

Committee Report

To:	Chair Keaveney and Committee Members
Committee Date:	May 1, 2025
Subject / Report No:	EDTC-PEDAC-03-25
Title:	Economic Development, Tourism & Culture Strategic Progress Report – April 2025
Prepared by:	Savanna Myers
Reviewed by:	Randy Scherzer
Lower Tier(s) Affected:	All

Recommendation

1. That report **EDTC-PEDAC-03-25 regarding the Economic Development, Tourism & Culture Strategic Progress Report – April 2025** be received for information.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide the first status update of 2025 on strategic progress of the Economic Development, Tourism & Culture (EDTC) Master Plan. Included is an overview of priority milestones, including relevant statistics and individual project outcomes. The items contained in this report are pulled directly from the EDTC Master Plan and were all discussed through the 2025 budget process, with approval through the same.

Background and Discussion

The Economic Development, Tourism & Culture (EDTC) team kicked off 2025 with the release of the departments first Annual Report. This was an important first step in evaluating the relevance of the Master Plan, while also providing the opportunity to review and celebrate the collective work achieved by staff. The Annual Report was presented to this Committee in February, shared with Council at the following meeting and upon invitation, presented to Committees in Meaford and Owen Sound. A hard copy of the report was provided to all Councillors across Grey, along with CAOs, EDOs, and staff with the request that the document be used as a resource to understand the programs and initiatives underway and available as per strategic direction.

Entering year two of Masterplan implementation, focus now shifts from a theme of foundational to a theme of study. The programs and initiatives introduced in 2024 are well positioned to be maintained, while new work is prioritized to study changing circumstances and perform due diligence. This array of study includes everything from new forms of business retention and

expansion (BR+E) outreach, to getting a better handle on preferred marketing channels, to performing full analysis of potential employment lands and evaluating application of LEAN principles to village site operations.

To ensure teams were on the same page and prepared for the year ahead, staff prioritized the first week of January for all-staff meetings and detailed workplan development, down to such detail as event dates and media buys. This adjustment in planning has already proven successful and ensured the team is strategically focused on key priorities. The following sections outline 2025 workplan accomplishments to date as per the EDTC Masterplan.

Economic Development & Tourism

Priority 1: Leadership & Collaboration

On April 4, the inaugural **Warden's Economic Development Leadership Luncheon (1.1)** was held at Sydenham Campus. 73 delegates registered for the event and 66 attended, representing all nine member municipalities and the County. The day was filled with big picture thinking, networking, and learning thanks to an Investment Readiness Activity session led by Luigi Presta of Think Compass, an uninterrupted networking lunch, and an education session by EPCOR on Water and Wastewater Alternative Project Delivery Models.

Delegates rated the session 8.7/10. With positive recommendations, future sessions will be offered to the full senior management team from each municipality, to accompany elected officials, and an e-newsletter will be used to maintain communication with the delegates on a go forward basis. Planning for the October 30th Economic Development Leadership Forum is underway.

Tariff Response Strategy (1.2)

This responsive workplan item was not originally included in 2025 activities. However, in February, staff leaned on the lessons learned during the pandemic and immediately began navigating numerous sessions and training, and launched the [Business Supports](#) webpage. Grey County is working together with its member municipalities to actively monitor the current situation and are committed to collectively supporting our business community across the region. In these uncertain times, our staff is doing the same great work as always. We're just making sure to visibly link our daily efforts as direct solutions to current challenges. See report EDTC-PEDAC-04-25 for further details on efforts and understanding.

Priority 2: Investment Ready

Following development of the industrial lands tool in 2024, staff initiated a consulting contract to support **Investment Readiness Due Diligence (2.3 & 2.4)**. This three-part contract is currently underway, with all projects expected to be completed in time for the Leadership Forum later this fall. The goal of the project is to unlock investment potential across Grey County by studying identified sites to understand the current situation and site potential, and de-risk investment attraction.

- **Comparative Analysis** of current policies and restrictions.
- **Investment Ready Tear Sheets** using Invest Ontario frameworks.

- **Scenario Modeling** to develop and test concepts for assessment potential.

Data Sharing Program (2.1)

Staff have negotiated the extension of the SPOTLIGHT platform for continued regional use. Based on 2024 feedback, staff have now introduced data office hours to provide training, tailor reports and form narrative sought by municipal economic development staff and business enterprise centre clients. With GIS staff, the ESRI Community Analyst program has also been secured to support downtown and geo area analysis specifically.

Priority 3: Business Retention & Expansion

Regional Job Fair (3.1)

Despite the snowy weather, the Regional Job Fair was a resounding success. In response to market conditions, staff reduced the scale of the event, which resulted in 64 employers and more than 600 job seekers. Overall satisfaction was rated 4.3/5, and on average 12 resumes collected per booth were expected to lead to interviews. More than half of the employers' plan to hire from the applicants, who were consistently noted as highly skilled and qualified.

Sector Scans (3.2)

Replacing the Sector Summits introduced in 2024, staff have reimagined the BR+E practices for 2025 given the tremendous uncertainty and resulting time constraints of business.

Staff is conducting its first sector scan in the agriculture sector, meeting with local representatives at their tables, to learn about each group's specific issues and opportunities. This work aims to gather detailed insights on trends, challenges, and opportunities unique to each subsector. The feedback will be used to inform broader advocacy efforts and influence development and delivery of departmental programs and initiatives. See report EDTC-PEDAC-04-25 for a more detailed analysis of findings to date.

Gather Campaign (3.1)

On February 17th (Family Day), the [gath-er] campaign was officially launched. Anecdotally, we are hearing an increase in community pride, directly from our featured businesses, our municipal partners, and the community at large. The campaign's stories are generating meaningful conversations and harnessing community pride. People are discovering new experiences and learning about agricultural production within Grey County that they were previously unaware of. Campaign Statistics include:

Over The Top (OTT): Impressions – 185,025, View Rate – 76:83%, Completion – 98.54% (to March 12, 2025)	YouTube: Views - 24,338 Click - 3.5% Watch Time - 2:55 (to March 31, 2025)	Meta Ad Campaign: Impressions - 156,896 Views - 82,372 Engagement - 32,939 (to March 31, 2025)
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Two production days have also taken place to date. The first in January featuring the warmth of

community, with the Owen Sound Farmer's Market and Rusty's at Blue Mountain Village; and most recently the sweetness of community with Misty Meadow's and Holstein Maplefest.

Digital Media Shift – B2B Engagement (3.1)

To improve communication, staff re-launched e-Newsletters. Every month, an Economic Development Newsletter is sent out on the last Tuesday. Special bulletins with urgent information are sent in between. Weekly tourism events, seasonal consumer newsletters, and quarterly industry news are also shared. This is part of our strategy to make social media a secondary communication tool. Staff are analyzing engagement metrics to optimize the timing and type of content released.

Cruise & Connect Networking Event (3.1)

On April 24, Grey and Bruce Counties partnered for a third time to host the region's largest professionals networking event on board the Ms. Chi-Cheemaun. The event welcomed nearly 350 individuals for an evening of networking and development.

Priority 4: Entrepreneurship & Innovation

Business Enterprise Centre (4.1)

Consultations are up 30% year over year, with a doubling of consults per month in March. From January to March, staff had 176 inquiries and 63 consultations, which resulted in 16 businesses started, 12 business sustained, 9 businesses expanded, and 2 businesses purchased.

In response to the current environment, staff hosted a Wellness Series for entrepreneurs in the first quarter. This included 12 workshops aimed at supporting the person behind the business and welcomed 183 registrants. In addition, staff partnered in two shared events with Henry Bernick Entrepreneurship Centre (HBEC) welcoming 50 participants, offered six Foodpreneur Advantage sessions/workshops, hosted one fieldtrip and conducted seven Summer Company presentations in class, to teachers and in one online information session.

Summer Company and Starter Company application intakes are underway.

Sydenham Campus

The first three months of 2025, Sydenham Campus has welcomed 71 short term rentals, and hosted major events like the King Charles III Coronation Medal Ceremony, Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) Regional Skills Challenge, the Warden's Economic Development Leadership Luncheon and a secondary school field trip to learn about entrepreneurship pathways.

In the first quarter, revenue has reached 30% of the annual target. Staff also submitted the final performance report and certificate to FedDev. Upon approval, this will release the holdback and end the contribution agreement.

The exterior doors replacement request for tender (RFT) closed within budget, and work is expected to begin this spring. The next and final planned capital project for 2025 is the interior HVAC engineering and phased equipment replacement.

Grey Bruce Makers

- **18** Volunteers giving 40+ hours per week in support of the makerspace.
- **76** members
- **4** Community meet-ups happening monthly on topics such as programming, woodworking, photography and 3D Design.
- **3** Student/youth programs introducing youth to woodworking.
- **3** Learn to Weld Jr. programs for youth to try a skilled trade
- **1** Woodworking program launched to support Adults with Disabilities
- Over **100** courses have been offering our community **600+** opportunities to learn and grow their skills.
- Grey Bruce Makers is open **7** days a week and late until **9pm** on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Henry Bernick Entrepreneurship Centre (HBEC)

- **Innovation and Research:** Collaboration with Grey County and Georgian College has helped local businesses access resources for research, social innovation, and entrepreneurship, supporting economic growth.
- **Technological Advancements:** Georgian College's projects focus on automation, digitization, and emerging technologies like AI and Big Data, with the new Centre for Industrial Simulation and Prototyping aiding vital industries.
- **Entrepreneurship and IP Support:** Georgian College provides mentorship and intellectual property advising, helping businesses in Owen Sound and the Blue Mountains to date with commercialization and patent activities.
- **Introduced Xcelerate Programs to the Region:** Xcelerate Now: Empowering Newcomer Entrepreneurs to Thrive in Grey County was hosted in Hanover and Xcelerate Her: Celebrating Indigenous Excellence in Entrepreneurship was hosted in Southampton.

Priority 5: Destination Development

Regional Marketing (5.3)

Late winter and early spring blogs featured [horse drawn sleigh rides](#), [maple syrup season](#) and [2025 signature events](#). The [GatherinGrey.ca](#) microsite was launched within visitgrey.ca. From January 1 to April 16, 2025, website visitation is down 10% compared to the same period in 2024, with over 49,000 active users. The Gather landing page is the top performer with 5,811 visits, followed by the homepage (4,366 visits) and the maple blog (3,278 visits).

Staff have adjusted the social media strategy for a more focused approach, including hosting influencer Olga Valentin ([@MiniJetsetter](#)) from April 11-13 to promote spring travel to Grey County. Her first reel received 9,822 views and 332 engagements. Since January 1, Visit Grey has gained 311 new Instagram followers, nearing 10,000 followers.

Mixed Media to date, includes:

- Mountain Life Magazine – winter edition, full page
- Canada Travel & Leisure Magazine – spring edition, full page
- Rampt Magazine – spring edition, full page
- Grey Bruce Kids and Boomers – Spring Editions

- Owen Sound Attack Jumbo Screen – Grey County videos play before, after and during Attack home games.
- Exhibition Place Billboard – March 3-9 along the Gardiner Expressway

Visitgrey.ca will also undergo a refresh in 2025. Staff are actively researching and seeking demonstrations for new technology and design to improve the user experience and facilitate more streamlined staff experience.

Grey Roots

Staff continue to prioritize programs and partnerships into 2025. While important work is happening across priority areas, this section will briefly discuss **Priority 5: Innovative Practices**.

As part of the **Annual Operations Review (5.3)** staff undertook a LEAN assessment of village operations and have prepared a new operating plan for 2025 to support volunteers, students and create a better visitor experience. This includes more **Interactive Storytelling (3.1)** and **Improved Access and Inclusion (5.4)**. Across the board, the continued focus on **Prioritizing Programming (5.1)** is seeing incredible results.

In keeping with this theme, since introducing *Craftastic Saturdays* earlier this year, Saturday visits have steadily increased. By the end of March, attendance doubled, with many young families coming specifically for the crafts. Most recently, staff have introduced *Reel Roots Filming Screening Series* in the Thomas Wheildon Theatre, bringing classic and contemporary movies to the big screen. Both of these offerings are available simply with admission.

Already in 2025, staff have hosted 26 programs welcoming 613 participants and three education visits welcoming 111 students. Major events, including Lunar New Year Celebration, Bluewater Railroad Day, Spring Lecture Series and Our Roots are Showing Concerts (2) resulted in 615 attendees. Memberships are up 19% over 2024 with renewals and new members. To date, 111 members have renewed or purchased a membership in 2025.

Staff also worked with Sheatre to pilot a community partnership supporting community arts for social change, finding a unique use for our venue during the quietest time of year. Moving from pilot to long-term agreement, the Specialist High Skills Major in Agriculture program returned in February. This year, the program was thrilled to reach capacity with 16 students. Staff continues to work with school board representatives to consider growth and enhancement opportunities for the program.

Finally, with the support of IT, staff are in the process of refreshing greyroots.com. To date, user testing has been completed and designs are being developed to enhance the user experience, supporting new digital **Interactive Experiences (3.1)** and **Strategic Target Marketing (5.5)** and **Improved Access and Inclusion (5.4)**.

Financial and Resource Implications

All initiatives are included in staff workplans and the approved 2025 budget.

Relevant Consultation

- ☒ Internal – EDTC Staff
 - ☐ AODA Compliance (describe)
 - ☐ Contribution to Climate Change Action Plan Targets (describe)
- ☐ External (list)

Appendices and Attachments

[EDTC Master Plan and Annual Report](#)