

SUBMISSION

Date: June 22, 2020

To: Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

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RE: Study of the recommendations relating to the Economic and Fiscal Update Act, 2020 and the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on certain sectors of the economy.

Introduction:

Thank you for the opportunity to present on the direct impact and devastation the Ontario tourism industry has shouldered from COVID-19 response. We appreciate that the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs works across partisan lines, to consider and report to the House its observations, opinions and recommendations on the fiscal and economic policies that shape Ontario. HHBRTA has pivoted its tourism development priorities to support local businesses so that the double bottom line of tourism will hopefully sustain beyond the pandemic and the development of a vaccine. We created an operation framework focused on Mitigation, Re-imagine and Re-emerge to support the re-opening of our tourism sector and support the development of Ontario as a world-class tourism destination.

Impacts in the Hamilton Halton Brant Regional Tourism Destination

- My region is a microcosm of what the Ontario visitor experience is – we have urban cities, small towns, rural communities, Indigenous communities and some of Ontario's most well-known nature assets, a range of Canadian authentic stories to discover in our many national heritage attractions, internationally re-knowned arts and live music offerings.
- Prior to the pandemic, overall, there are 15, 253 tourism related establishments in HHB with a total of 60,420 jobs. Our region is ranked 4th for most industry establishments in Ontario coming after RTO 5 (GTA), RTO 6 (York, Durham, Headwaters) and RTO 2 (Southwest)
- Our region has had over 10,677,600 persons visitation which accounts for 8% of total visits to Ontario. Total visitor spending was \$845,073,000 – with highest quarters of spending being April-June & July-September

Impacts in our destination - Cancellations and Closures

Like many other parts of the province, our destination has also experienced job losses and business closures. Some examples:

- **Red Back Tours** has been forced to cancel their Hamilton Waterfall Tour Packages due to the closure of waterfall sites by Hamilton Conservation Authority and the City of Hamilton. This has impacted new markets to their business as they only officially launched these niche packages in summer of 2019.
- **Emma's Back Porch (Burlington)** has closed its doors permanently after 35 years of operation.
- **Trends on the Grand**, clothing store, in Paris, Ontario, closed permanently.
- **A Co-invested Regional Canadian Canoe Culture Marketing Campaign, Paddle the Grand** is cancelled for 2020 canoe season due to inability to market beyond locals and hyper-locals.
- **Six Nations of the Grand River Territory** borders continue to be closed to non-residents.
- **TownePlace Suites by Marriott, Hamilton** paused all building construction of this new hotel property on Upper James Street. Construction resumed after May 19, 2020.
- **The Pearle Hotel and Spa, Burlington**, paused all building construction of this new Marriott Autograph hotel on Burlington's waterfront. Construction resumed after May 19, 2020.
- **HMCS Haida** is remaining closed for the rest of 2020 and therefore cancelling all 2020 programming. The museum is not adaptable for physical distancing currently.
- **HCA's Wild Waterworks Park** will remain closed throughout 2020.
- **Niagara Escarpment Waterfalls** in Hamilton are closed due to over-visitation tendency and the asset managers not having infrastructure in place to adapt to social distance requirements.
- **Indigenous Tourism experiences** are not open due to community closures. This has resulted in 53% Revenue Loss, 31% Job Loss, 25% Business Loss

In this pandemic timeframe some businesses in our destination are demonstrating their entrepreneurial spirit and innovating their businesses for the times to keep their business economically viable.

- **Grand River paddle outfitters** are streamlining product offers that suit the physical distance needs of the customer.
- **African Lion Safari** is opting to revert to the nostalgic early days by focussing their offer to the 'drive your own car' through the nature reserve. This will keep visitors apart from other visitors while still enjoying the experience in the comfort and safety of your own vehicle.
- **Virtual tour** implementation of industry partners – **Art Gallery of Hamilton** for the first time showcases their impressive Art Collection from their vault virtually.
- **Conservation Halton** has implemented new sustainable and integrated software technology to answer the needs for timed visitation and reservation confirmations, and contact-less gate house entry (license plate camera scanner technology); Park Pledge for the promise of sustainability at the Conservation Parks has also been implemented.

- **Leaning Post Winery and Ridge Road Winery** has been offering delivery of their local wines to consumers as far reaching as GTA. This has kept the winery open and sustained jobs for the valued employees

Overarching Opportunity: Building strong forward-thinking communities within our region and Ontario will build travel experiences for the new traveller:

The opportunity today is the need to look ahead to the future of tourism and evaluate the visitor experience- looking at how to make us more resilient and sustainable as the world is demanding. We are learning from the crisis and anticipating new trends and consumer patterns related to visitation, behaviours and expectations. Establishing Pride of Place engagement, connecting with local experiences that are authentic, sustainable and friendly for small groups. Developing sustainability skills for tourism professionals so that they can offer genuine experiences.

The following are some areas that we are evolving working collaboratively with industry:

- 1) To support recovery we Pivoted our marketing efforts and developed an interim Covid-19 Marketing Campaign that is focussed on support to the local community commerce hubs and to maintain a destination aspirational relationship with non-local audiences so that when it is the right time we can move the message to purchase and invite to visitor the region again. local spending & visitation.
- 2) Developing open spaces programming with industry partners and capitalize on the visitor economy seeking outdoor adventures and the safety of the outdoors.
- 3) Diversifying the tourism offers and extend off-season opportunities for industry business. This requires product development and confidence of markets (promotion of a 4-season destination province-wide).
- 4) Prioritizing the sustainable gastronomic offers that incorporates ecological products that are respectful with the environment and representative of the local identity.
- 5) Supporting small businesses in capacity building, product development, training, technology, digital content development, access to experts that accelerates to investment, mentorship and become self-sufficient.

What can government do to manage innovation and industry support for re-imagine and re-emerge to Ontario's recovery and support to business?

As we have been supporting and engaging with our regional businesses, we have learned of common challenges being faced by the operators regionally that are also occurring in other regional jurisdictions in the province. Attention and support from the provincial government in these areas will help business operators navigate Ontario's re-opening stages of the economy.

- 1) **United messages on safety and health protocols**, province-wide all parts of Ontario stating the same points for visitor expectations.
- 2) **Washroom Management Protocol** : Industry need for clean and safe washrooms in parks, public (communities), general business washrooms (restaurants, cafes, stores). PPE expense support & establish standardized regulations.

- 3) **Support creative innovations in product/experience development** in Rural Touring Development; Grand River Angling; Digital Cycling Mapping; Digital Waterfall Mapping
- 4) **Outdoor Recreation Sector:** Training staff on pan-Ontario standardized protocols for health and safety implementation, signage and communications; supporting the infrastructure of widening hiking and cycling trails and re-directing trails for one-way use (signage and messaging) establish standardized training and provide resources.
- 5) **Camping Infrastructure** for retrofitting camping sites for RV Market. There is interest and opportunity to capitalize on this market. Campgrounds, if not already serving the RV market, will need updated infrastructure for waste management. Washroom infrastructure for campgrounds to allow for individual stalls verses a bank of bathroom stalls.
- 6) **Parks** need to invest in automatic gates and online booking systems to avoid person interaction. Timed visitation to popular nature sites, such as trails, lookouts and waterfall locations in Hamilton. Many tourism businesses rely on the influx of the outdoor visitor to provide added-value for their stay – food, attractions, hotels, camping, shops.
- 7) Create a sustainability **province-wide pledge**, giving back to nature. Refer to the Icelandic Pledge as a model. Our region's Indigenous communities are looking to add Visitor Pledge to build mutual respect between visitor and their authentic experiences and residents.
- 8) **Ensure Connectability** to visitors and opportunities for business growth to include broadband implementation for Rural communities including First Nations communities. Currently, they are not on a level competitive business playing field to establish a strong virtual commerce presence.
- 9) **Support Festivals & Events** that are re-inventing the way they feature live music & artists in the virtual sphere. This sector is a big employer of live music & artists and with so many now cancelled due to COVID-19 that there is significant job loss. In our region 2 signature tourism events have successfully implemented a virtual platform, in Burlington, the Sound of Music and in Paris the DT Concert Series. *This quote from musician artist Terra Lightfoot who was in the Paris line-up says it all: "I know that you'll continue delivering great shows with other artists these next few weeks. It's so important right now to have income we can count on as musicians... honestly.... You are making a difference in my life and others by giving us something to fall back on as the return of attended live shows gets pushed farther and farther into the future...."*

Closing Message:

- HHBRTA recognizes that COVID-19 is first and foremost a health crisis. However, it is simultaneously an economic crisis that will have long lasting devastating impact on small business operators and hundreds of thousands of workers, across every region of the province.
- We have been working closely with the Minister MacLeod and her team via the Ministry Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Cultural Industries to pivot to support the double bottom line aspect of the tourism industry. Support to local businesses and the communities

they are in is critical now so that once we get on the other side of the pandemic tourists to Ontario will continue to be able to experience the many authentic local experiences that makes up the province's overall tourism visitor experience.

- Staying globally competitive, we need to keep an eye on the future and adapt access and policies, invest in enhancements for the new customer, invest in product and infrastructure, capacity building, skills training in patience and understanding.
- We are committed to work directly with government to ensure the needs of tourism and hospitality businesses and workers are a key consideration, as government rolls out economic recovery to help today but to also support the future of Ontario's tourism sector. Ontario is the "Place to Grow".