

## Staff Report

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**Report To:** Community Development, Tourism and Culture Advisory Committee

**Report From:** Brent Fisher, Manager of Community and Business Development

**Meeting Date:** June 11, 2021

**Report Code:** CS-21-059

**Subject:** River District Action Plan

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### Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report CS-21-059 respecting River District Action Plan, the Community Development, Tourism and Culture Advisory Committee recommends that City Council:

1. Approve the River District Action Plan; and
2. Request staff work collaboratively with the DIA Board of Management to implement the River District Action Plan.

### Highlights:

- The Owen Sound Downtown Improvement Area Board of Management and the City have partnered on a Downtown Action Plan, including a re-branding strategy.
- The plan was developed with public and stakeholder input as well as with the guidance of the Board.
- The DIA Board of Management has allocated \$40,000 of reserve funds for the creation, development, and hosting of a new website, as well as content development for the new site.

### Strategic Plan Alignment:

This report supports the delivery of core services.

## **Background:**

At its meeting on August 15, 2019, the DIA Board of Management gave direction to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) to engage a consultant to undertake a Downtown Marketing Action Plan and Branding for the OSDIA. At its meeting on November 13, 2019, the Board awarded the RFP to BC Hughes Inc., the highest scoring proponent for \$31,764 (including HST).

This was a joint initiative with both the City and DIA contributing half the cost of the project with the City's portion being funded through a Rural Economic Development reserve fund.

The project goal was to:

1. Create a refined downtown identity (brand) that captures the story and rallies people together; and
2. Develop a marketing plan with clear actions and objectives to tell that story.

## **Public Input**

Stakeholder engagement was completed in June and July of 2020 in a variety of ways:

- Interview workshop with each DIA Board Member and select City staff;
- One-on-one interviews with over a dozen key downtown stakeholders as identified by the DIA Board;
- A unique DIA Membership survey, garnering 43 responses; and
- A community survey for residents, garnering 321 responses.

The original strategy for public input was modified to reflect restrictions as a result of the global pandemic.

Site visits were completed by BC Hughes from February to September 2020. Overall, the input as reported in the plan shows challenges offset by many positive factors in the downtown.

The Community Development, Tourism, and Culture Advisory Committee [received a report and presentation from BC Hughes Inc.](#) in November of 2020. Committee supported the new River District brand concept presented at that meeting.

At the March 2021 OSDIA meeting, the Board of Management approved the full River District Action Plan presented by BC Hughes (Attachment 1).

The Plan presents strategies and actions for success in four key areas:

- Branding. The branding proposes an impactful and bold identity. It has been recommended that the entire downtown area be rebranded and renamed as the “River District”. The re-branding is intended to demonstrate change, signify a new chapter, and rally support with a positive connection to the area.
- River District Management
- River District Experience Development
- River District Promotion

For each of the areas, there is a clear objective and many actions to achieve success. The tasks are actionable, achievable, and measurable. The last section of the River District Action Plan is devoted to moving forward and identifies 13 key actions to create momentum, rebrand the downtown, and start to tell the story.

To support implementing the actions outlined by the Plan, City Council and the DIA Board of Management approved a joint 18-month Community Development Coordinator contract position.

The purpose of this report is to provide the Community Development, Tourism and Culture Advisory Committee an update concerning the River District Action Plan Implementation and to request approval of the overall plan.

## **Analysis:**

It has been noted that the River District Action Plan has an ambitious timeline with three years to achieve the objectives and implement the actions. The actions, when implemented, will achieve the goals laid out in the plan and ensure that the downtown captures its potential and positions the City, and in particular the downtown, for vitality and economic stability.

This committee will receive reports on the progress as several of the actions within the City’s 2021 Strategic Plan fall out of the River District Action Plan.

The actions in the River District Action Plan are planned for implementation over three years. An immediate impact from a branding perspective can be achieved by implementing the following recommendations outlined in the attached chart:

1. New consumer-focused website (RFP process underway);
2. Claiming Google and TripAdvisor listings and updating all information;

3. Re-branding of all social media channels in conjunction with a new website;
4. Banners for light standards throughout River District (City expenditure);
5. Replacing wayfinding signage at key decision points with “River District”;
6. Change to River District in City publications where possible;
7. Changing the official name of OSDIA to the River District Business Area Board of Management; and
8. A thoughtful and creative marketing campaign when steps 1-7 are complete to draw attention to the positive changes and new brand.

### **River District Experience Development**

On May 12, the [DIA Board approved funding and implementing two new experiences](#) that will support River District Experience Development within the Plan. These experiences are in place of the Hottest Street Sale and Fifties First Friday, which have been cancelled due to anticipated COVID-19 restrictions.

#RiverDistrictSightsofSummer will be a 6-week long campaign, beginning in early July and running until mid-August. The program is designed to encourage residents and visitors to explore the Downtown River District and create a connection with businesses and the River District environment.

As a way to add colour and animation to pedestrian space within the River District, a variety of River District branded games and graphics will be installed at different locations throughout the River District. The chosen locations are areas where patrons typically gather or pass through. These decals are non-slip, and once installed on concrete and paving stone can remain in place for the summer and fall season.

### **Other 2021 Planned City Activation, Events, and Initiatives Contributing to River District Experience Development**

The City is an important partner with the Board in implementing the actions of the River District Action Plan. The City has several initiatives planned that will also support River District Experience Development in 2021 toward creating an engaging and animated space:

- Music at the Market will be happening for the second year in a row. This concert series will take place in the Farmers’ Market square on

Thursdays and Fridays in July and August, from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m.

- Outdoor Movie Nights will also be taking place at the Farmers' Market square on August 12, 19, and 26. Both initiatives can operate within the guidelines of Public Health and fulfill the goals to create an engaging space within the River District.
- Streamlining the Sidewalk and Street Patio Furniture process through delegation of approval to the City Manager and waiving of application fees.
- The new Community Improvement Plan with programs available in the River District include:
  - Façade & Structural Improvement Grant Program
  - Accessibility Improvement Grant Program
  - Start-up Space Leasehold Improvement Grant Program
  - Property & Landscaping Improvement Grant Program – Coming Soon
  - Vacant Building Expansion/Conversion Grant Program – Coming Soon
- Procurement and placement of River District banners. Banner design is in accordance with River District Branding Guidelines. Placement is in accordance with the Downtown Owen Sound Streetscape Plan.
- 2020/21 Wayfinding Signage Initiative and 2021 Wayfinding Signage Strategy.

To further support the implementation of the plan, the City has assembled a cross-functional team including Public Works & Engineering, Planning, Community & Business Development, Parks & Open Space, and Police Services. This staff will work to support a variety of initiatives. In addition, external partners will be key and include the County of Grey, Canadian Mental Health Association, United Way, and RTO7.

## **Financial Implications:**

The City's portion of the 18-month contract position is funded through City reserves.

The City supports the Downtown through the approved operating and capital budgets.

## **Communication Strategy:**

As outlined in the original report.

The plan is also included on the [City's website](#).

All DIA Agendas are shared with the entire DIA Membership as well as the Board of Management.

## **Consultation:**

As outlined in the River District Action Plan.

## **Attachments:**

1. River District Action Plan with Summary of Recommendations
2. River District Branding Toolkit
3. River District Decals and Locations

## **Recommended by:**

Brent Fisher, Manager of Community and Business Development

## **Reviewed by:**

Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services

## **Submission approved by:**

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Brent Fisher, Manager of Community and Business Development at [bfisher@owensound.ca](mailto:bfisher@owensound.ca) or 519-376-4440 ext 1254.