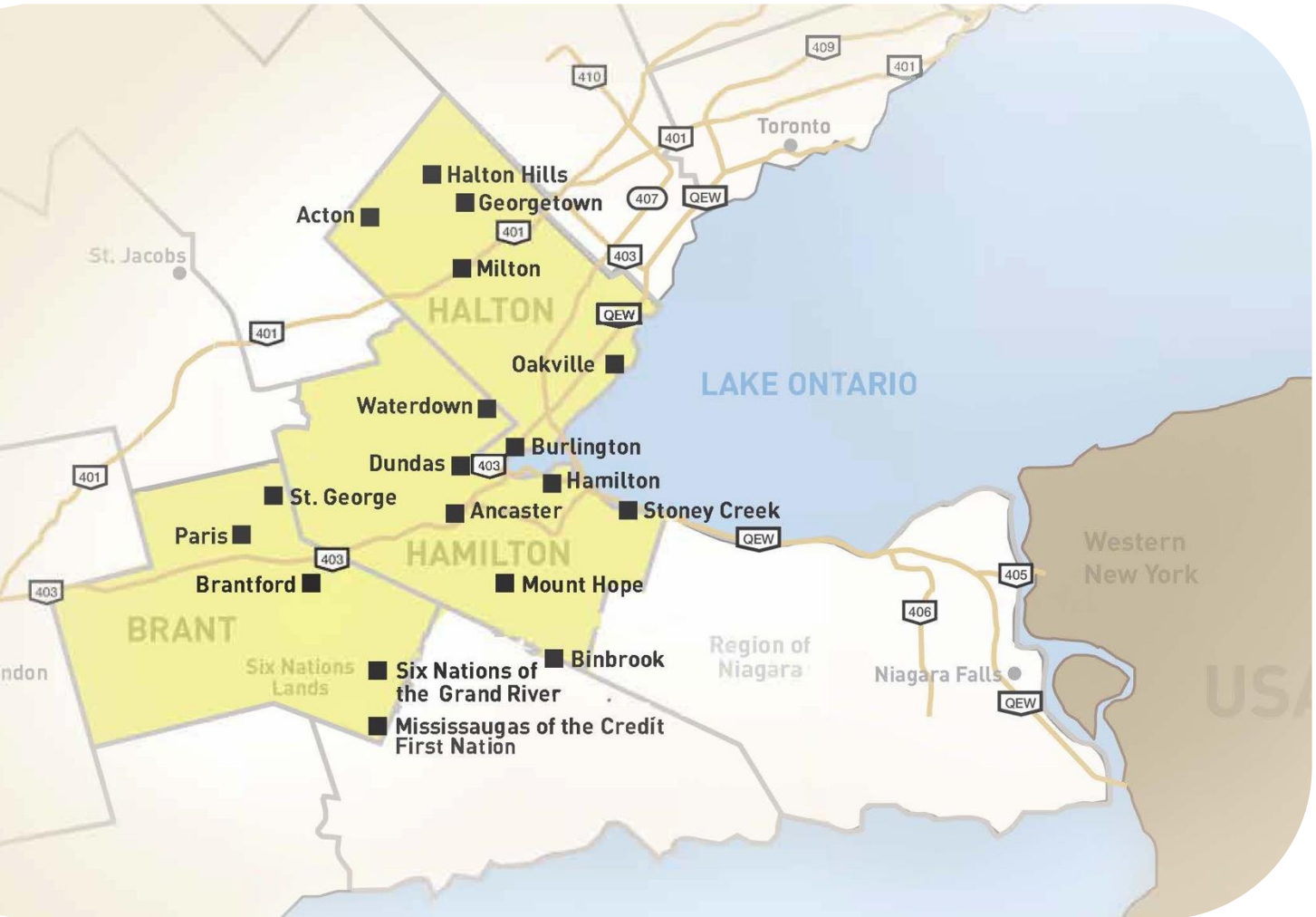
Strategic Plan for Regional Tourism Development

2024 - 2026

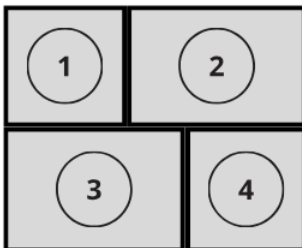


Find your way to The Heart of Ontario

Hamilton Halton Brant Regional Tourism Association



Cover Photos



- 1: Hamilton, Super Crawl
- 2: Paris, Aerial View of “The Prettiest Little Town in Canada”
- 3: Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Chiefswood National Historic Site
- 4: Milton, Winter Cross-Country Skiing at Crawford Lake

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Acknowledgements

The land which RTO3: The Heart of Ontario represents, forms part of the traditional territory of the Wendat Confederacy, the Attiwandaron Confederacy, the Anishinaabe, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, including Six Nations of the Grand River made up of the Onondowahgah (Seneca), Guyohkohnyoh (Cayuga), Onundagaono (Onondaga), Onayotekaono (Oneida), Kanienkahagen (Mohawk), and the Ska-Ruh-Reh (Tuscarora) Nations. The land is part of the Dish with One Spoon (1100) agreed upon by many Indigenous nations around the Great Lakes to share the land and resources. It was later referenced at the signing of the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701 between New France and multiple First Nations to end 100 years of war. Finally, the land is part of the Métis Nation of Ontario's Region 8 and 9, including the Credit River Métis Council, and the Clear Waters Métis Council.

We thank all Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations, for their continued care for and stewardship of the lands, waters, creatures, and peoples since time immemorial. Without this continued multigenerational effort, the land which RTO3: The Heart of Ontario represents, would not be a place to live, work, play, and visit, as it is to millions of people from all over the globe today. We look forward to seeing Indigenous tourism continue to grow and thrive in our region and beyond and look forward to continuing to grow our relationship with our Indigenous partners. We encourage all our stakeholders to continue to learn about Indigenous peoples, their communities, and their major contributions to our society, including within tourism.

RTO3: The Heart of Ontario's 3-Year Strategic Plan for Regional Tourism Development is the result of a stakeholder-driven and community-based participatory research approach that strived to engage a diversity of stakeholders in Hamilton, Halton Region, which includes Oakville, Burlington, Halton Hills, and Milton, Brant County, Brantford, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Thank you to the Strategic Task Force members, including the co-chairs Kelly Harris, and Dave Miller, as well as Tracey Nurmi, Jaquie Jamieson, Damian Szybalski, Vincent Sowa, Danielle Gerard, and Marilyn Butkovic, for their time, experience, and perspectives across the development of the strategic plan. We would also like to thank our Board of Directors, including once again Kelly Harris, Dave Miller, Tracey Nurmi, Jaquie Jamieson, and Damian Szybalski, as well as Bridget Saulnier, Julian Kingston, Lisa LaRocca, Rebecca Edgar, Trish Gerth, Sara Munroe, Garth Potruff, and Angela Papparizo, for their continued support.

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A very big thank you to all our staff, with a special thank you to Maria Fortunato, and Maureen Beatty, for their leadership and support throughout the development of this strategic plan.

The development of the RTO 3's Strategic Plan was facilitated by Bannikin, more specifically by team members Camilo Montoya-Guevara, James Arteaga, Jillian Dickens, and Trevor Jonas Benson.

BANNIKIN



1. Introduction

It has been over a decade since we came to exist as an organization through the landmark review of Ontario’s tourism industry *Discovering Ontario – A Report on the Future of Tourism (2009)*. Over the past years, we worked hard to help grow the tourism sector in our region of Hamilton, Halton, which includes Halton Hills, Milton, Oakville, and Burlington, and Brant, which includes Brantford, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the County of Brant.

Tourism plays an important role in our region. The range of our outdoor activities, cultural heritage and history, multicultural communities, exciting tastes, and awe-inspiring landscapes bring in visitors from near and far. Our tourism sector supports economic activity across the region where in 2019 and prior to the drastic shifts of the COVID-19 pandemic we saw \$1 billion dollars being spent in the region through tourism activity, 8,900 jobs in tourism, and a total of \$305 million dollars being generated in tax revenue through tourism spend.¹ Beyond the economic contributions that our sector generates, tourism is an important contributor to supporting social connection and awareness, including providing opportunities for locals and visitors to connect with the people whose passion make tourism a reality. As such, tourism also provides opportunities for residents to explore and engage with the place they call home, whether as newcomers exploring the area or long-time residents discovering new corners!

Over the years we have responded and adapted to the changing tourism landscape in our region, which has seen shifts in visitor priorities, interests, spending habits, demographic changes, and industry relationships. With these changes comes the task of re-visiting our role and re-calibrating our responsibilities through our organizational strategy and within the remit of our provincial mandate. At the end of 2022, we began a journey to develop a 3-year Strategic Plan for Regional Tourism Development to guide our work to support and advance our tourism sector and regional visitor-economy, starting in 2024 and going to the end of 2026.



Figure 1: Hamilton, Ridge Road Estate Winery

¹ Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. (2019) “RTO3 Economic Impact Summary Report”



Project Goals and Objectives

When we began this important work, we set the goal to produce a new partner- and stakeholder-supported 3-year strategic plan to guide our path and actions for the tourism sector. Building upon our existing values and pillars of performance, this strategic plan sets an inspiring vision for tourism in our region and provides a road map for our near and future actions to co-create value with our partners and stakeholders. Related to our goal, we identified five key objectives for the development of our strategic plan:

1. To establish a strong baseline of the current state of the tourism sector and our performance,
2. To meaningfully engage a breadth and diversity of our partners and stakeholders,
3. To co-create, with our staff and board of directors, an updated vision, mission, and mandate in alignment with our existing values,
4. To gather input from and build consensus with our staff, board of directors, and our Strategic Task Force members around the strategic priorities and near future actions for us, and
5. To identify actions for our sub-regional partners and stakeholders to support our work.



Figure 2: County of Brant, Canoeing on the Grand River

Methodology

A stakeholder-driven and community-based participatory research approach was used to develop our 3-year Strategic Plan for Regional Tourism Development. As part of this, we formed a Strategic Task Force that included representatives from different industries and stakeholder groups, including attractions, food and drink, hospitality, festivals and events, destination marketing/management organizations, and municipalities. Along with the Strategic Task Force, we used a variety of primary and secondary research methods to engage stakeholders, solidify our understanding of tourism's context in our region, and draw learnings throughout the project. These methods, which have been key to informing our strategic plan, include:

- Reviewing and summarizing 25+ background documents for background and context
- Conducting a performance assessment of our past strategy
- Conducting a tourism asset scan and demands generator review by reviewing over 30 visitor-facing organizational websites
- Conducting an industry and resident survey with over 30 industry and over 60 resident responses
- Conducting a market and marketing review of three comparator organizations
- Conducting over 20 telephone and virtual key stakeholder/informant interviews
- Hosting two in-person and one virtual industry session with over 35 industry attendees at each
- Hosting an in-person session with our Board of Directors



Overview of Our Strategic Plan

After more than a decade of progress in delivering our mandate towards increasing the proportion of overnight visitors to the region, and increasing their spend, we recognize the opportunity and the need to refresh our vision and mission to take us forward towards a flourishing future. Therefore, we have built upon our strategic pillars of growth of prosperity, people power and placemaking with planet in mind, to create a new strategic direction. Our strategic direction is articulated by our mission, vision, and mandate, as well as the values and behaviours that guide us through the next three years for our organization.

Vision	The Heart of Ontario, which includes Hamilton, Burlington, Oakville, Halton Hills, Milton, Brant, Brantford, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, is a region of choice whose destinations make up a tourism ecosystem that supports the flourishing of our economy, society, and environment.
Mission	We are a leader and innovator working to steward a regional destination into the future. Through our programs and services, collaborations with partners, and strong connections, we support a breadth and diversity of local, regional, and pan-regional stakeholders in harnessing the value that tourism can bring to our destinations and province.

Areas of Focus and Goals

Along with the foundational components of our strategic plan, we have identified four areas of focus to organize our strategic actions over the next three years. For more detail on each area of focus, goals and objectives, and corresponding actions, please see the **Where We Are Going** section of this report.

- A. Relationship development and communications:** We are highly connected and engaged with a strong network of stakeholders and partners who we collaborate with to activate a welcoming and thriving region of destinations.
- B. Leadership and representation:** We are the recognized and trusted leader representing the needs and priorities of our sub-regions both inside and outside our region.
- C. Ecosystem development and value co-creation:** We are working collaboratively with our regional partners and stakeholders to maximize the value that tourism can bring to our region.
- D. Resource management:** We are a resilient organization that is fully equipped to respond to the needs of our stakeholders.



Figure 3: Burlington, Sunrise at Brant Street Pier along Spencer Smith Park



2. Where We Are Coming From

Getting to a place where we are confident and ready to move forward with our strategic plan, so that come 2024 we are prepared to begin implementing the strategic actions, has been a process informed by a variety of research, engagement, and strategic planning activities. We recognize the importance of beginning with a strong understanding of where we are, including our past and recent successes, how tourism looks like across Hamilton, Halton, Brant, and learnings from comparable organizations. The below section provides an overview of this context, which is key to framing the “why” behind our new strategic plan; including the value we seek to continue co-creating and recognizing the changes we are prepared to make.

Our Organization

Past Work and Accomplishments

We are guided by our mandate and commitment to tourism in our region. As a result, we have led several projects and initiatives to create and deliver value to our stakeholders. Capturing the range of initiatives that we have worked on, successes we have celebrated, and benefits we have helped shape, is a large undertaking that goes beyond this report. However, below is an overview of our key activities and accomplishments based on our past strategic plan.

We have focused on working collaboratively, with partners such as Destination Ontario, the Ministry of Tourism Culture and Sport (MTCS), Destination Canada, Indigenous Tourism Ontario (ITO), the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario (TIAO), and the Tourism Industry Association of Canada (TIAC), to compile and share data we receive. We have also worked to raise awareness about our work, opportunities in tourism, and the results of our efforts through drafting and publishing annual stakeholder reports. Additionally, our annual reports also outline how the provincial funding provided through MTCS has been invested over time.

“We are guided by our mandate and commitment to tourism in our region. As a result, we have led several projects and initiatives to create and deliver value to our stakeholders.”

We have also set standards for success by delivering workshops and training opportunities to industry that are focused on a variety of knowledge areas such as marketing, experience/product development, workforce training, and customer service. We have also developed and published capacity-building resources like the toolkits that accompany our campaigns, the Visitor Readiness Manual for businesses, as well as sharing relevant resources developed by others.

We have worked to invest wisely by leveraging over \$500,000.00 of MTCS’s funding between 2018-2021 to directly fund industry initiatives and collaborations in the region through our Partnership Fund program. We also played a pivotal role in managing the disbursement of the COVID-19 Tourism Recovery Program, and delivering pandemic-related supports, including the Health and Safety Business Requirement Expense Program. On top of our direct investments, we have pursued joint programs and packaging initiatives, including the tourism conference with Ontario’s Southwest (RTO1), and our collaboration with Six Nations Tourism and their stakeholders to create itineraries and Grand River paddling offers in 2020. We have focused on supporting product development, packaging, and sale of products across our region both by offering our knowledge and expertise, as well as by supporting our industry members in being present at key events such as Rendezvous Canada to sell their experiences.



We have reached out and engaged a variety of stakeholders through our marketing and branding. We have done this primarily through the development and delivery of marketing campaigns targeting non-regional audiences, such as the recent “Pick, Pack, Go” campaign, as well as campaigns targeting a local population during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns like our “Show Some Local Love” campaign. We also launched our new leisure consumer-facing website in 2018, and our new industry-facing website in 2022. We have also supported our stakeholders in developing their own digital content to increase online readiness and availability of relevant online resources across our region.

Our more recent initiatives that are important to highlight include the customization and adoption of two new tools Booker and Tripper. Booker is a booking engine built for destinations and their tourism industry operators. It will allow us to become a distribution channel for tourism experiences being offered by regional operators via our consumer website. Tripper, in comparison, is a mapping tool that will be used to convert our existing and new itineraries and routes into functional, navigable wayfinding guides for visitors to access and use via mobile-first guides. Through the incorporation of these tools, we are working to adopt technologies that will facilitate tourism business direct sales to consumers via our channels.

Key Factors Affecting Our Organization

We are proud to be a resource and champion for our region’s tourism industry which stems from our team’s depth and wealth of experience. This along with the high-value industry training and supports are areas we plan to continue to expand, including diverse and innovative product development and destination marketing. We see this happening through communications and tailored trainings that meet the needs of our stakeholders.

While we are well-positioned as a connector, we know there is room to grow. We need to streamline our stakeholders’ understanding of our organization’s roles, responsibilities, tools, and resources. Along with this we need to increase cross-industry collaboration and encourage the use of partner resources that support collaboration and empower our stakeholders. There is a strong need to leverage our partnerships with sub-regional Destination Marketing/Management Organizations in our region so that our respective roles and positions compliment and support advancing tourism in their sub-regions and collectively across the region.

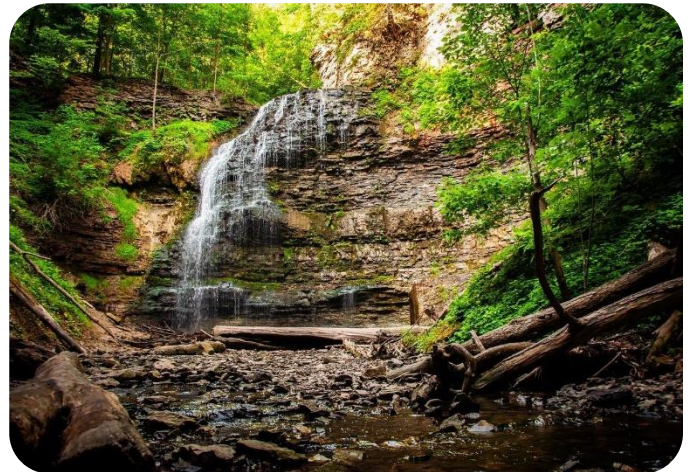


Figure 4: Hamilton, Tiffany Falls

Continuing to steward the destination through prioritizing environmental sustainability and social consciousness, increasing transit options and connectivity, determining what the limits are for visitor numbers and when, are some opportunities for us to push towards a more sustainable and balanced industry overall. For our organization to reach far-reaching future goals, we ourselves need to be resilient and sustainable. The unpredictable future of funding is a challenge, and we are excited to find ways to expand our income streams and strengthen ongoing monitoring and evaluation of our work and the related value it brings to our region.



Tourism in Our Region

Demand Generators and Experience Categories

We know that our region's main demand generators and experience categories are related to the outdoors, food and drink, and arts, heritage, culture, and music. We also know that our visitors and residents value the access they have to the outdoors through the number of local, provincial, and national parks, conservation areas, and nature reserves we have in our region, which allow for a diversity of outdoor activities to take place, including hiking, paddling, cycling, and rock climbing.

Of the top assets highlighted by different visitor-facing websites, close to 80% were related to the outdoors, including cycling routes in Brantford; the Royal Botanical Gardens, and Mount Nemo Conservation Area in Burlington; Bronte Creek Provincial Park in Oakville; Terra Cotta Conservation Area in Halton Hills; Tiffany Falls in Hamilton; and the Bruce Trail in multiple municipalities. Additionally, we are home to both nationally and internationally renowned natural assets, such as the Niagara Escarpment, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, and the Grand River, a Canadian Heritage River.

“Our region’s main demand generators and experience categories are related to the outdoors, food and drink, and arts, heritage, culture, and music.”

At the same time, we also noted that our visitors and residents value the access to the diverse food and drink offerings we have in our region, including the many agritourism products and experiences available. Many are interested in supporting local food production and learning where their food comes from. We are home to a growing breadth and diversity of restaurants, breweries, distilleries, wineries, cideries, meaderies, and farms that allow us to offer exceptional quality local food and drink.

Finally, we noted that our visitors and residents value the arts, heritage, culture, and music we have throughout the year, including festivals and events, historic buildings and neighbourhoods, museums, art galleries and studios. Although we did note that these assets are not always as well-known as our other asset types, we know our visitors and residents are interested in engaging with our cultural assets to learn about the unique types of talent we have and the stories behind them. Specifically, of the top nine assets highlighted multiple times by different visitor-facing organizational websites, two were related to the heritage and culture, including the HMCS Haida National Historic Site in Hamilton, and the Mount Pleasant Cemetery History Tour in Mount Pleasant, Brant County.



Figure 5: Hamilton, Battle of Stoney Creek Re-Enactment

Despite knowing that the outdoors, food and drink; and arts, heritage, culture, and music are the main demand generators and experience categories, we know there are others that may be more relevant to specific sub-regions. For this reason, we know it is important to work with our sub-regional partners to not only grow our three areas of demand generation, but also support the growth of others including sports-related activities, retail-related activities, wellness-related activities, and exploring villages and cities.



Regional Markets and Audiences

Across our research for this strategic plan, we heard our industry is interested in continuing to focus on and grow our region's existing primary markets. This knowledge and context are important for our future marketing and promotion activities, especially as we continue to collaborate toward showcasing the great experiences, attractions, businesses, landscapes, and people that our region has to offer. Specifically, the primary markets for visitor-facing businesses in our region align with the following geographic origins and demographics.

Geographic Origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Residents from our region (incl. Hamilton, Burlington, Oakville, Milton, Halton Hills, Brantford, Brant, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation),• Visitors from our neighbouring regions (incl. Niagara Region, Norfolk County, Oxford County, City of London, Region of Waterloo, etc.), and• Visitors from the rest of Southern Ontario, especially the City of Toronto.
Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Median age: 49.8 years old,• Average household income: \$126,288,• 35.6% of households have children aged under 9 years,• 39.8% work in white-collar occupations, and• 44% are visible minorities.

Key Factors Affecting Tourism

Given the substantial changes that have been impacting tourism since 2020, we saw the need to take a closer look into what is happening at the local and provincial levels of our tourism landscape, which affect our work now and will continue to do so into the future. Our research, including conversations with stakeholders, points to a range of micro- and macro-influences that have been key to shaping a strategic direction that is aware and responsive.

Factors impacting our stakeholders include the use of technology to diversify tourism access and experiences, from augmented reality activations at museums to artificial snow that allows for the ski seasons to be more consistent. Additionally, our stakeholders were united in their perspective around the limited transportation connectivity options in the region that connect urban and rural experiences, which means that the non-driving market is ignored; highlighting transit as one of the most important tourism issues for the region. It was also clear that variability in weather and climate change is affecting our stakeholders in different ways, from cancellations of tours based on incorrect weather forecasts to increasing in intense wildfire seasons, from unpredictable storms leaving visitors unprepared and operators facing challenges to operate sustainably and curb tourism's negative contributions to the climate crisis. In addition, our stakeholders perceived challenges with profitability and the loss of business due to inflation and other legacy issues created by the pandemic, from government funding insecurity, labour shortages, pandemic time loan repayment and workforce development.

However, positive developments that our stakeholders identified include the increased awareness of the need for collaboration and partnership, including working closely with different community groups and the diversity of our residents to inform projects and programming. Additionally, shifting target markets and the rapid increase in people moving to the region after COVID-19 has allowed for expanded opportunities for our stakeholders to connect with new markets, including residents. Marketing methods and tools to attract visitors have changed a lot and will continue to do so (e.g.,



artificial intelligence and mobile first technology) as well as the types of products and experiences in demand and on offer. For example, the pandemic amplified interest in nature-based outdoor activities, and there is a strong desire from visitors to have a social and educational component in their experiences.

Moving forward, and as captured in our strategic actions, we will continue to grow our learning and strengthen our understanding of the macro- and micro-factors affecting tourism in our region so that we can continue to provide relevant and needed resources, insights, and opportunities for our industry.

Learnings from Others

We can learn much from neighbouring destinations, including Ontario’s Southwest (RTO1), Central Counties Tourism (RTO6), and Southeastern Ontario (RTO9), who all share a similar experience mix of outdoor, culinary, and a combination of cultural and agricultural offerings. These regions also have a similar blend of urban and natural spaces and draw primarily from the Greater Toronto Area as a source market.

Each organization supports industry awareness building through a variety of means including consumer-facing websites, social media (i.e., Instagram and Facebook), and email marketing. All offer co-op social media advertising packages like boosted Facebook posts. Additionally, each organization has other ways to support industry through cooperative means, including paid marketing opportunities and offers to co-host media. Each organization offers special campaigns industry can collaborate on, such as seasonal or theme-based promotions with other tourism organizations like Destination Ontario or using campaigns to focus on specific demographics based on the campaigns on which they are working.

Operational and experience trends of similar RTOs are refined through investment and tourism operator supplier training and capacity building and include experiential tourism itineraries featuring Indigenous tourism, agritourism, and nature-positive tourism experiences and operations. One region, RTO6, has focused their marketing and experience offering on one thing: the road trip, and all similar regions have worked on crafting their experience offerings to align with their sense of place.

In our strategic planning process, we have looked to these regions for inspiration and learnings, including better aligning our experience development with our region’s sense of place, enhancing our commitment to creative partnership opportunities, and being more intentional in the support we provide operators, to ensure it matches their needs.



Figure 6: Georgetown, Desserts at Whimsy Street Treats



3. Where We Are Going

Our Plan

As we look toward the future of our organization and tourism in our region, we recognize the importance of moving forward strategically, solidifying our role, and demonstrating our value to our tourism sector. Our strategic direction is founded on an inspiring vision for the future of tourism in our region, a strong mission for our organization, and a comprehensive mandate illustrating our approach to work and collaboration.

Vision	The Heart of Ontario, which includes Hamilton, Burlington, Oakville, Halton Hills, Milton, Brant, Brantford, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, is a region of choice whose destinations make up a tourism ecosystem that supports the flourishing of our economy, society, and environment.
Mission	We are a leader and innovator working to steward a regional destination into the future. Through our programs and services, collaborations with partners, and strong connections, we support a breadth and diversity of local, regional, and pan-regional stakeholders in harnessing the value that tourism can bring to our destinations and province.
Mandate	We are a non-profit Regional Tourism Organization (RTO) that works to increase tourism visitation, economic activity and job growth throughout the Hamilton, Halton, Brant region. In Ontario, RTOs are responsible for tourism marketing, product development, workforce development and destination management at a regional level.
Values	Behaviours
Leading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We lead by helping others grow and evolve through mentorship, partnership, and collaboration. • We recognize and support practices that promote sustainability and conservation. • We will consider the past, present, and future of our actions to be forward thinking.
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are committed to ongoing communication to engage and network with the industry. • We facilitate relationship building and function as a conduit to connect stakeholders and partners. • Through RTO channels and programs, we are initiative-taking, sincere, and value-driven in our interactions.
Inclusiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We invite, welcome, and listen to new ideas and perspectives in our work with regional partners and stakeholders. • We promote and highlight the many ways to experience the region. • We welcome everyone.



Our Stakeholders

We will continue to serve the needs of a range of our internal and external stakeholders. These include but are not limited to tourism sector businesses (i.e., visitor-facing businesses and attractions), residents, visitors, municipal and provincial governments, and First Nations band councils, destination marketing/management organizations, other connected organizations (e.g., business improvement areas, chambers of commerce, industry organizations/associations, media, etc.), our staff and board of directors.

All our stakeholders form an interconnected web that makes up our region’s active tourism sector and ecosystem, and although their purpose and roles may differ, there are many shared needs from our organization. The below chart visualizes the high-level connections our organization will work towards strengthening through established and ongoing (e.g., Memorandum of Understanding), information-based (e.g., marketing and promotions, feedback), indirect (i.e., through another established relationship), and open relationship development activities (e.g., support and resource provision and feedback exchange).

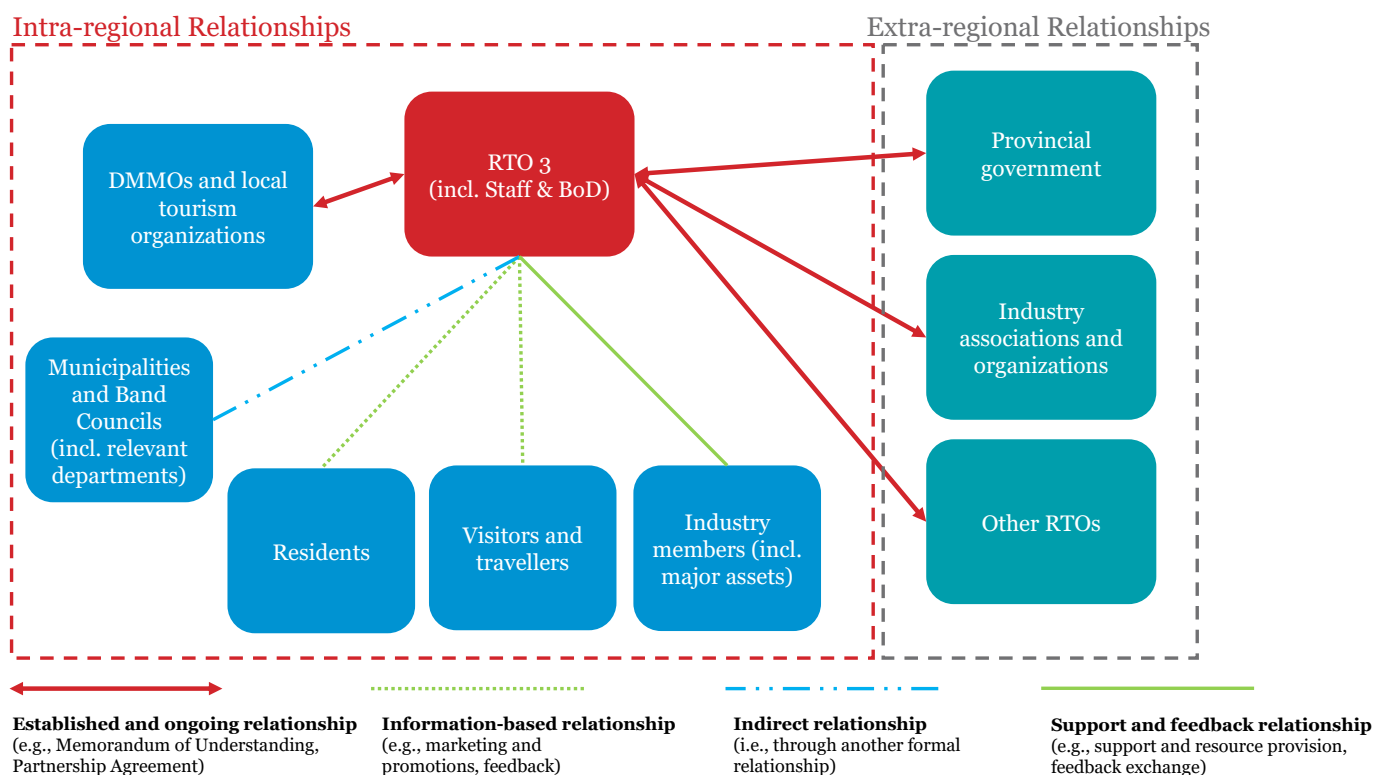


Figure 7: Visualization of the high-level connections our organization will work towards strengthening



Our Areas of Focus for Strategic Direction

To guide our path as a leader, supporter, developer, marketer, and manager of regional tourism in our region, we have identified a total of 23 strategic actions that we will act on through collaborative and innovative approaches and initiatives. The strategic actions are organized into four (4) areas of focus for our team and organization. Below is a summary narrative of our four areas of focus that provide more detail into how each of the strategic actions can take shape. The narrative leads into a framework table for each of the areas of focus that includes anticipated outcomes, how the action's success will be measured. This is followed by the projected timeline for implementation of our actions.

Importantly, we have identified a total of nine (9) actions that are particularly relevant for a sub-regional focus and collaboration. These nine actions are identified in blue cells and form the basis of our strategic collaboration with the sub-regional Destination Marketing/Management Organizations in our region.

Legend

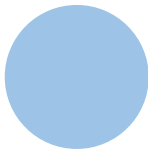
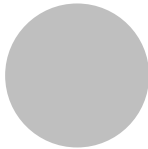
	<p>Cells with a light-blue background indicate those specific actions we are looking forward to exploring and implementing in collaboration with our DMMO partners.</p>
	<p>Cells with a light-grey background indicate those actions that we look forward to implementing through our team's hard work and in collaboration with the wide set of our organizational partners.</p>



Figure 8: Brantford, Glenhyrst Art Gallery



Figure 9: Hamilton, Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum



A. Relationship Development and Communications

Our focus on our relationships and effective communication means that by 2027 we are highly connected and engaged with a strong network of stakeholders and partners who we collaborate with to activate a welcoming and thriving region of destinations. Our first objective toward achieving this goal is to formalize and showcase our relationships with others based on shared understandings of clear roles and responsibilities. An important and initial strategic action will involve working collaboratively to establish a jointly established framework that will foster cross-regional connections and strengthen working relationships. Our collaborative RTO and DMMO group will meet quarterly across the year and serve as an important space to identify and plan joint initiatives, discuss sub-regional and regional needs, and explore collaborative solutions and resource sharing to meet tourism industry sector needs.

We will work to strengthen and evolve our relationship with our provincial government partners, including the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sport, to fully leverage our role and capacity as a representative of the tourism industry in our region. Importantly, our ongoing communications with the Regional Tourism Organization Strategic Committee will be key to informing and helping shape our growing relationship with the government so that we foster a shared understanding of the needs and priorities of our region and continue to align our regional strategic direction with the province. Lastly, we will seize the opportunity to strengthen our brand recognition, both for our region “The Heart of Ontario” as well as for our organization. Currently, we leverage different brand names for different purposes, but moving forward, we will review and refresh our brand to establish a clear and consistent organizational brand that is shared and familiarized among our stakeholders through a well-defined communications approach. This work can take many shapes, however, chief among them is our need to develop an organizational positioning and communications plan to outline our communications approach with our different sub-regional, regional, and interregional stakeholders. By working toward having a clear and consistent brand and outlining our approach to communicating with our stakeholders, we will build on our resources to speak clearly and directly about what we do, how we do it, and how others can benefit from, or participate in our products, services, and supports.

Our second objective is to recognize similarities and celebrate differences across our sub-regions through our marketing and communications activities. To achieve this objective, we will work with our Destination Marketing/Management Organization partners to co-develop a collaborative regional marketing plan. The plan will be the foundational resource for aligned and collaborative marketing activities that through innovative tactics and technologies highlight niche tourism offers in our sub-regions and elevate the collective visitor appeal of our region. To support our promotions of the whole region through our traveller-facing resources, we will evolve our visitor-facing website and related resources to better position “The Heart of Ontario” as a region made up of sub-regional destinations and integrate Destination Marketing/Management Organization resources into our website.

Finally, we will work to establish and grow our relationship with residents and better understand their views and experience of tourism. We will plan to begin by measuring resident sentiment and gathering their feedback about tourism development and management. We will need to work closely with our sub-regional destination partners, including DMMOs, on such things as identifying areas of inquiry and synergies. This way, we can ensure that resident feedback is relevant and informing both sub-regional development as well as regional understanding. We will also continue to jointly market and promote our region’s exciting tourism as opportunities for residents. This way, we will work with local partners to help build awareness and participation in regional tourism among our residents and encourage them to pack a day or overnight bag and explore, taste, and experience the variety of tourism assets our region has to offer.



Area of Focus A: Relationship Development and Communications

Goal	We are highly connected and engaged with a strong network of stakeholders and partners who we collaborate with to activate a welcoming and thriving region of destinations.		
Objectives	Actions	Anticipated Outcomes	Key Performance Indicators
To formalize and showcase our relationships with others based on shared understandings of clear roles and responsibilities.	1. Co-develop a strategic regional collaboration framework with DMMOs and local tourism organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established and active collaboration and communication with DMMOs Regular and ongoing collaborations toward regional and sub-regional tourism development, marketing, and management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of DMMOs actively engaged Number of collaborations identified and implemented through the strategic committee
	2. Continue to share successes and needs with Provincial government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger relationship and shared understanding of needs and priorities for the region Alignment between regional strategic direction and provincial strategic direction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of feedback provided to government Type(s) of support received from Provincial government
	3. Review organizational brand to establish a clear and consistent brand and stakeholder communication approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear and consistent brand for the organization Established and consistent stakeholder communication channels and tactics Awareness and understanding of organizational role and responsibilities among stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refreshed / established brand for organization Number and type of confirmed communication channels and tactics Level of awareness and understanding among stakeholders



<p>To recognize similarities and celebrate differences across our sub-regions through our marketing and communications.</p>	<p>4. Co-develop a collaborative regional marketing plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established marketing plan that outlines collaborative marketing approach and tactics Aligned sub-regional and regional marketing efforts Increased awareness and buy-in among sub-regional stakeholders for region-wide marketing efforts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of collaborative marketing campaigns and initiatives Number and type of marketing innovations/ resources created or procured and shared with collaborators
	<p>5. Evolve the visitor-facing website and related resources to better position The Heart of Ontario as a region made up of sub-regional destinations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced profiling of sub-regional destinations and offers across visitor-facing channels and resources Increased awareness and understanding of connectivity across region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and types of changes made to visitor-facing channels and resources
<p>To establish and grow our relationship with residents and better understand their views and experience of tourism.</p>	<p>6. Measure resident sentiment and gather feedback about tourism development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased understanding of resident sentiment toward tourism in sub-regions Increased awareness and appreciation for tourism's role among region's residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Type of resident sentiment measurement system confirmed and developed Number of residents engaged Number and type of insights garnered from residents about tourism in the sub-regions and region
	<p>7. Evolve tourism marketing promotions to regional residents leveraging DMMO priorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness and participation in regional tourism among region's residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of residents reached through marketing and promotions



B. Leadership and Representation

Our second focus on leadership and representation means that by 2027 we are the recognized and trusted leader representing the needs and priorities of our sub-regions both inside and outside our region. Our objective towards achieving this goal is to further activate our capacity to represent regional industry needs and inform related policy and infrastructure developments, both within our region and beyond.

One of the strategic actions through which we will pursue this is by working with the Destination Marketing/Management Organizations in our region to support them in informing transportation policy and infrastructure development within their sub-regions, as well as working toward having a better-connected region. This means we will work together to develop relationships with relevant transportation authorities, such as Metrolinx, VIA Rail Canada, Hamilton International Airport, Hamilton Bike Share, social bike companies, electric vehicle station hubs, taxi companies, and municipal transportation systems, to identify challenges and opportunities to better support visitor movements throughout the region.

We will also establish new and strengthen existing relationships with other Regional Tourism Organizations in Ontario to highlight the future growth opportunities and needs for tourism in the province, such as additional funding, and updating the mandate of the Regional Tourism Organizations. Finally, we will strengthen our relationship and communications with the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario, such as a Memorandum of Understanding or identifying a direct liaison, to support them in their advocacy efforts, and to represent regional, sub-regional, and industry-specific needs that are identified through our stakeholder engagements.



Area of Focus B: Leadership and Representation

Goal	We are the recognized and trusted leader representing the needs and priorities of our sub-regions both inside and outside our region.		
Objectives	Actions	Anticipated Outcomes	Key Performance Indicators
To activate our capacity to represent regional industry needs and inform related policy and infrastructure developments, both within our region and beyond.	8. Support DMMOs and relevant organizations in evolving the development of a better-connected region (incl. transportation policy and infrastructure)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased understanding of transportation needs and potential solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Types of support provided to DMMOs Number of infrastructure proposals and developments informed by tourism needs
	9. Establish new and strengthen existing relationships with other RTOs in Ontario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong network of RTOs and increased capacity to share learnings, collaborate, and interact with government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of collaborations with RTOs
	10. Strengthen communications and collaborative relationships with TIAO and other sector associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stronger connection to and increased support in representing regional industry needs to government via partner efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of direct engagements and insights shared with TIAO on behalf of industry Established MOU and collaboration dynamic Number of strategic engagements with sector associations



C. Ecosystem Development and Value Co-Creation

Our third focus on ecosystem development and value co-creation means that by 2027 we are collaborating with our regional partners and stakeholders to maximize the value that tourism can bring to our region.

Our first objective towards achieving this goal is to work closely with tourism partners and stakeholders to strengthen understanding, appreciation, and action toward regional research specifications and needs to develop an industry research and data collection framework and dissemination hub. We will do this by strategically gathering data and research findings from industry stakeholders and partners, such as heads-in-beds from accommodations, and visitation numbers at major attractions, including conservation authorities, visitor centres, events and festivals, among others, to gather insights for industry's use, inform future decision making, and measure the impact of tourism. We will also do this by researching and gathering existing capacity-building resources that respond to industry needs required for an evolving workforce. We will then share all this information through our industry website's dissemination hub that will be updated with existing and new research, data, and resources.

We will also conduct or commission research and data that corresponds to industry and stakeholder needs based on insights and feedback received through stakeholder engagement, such as a resident sentiment survey, industry survey, visitor survey, and other data gaps identified. By providing a regional perspective through sub-regional lenses we will support our stakeholders and partners in growing awareness and understanding of key areas of knowledge, such as the existing and emerging markets for the overall region and sub-regions through resources like visitor profiles. Relatedly, we know that there is work to be done to explore and establish a shared understanding of what economic, social, and environmental sustainability in tourism means and looks like across our region and sub-regions. Building on this shared understanding, we will also gather and share sustainability and destination stewardship resources, initiatives, and opportunities with stakeholders that connect or showcase tourism's role and contribution to destination stewardship. Some examples of resources could be around developing performance indicators/measures on how to measure the impact of tourism on sustainability and destination stewardship efforts in the region. Finally, we will continue working with the Destination Marketing/Management Organizations in our region to co-develop sub-regional and cross-regional tourism experiences and products, such as cycle tourism- and culinary tourism-related experiences and products.

Our second objective towards achieving this goal is to pursue strategic collaborations with organizations that support regional priorities and build on our capacities and resources. One of the strategic actions through which we will pursue this is by developing new and strengthening existing relationships with organizations focused on elevating underrepresented community groups in the tourism sector, such as Canada's 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce, the Black Chamber of Commerce, and Indigenous Tourism Ontario. We will also lead the facilitation of the development of a regional Truth and Reconciliation Action Plan to provide a foundation and framework upon which our tourism sector can work from. Finally, we will also develop new and strengthen existing relationships with environmental organizations and groups to identify opportunities to better connect tourism development with environmental initiatives, such as environmental/climate change education, and health and safety awareness building. We know that one of our assets is access to the outdoors; however, we must ensure that these assets are conserved and respected by those who visit our region.



Area of Focus C: Ecosystem Development and Value Co-Creation

Goal	We are working collaboratively with our regional partners and stakeholders to maximize the value that tourism can bring to our region.		
Objectives	Actions	Anticipated Outcomes	Key Performance Indicators
To work closely with tourism partners and stakeholders to strengthen understanding, appreciation, and action toward regional destination development.	11. Develop an industry research and data collection framework and dissemination hub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established processes and channels to collect, compile, and share industry-facing research and data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of regional partners contributing to collection of data Number and type of data gathered through industry participation Number of industry members and partners using resources
	12. Conduct or commission research and data that corresponds to industry and stakeholder needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased understanding of regional tourism landscape, including existing challenges, and opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of research conducted and published
	13. Work to establish a shared understanding of sustainable tourism across the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared understanding of economic, social, and environmental sustainability in tourism across the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of stakeholders engaged Type of definitions and/or principles drafted to articulate shared understanding of sustainable tourism
	14. Gather and share sustainability and stewardship resources, and opportunities with stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness, understanding, and action toward connecting tourism development with 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and types of resources collected and shared Number of new sustainability-focused resources developed



		environmental and social sustainability	
	15. Enhance knowledge and understanding of tourism carrying capacity across the overall region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased understanding of visitor flow and tourism activity concentration across region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Types of insights garnered relevant to sub-regions and broader region Number of resources enriched with understanding of carrying capacity
	16. Co-develop sub-regional and cross-regional tourism experiences and products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New and enhanced experiences and product that highlight sub-regional assets and respond to sub-regional needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of experiences/ product development supports provided Number of DMMOs and other stakeholders engaged in process
To pursue strategic collaborations with organizations that support regional priorities and build on our capacities and resources.	17. Develop new and strengthen existing relationships with organizations focused on elevating underrepresented community groups in the tourism sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong network of organizations contributing to understanding and shaping of inclusive and welcoming tourism sector The RTO has become Rainbow Registered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of new relationships established Number and type of formalized relationships and/or collaborations
	18. Facilitate and support the development of a regional Truth and Reconciliation Action Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared understanding and regional action of Truth and Reconciliation recommendations that may be applicable to tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of stakeholders engaged Number and types of action/ initiatives identified for organization and stakeholders
	19. Develop new and strengthen existing relationships with environmental organizations and groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong network of organizations contributing to understanding and shaping of a sustainable tourism sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of stakeholders engaged Number and types of action/ initiatives identified for organization and stakeholders



D. Resource Management

Our fourth and final focus on resource management means that by 2027 we are a resilient organization that is fully equipped to respond to the needs of our stakeholders. Our first objective towards achieving this goal is to diversify our financial resources to build operational resiliency and maximize investment potential. One of the strategic actions through which we will pursue this is by creating new and/or evolving existing marketing products/services as revenue-generation sources that can be used to fund organizational priorities and programs. This includes in the near-term using Booker and Tripper as revenue-generating services or in the long-term by exploring opportunities to develop a social enterprise to fund the organization. We will also work with the Destination Marketing/Management Organizations in our region to explore and identify other funding diversification approaches and resource sharing with our partners.

Our second objective towards achieving this goal is to prepare our current and future staff to inform, manage, and deliver our collaborative products/services across our region. One of the strategic actions through which we will pursue this is by supporting and facilitating the needed evolution of staff roles, responsibilities, and capacity across the implementation of the strategic plan. This could include having regional representatives or liaisons, dedicated staff for product development programs, research, and data analysis programs, or encouraging staff to continue learning, and participate in training opportunities. We will also identify and integrate efficiency-building and capacity-enhancing technologies based on operational and stakeholder needs, which could include technologies around data collection, analysis, communications, training delivery, or product development.



Area of Focus D: Resource Management

Goal	We are a resilient organization that is fully equipped to respond to the needs of our stakeholders.		
Objectives	Actions	Anticipated Outcomes	Key Performance Indicators
To diversify our financial resources to build operational resiliency and maximize investment potential.	20. Explore and identify other funding diversification approaches and resource sharing with partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximized investment and resource sharing opportunities with key partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of resources shared and received Number and type of co-investments
	21. Create new and/or evolve existing marketing products/services as revenue generation sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversified financial resources Increased financial resiliency and autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of revenue-generating products and services introduced to market Amount of revenue generated and reinvested into organization
To prepare our current and future team to inform, manage, and deliver our collaborative products/services across our region.	22. Support and facilitate the needed evolution of staff roles, responsibilities, and capacity across implementation of strategic plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated and refreshed roles and responsibilities that correspond to strategic direction Increased capacity among team members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of evolved responsibilities across team Number and type of capacity-building supports provided to team
	23. Identify and integrate efficiency-building and capacity enhancing technologies based on operational and stakeholder needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased operational capacity to deliver existing and new products/ services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and type of relevant technologies invested in and shared with industry



Proposed Timeline for Implementation

The below table outlines the proposed timeline for implementation for each of the strategic actions.

Legend	<i>Focused Start Time</i>				<i>Continued Effort</i>									
Focus	Action	2024				2025				2026				
		Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	
A. Relationship Development and Communications	1. Establish a Regional Tourism Organization Strategic Committee	■												
	2. Continue to share successes and needs with Provincial government				■				■				■	
	3. Review organizational brand to establish a clear and consistent brand and communication approach			■	■									
	4. Co-develop a collaborative regional marketing plan				■	■								
	5. Evolve the visitor-facing website and related resources													
	6. Measure resident sentiment and gather feedback about tourism development				■				■				■	
	7. Continue to market and promote tourism to regional residents													



Legend	Focused Start Time					Continued Effort							
	Focus	Action	2024				2025				2026		
Jan - Mar			Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec
B. Leadership and Representation	8. Support DMMOs and relevant organizations in evolving the development of a better-connected region (incl. transportation policy and infrastructure)												
	9. Establish new and strengthen existing relationships with other RTOs in Ontario												
	10. Strengthen communications and collaborative relationships with TIAO and other sector associations												
C. Ecosystem Development and Value Co-Creation	11. Develop an industry research and data collection framework and dissemination hub												
	12. Conduct or commission research and data that corresponds to industry and stakeholder needs												
	13. Work to establish a shared understanding of sustainable tourism across the region												
	14. Gather and share sustainability and destination stewardship resources, initiatives, and opportunities with stakeholders												
	15. Enhance knowledge and understanding of tourism carrying capacity across the overall region												
	16. Co-develop sub-regional and cross-regional tourism experiences and products												



Legend	<i>Focused Start Time</i>					<i>Continued Effort</i>							
Focus	Action	2024				2025				2026			
		Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec
	17. Develop new and strengthen existing relationships with organizations focused on elevating underrepresented community groups in the tourism sector												
	18. Facilitate and support the development of a regional Truth and Reconciliation Action Plan												
	19. Develop new and strengthen existing relationships with environmental organizations and groups												
D. Resource Management	20. Explore and identify other funding diversification approaches and resource sharing with partners												
	21. Create new and/or evolve existing marketing products/services as revenue generation sources												
	22. Support and facilitate the needed evolution of staff roles, responsibilities, and capacity across implementation of strategic plan												
	23. Identify and integrate efficiency-building and capacity enhancing technologies based on operational and stakeholder needs												



4. The Way Forward

Our organization has been working hard, efficiently, and effectively to build up the Hamilton, Halton, Brant region into a destination of choice since we were founded over 10 years ago! With our new 3-year strategic plan, we look forward to continuing to build up our region and co-create value with all our stakeholders and partners. We are not just excited for the future; we are also confident that the strategic direction we have identified will be a strong guide as we evolve and strengthen our capacity to provide a regional perspective through sub-regional lenses.

Although this is our strategic plan for regional tourism development, we know that we cannot do this alone. We have heard where our collaborations have succeeded, and we know how we can continue strengthening how we work with our stakeholders and partners. Our future collaborations will be guided by our vision for tourism in our region and our mission for how our organization works. These are supported by our organizational values and behaviours so that we lead, connect, and include. Through a strongly aligned strategic direction, we will continue to work diligently through what we already do and explore new initiatives and innovate new approaches to successfully achieve and measure the 23 actions identified in our strategic plan.

As we move forward with our strategic plan, we will begin by preparing for implementation in 2024. This preparation includes confirming who in our team is leading each action, the resources available and required, the stakeholders and partners to collaborate with, and the specific timeline for implementation. Moving forward, an initial step is familiarizing our strategic plan with both regional and non-regional stakeholders. Toward this, one of the final engagements as part of our strategic plan development process included engaging existing and prospective organizational partners to present our preliminary direction and most importantly explore areas of alignment and opportunities for collaboration. We are also excited and prepared to work collaboratively with our Destination Marketing/Management Organization partners specifically to discuss and confirm how we will collaborate through the strategic actions and elevate our region into a key destination of destinations in Ontario.

Hamilton, Halton, Brant is a region rich in what it offers both residents and visitors. We are home to amazing outdoor assets; food and drink; and arts, heritage, culture, and music. We have a breadth and diversity of current and future partners working in the tourism space, and we have a team and Board of Directors, that are ready to lead our organization into our next chapter in regional tourism development that recognizes the importance of not only the economic impact of tourism, but also the impact towards a safe-guarded and thriving environments, and diverse and vibrant communities in our region.

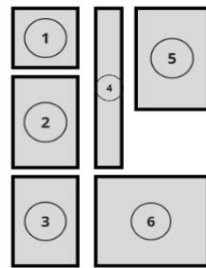


Figure 80: Hamilton, African Lion Safari



Figure 11: Milton, Andrew's Farm Market & Winery





- 1: Hamilton/Burlington, Royal Botanical Gardens
- 2: Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Grand River Champion of Champions Pow Wow
- 3: Scotland, Flux Brewing Company
- 4: Brantford/County of Brant, Grand River
- 5: Burlington, Sound of Music Festival
- 6: Hamilton, Myers Apple Farm



5. Appendix

As part of the research and planning that informed our strategic plan, we also conducted an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges being identified and uncovered for our organization. The following table presents the summary of these findings:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO3 provides industry with mentorship and a depth and wealth of experience. • RTO3 can coordinate and connect with industry and organizations in the region and has a high awareness of tourism issues and opportunities. • RTO3 provides high value industry training and supports, including product development and destination marketing. • Industry is aware and prioritizing environmental sustainability. • There is the perception the region tracks well in diversity. • Residents strongly recognize that the tourism sector is very important to the region's economy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited understanding of RTO3's roles, responsibilities, tools, and resources among industry. • Limited co-ordination between RTO3 and DMOs. • Limited cross industry collaboration and use of partner information sharing resources. • Lack of evident connection between strategic direction components (e.g., goals and strategic pillars). • Perception the region does not prioritize sustainability in all its tourism related decisions. • RTO3 consumer-facing website categories do not account fully for the range of assets and experiences. • Limited capacity for monitoring and evaluation of diverse organizational activities and initiatives.
Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing RTO3's role in destination management. • Developing and supporting the development of more diverse experiences and needed assets. • Expanding RTO3's promotion of experiences beyond the current experience type categories, which weigh heavily towards "outdoors". • Enhancing the sustainability of tourism in the region. • Increasing transit options and connectivity. • Clarifying strategic direction. • Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of RTO3's efforts and related ROI. • Working closely with industry to gain expanded awareness of their needs and market awareness, to share resources and information, and to offer relevant supports. • Ensuring industry and partners have access to and awareness of organizational tools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpredictable future of funding • Lack of funding for businesses, infrastructure, and other investments. • Limited public transportation across and between the sub-regions. • Increased costs and related restraints in accessing products, services, permits, and labour. • Increased competition from surrounding tourism destinations. • Hamilton, Halton, Brant is a large region, and not well understood and recognized. • Potential lack of needed infrastructure and approaches to make the region widely accessible for different types of mobility and cognitive abilities. • Decrease in international visitation. • Inconsistent DMO Strategic Relationships



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