

Staff Report

Report To: Community Services Committee
Report From: Melissa Crannie, Tourism Marketing Coordinator
Meeting Date: January 22, 2025
Report Code: CS-25-001
Subject: 2024 Tourism Year-End Wrap-Up Report

Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report CS-25-001 respecting the 2024 Tourism Year-End Wrap-Up report, the Community Services Committee recommends that City Council receive the report for information purposes.

Highlights:

- Visitor Services moved to the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, providing an enhanced central location for tourist inquiries and information. Visitor attendance exceeded previous years, highlighting the success of this initiative.
- Overall engagement statistics from Tourism marketing and promotional areas demonstrate significant increases. The Tourism Website saw an increase in views/users of approximately 40% and engagement and user sessions of an average of 73.21%.
- Staff initiated the planning and development of a Tourism Ambassador Program to enhance visitor engagement and promote local experiences.
- The popular Corkscrew City Tour made a successful return with increased participation and positive feedback.
- The new Tourism App is ready for launch, offering visitors a modern, user-friendly digital guide to local attractions, events, and services.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

[Strategic Plan](#) Priority: This report supports the delivery of Core Service.

Climate and Environmental Implications:

There are no anticipated climate or environmental impacts.

Previous Report/Authority:

[Staff Report CS-24-083](#) Project 3a3 – 2024 Tourism Services at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery Pilot Project Results

[Staff Report AG-24-005](#) Tourism Services Update

Background:

Owen Sound Tourism functions under three pillars:

1. Product Development;
2. Marketing and Promotion; and
3. Visitor Services

Product Development within the Tourism division strives to market Owen Sound as a travel destination by creating experiences and activities that draw tourists to the community and showcase the city's most attractive features.

Marketing and Promotion through publications, advertising, website, social media, and participation in events and tradeshow, promote Owen Sound as a tourism destination and provide interactive opportunities to share information about the City's assets. These channels concentrate on the services offered throughout our community while highlighting our rich cultural, historical, and natural attractions.

Visitor Services serves as a first stop for those visiting Owen Sound and the surrounding area. In May 2024, it moved to the Tom Thomson Art Gallery. In addition to welcoming visitors to the area, staff provide tourists with access to free publications, brochures, merchandise, products, and information on Owen Sound Tourism and Events. From the May long weekend to Thanksgiving, Tourism is open 7 days a week. City Hall also provides publications, City-branded merchandise and online tools to help Visitor Services as well throughout the year.

Partnerships are crucial to the operation of the tourism industry and the City is fortunate to collaborate with many significant tourism stakeholders. Some of those partners include:

- Grey County: Grey County Tourism is the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) for Grey County and operates within the newly formed Economic Development, Tourism, and Culture Department.
- RTO7: Tourism in Bruce-Grey-Simcoe is developed, sustained, and expanded with the help of RTO7 Regional Tourism Organization 7. RTO7 supports private businesses and destination marketing organizations throughout the pandemic by assisting with our area's tourism planning, marketing, fundraising, and product development.
- Tom Thomson Art Gallery: Visitor Services was relocated to the Art Gallery building. The building's lobby offers both Tourism and Gallery visitor services. Tourism and the Art Gallery collaborate on staff and volunteer training as well as marketing and promotions.
- Community Partners: Staff collaborate closely with several other community partners, including the Grey Roots Museum and Archives, the Roxy Theatre, Ontario By Bike, Billy Bishop Museum, Attack Box Office, and the Great Lakes Waterfront Trail Association, among others.
- Owen Sound Attack Hockey Club: New in 2024, through the updated Agreement with the Attack, City merchandise and information is available at the Attack store.
- River District: Tourism proudly partners with the Owen Sound River District Association on city-related, tourism, and River District activities, activations, and experiences within the district's boundaries. This collaboration combines our strengths and resources to deliver successful events, engaging experiences, and initiatives that benefit residents and visitors alike. Together, we enhance the district's vibrancy, ensuring it remains a dynamic hub of culture, commerce, and community connection.

Analysis:

On February 21, 2024, the Community Development, Tourism, and Culture Advisory Committee approved the 2024 Tourism Workplan. The 2024 Workplan ([CS-24-009](#)) was based on the direction provided by Council through the Strategic Plan, and various Master Plans and is aligned with the

Capital and Operating Budgets. The purpose of this report is to review and summarize the activities of the Tourism division for 2024.

Product Development Highlights

Savour Owen Sound

- This award-winning Savour Owen Sound event celebrated its 11-year Anniversary in March.
- Each week, staff promoted a different Savour Owen Sound restaurant on Facebook, through a website feature interview, and by hosting a contest for a \$50 gift certificate to the restaurant.
- The event featured 11 local eateries, each offering a unique special prix fixe dine-in menu unique to their specific flavours.
- Total of 708 QR code scans recorded for Event Details.
- 451 online ballots were submitted to vote for The People's Choice Savour Skillet award and for a chance to win the \$1,000 Foodie Basket grand prize at the end of the campaign.
- Papi's Pub & Eatery was the 2024 winner of the People's Choice Savour Skillet award, for a 2nd consecutive year.
- Digital stats during the March event include:
 - Reach 54.8K +37.7%
 - Visits 8.7K +54.5%
 - New Followers 233 +65.2%
 - Content Interactions 5.6K +222.7%
 - Watch time: 20h 25 mins +365.8%

Savour Owen Sound will return in March 2025. Staff is planning to partner with the River District and Grey County to enhance offerings for the month-long event that will feature special features such as a flavour of the week.

SNOwen Sound Frolics

SNOwen Sound Frolics returned for its fourth year in February. This month-long celebration promoted hyperlocal travel and outdoor activity while encouraging visitors to explore Owen Sound's outdoor attractions through online puzzles that functioned as clues, directing them to 15 locations throughout the city. Staff purchased giveaways from local stores to promote shopping and inspire residents to be active and healthy. The initiative encouraged our community to enjoy being outside while promoting and supporting local businesses.

The outdoor self-guided activity was well received. The 2024 campaign stats were as follows:

- Reach 66.6K -11.2%
- Visits 8K +202.9%
- New followers 138 +79.2%
- Content Interactions 2.4K +117.6%

SNOwen Sound Frolics will return in February 2025, with some new innovative initiatives to further enhance the outdoor experience and engage the community.

The Salmon Tour

The Owen Sound Salmon Tour showcased Owen Sound's unique connection to the Sydenham River during the annual salmon migration, mid-September to mid-October. This event combined traditional and modern promotional strategies, leveraging QR codes on posters around the city and distributing printed and digital maps. These measures enhanced accessibility for diverse audiences, while a strong online presence provided real-time updates and engaged the community. The result was a significant increase in visitor numbers during the peak migration period.

The Salmon Tour's social media posts achieved top views overall for 2024, demonstrating its exceptional engagement with audiences:

- Views: 383,000
- Reach: 183,800
- New Followers: 157
- Interactions: 3,600

Several initiatives complemented the Salmon Tour's success, including a very popular colouring contest, which drew over 100 entries and facilitated family engagement. Collaboration with primary students at East Ridge Community School supported their educational unit on salmon migration.

Ongoing discussions with the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority (GSCA) and the Sydenham Sportsmen Association are laying the groundwork for future innovative partnerships. These initiatives aim to enhance visitor experiences, encourage overnight stays, and support local shopping and dining during the fall salmon run. This is reflected in the Tourism Work Plan for 2025.

Marketing & Promotion Highlights

Brochures and Publications

A series of local brochures are designed, updated, and printed annually by staff. The two brochures that continue to be most often requested are the Owen Sound Maps and Attractions brochure and the Owen Sound Restaurant Guide.

The Owen Sound Maps and Attractions brochure and Harrison Park Brochure were redesigned in 2022 to create a comprehensive directory featuring parks, trails, beaches, open spaces, and River District, with all the information in one convenient location. This has aided both residents and visitors in navigating the city. This brochure update was well received and is an excellent reference tool.

Other Owen Sound City-produced brochures include:

- The Salmon Tour
- Owen Sound Art Scene
- Corkscrew City Tour
- Owen Sound Trails Network
- The Indigenous Interactive Walking Tour
- River District Historical Walking Tour
- The Greenwood Cemetery Walking Tour
- Wiidosendiwag- Interactive Walking Together Tour

All pamphlets have been updated with a new look and feel and are available on our tourism website as a digital alternative.

The City's extensive trail networks and self-guided tours are frequently used for tourism. Excursions can be enjoyed while walking, biking, riding a motorcycle, ATV, or snowmobiling. Maps and information for the Tourism team continue to work with Grey County to support these initiatives and promote Owen Sound as a bike, ATV/Snowmobile, and motorcycle-friendly community.

Paid advertisements appeared in Rrampt, the Georgian Triangle Tourism Association, The Owen Sounder, Sweetwater Music Festival, Salmon Spectacular, Georgian Bay Symphony, The Chamber of Commerce publication - The Sound, and Escarpment Magazine. Each paid advertisement was accompanied by digital marketing efforts to supplement print.

Owen Sound Tourism Website.

The Owen Sound Tourism Website continues to thrive. Online visitors to the site continue to climb, with an overall increase in views/users up approximately 40% and engagement and user sessions up an average of 73.21%.

Throughout the year, our numerous online campaigns, including Cycle the Sound, Locals Love it Here, Owen Sound Fall Colour Progression update, #HarbourViews, Hockeyfest, Salmon Tour, Holidays, #TourismAtTheTom, Corkscrew City Tour, Owen Sound Branded merchandise, Patio Season, Music @ the Market, TD Harb Nights, The Salmon Spectacular, Doors Open, Summerfolk, Canada Day/Harbourfest, Savour Owen Sound, HP – Camping, #ShineOnOS, #TBT, Snowden Sound Frolics, NYE Event, Arts, Culture, and Volunteers Awards. Reporting on up-to-date activities and local tourism news, videos and images, were all well-received online media content that successfully engaged our audience, bolstered our online presence, raised community awareness, and enhanced our tourism branding efforts.

Updates are ongoing to ensure functionality, accurate information, and visual aesthetics are seasonally aligned.

2024 Website statistics are reported as follows:

- Over 188,000 visits
- 87,000 new visitors to the site
- Top pages visited (in order):
 - Camping & RV
 - Harrison Park
 - Home
 - Events & Festivals
 - Plan your Visit
 - Salmon Tour
- Countries visiting our site (in order):
 - Canada
 - United States
 - Indonesia
 - Ireland
 - United Kingdom
 - Germany
 - China

- Cities visiting our site (in order):
 - Toronto
 - Owen Sound
 - London
 - Montreal
 - Hamilton
 - Sentolo (Indonesia)
 - Mississauga
- User attributes:
 - 58.6% Female
 - 41.4% Male
- Top 2 Age range of users (in order)
 - Age 25-35
 - Age 45-55
- User interests (in order):
 - Food & Dining
 - Travel
 - Politics/News
 - Outdoor enthusiasts
 - Media

Efforts to update and maintain the content of the newly launched tourism website continue.

Additional marketing and promotion highlights include:

- Expanding outreach, engagement, and following on social media and utilizing social media to target specific demographics for campaigns;
Statistics on followers compared to 2023:
 - X (formerly Twitter) – 9,687 (-29)
 - Facebook – 17,800 (+1.2K)
 - Instagram – 6,000 (+414)
 - Tik Tok (New) – 1722 (+1722)
- Continuing to update and expand City stock images for use in communication efforts by all City departments.
- Launch of a new Owen Sound Tourism App for a more enticing, user-friendly visitor engagement.

- Introducing TikTok as a new social media platform to broaden our video marketing reach and target specific demographics.
- Emphasis on highlighting hyperlocal tourism through:
 - The creation of experience packages, which are available both online and in print and highlight a variety of local tourism options targeted at different visitor types identified by Grey County's analytics for Owen Sound, such as adventurers, culturati, eco-tourists, family travellers, etc.;
 - Free Bicycle rentals and child carrier/jogger attachment, including customized in-town cycling experiences;
 - [Owen Sound Tourism - E-Blast](#), a digital resource highlighting Events & Attractions' monthly calendar of events, surveys, local insight, and information; and
 - Ongoing social media campaigns, giveaways, event appearances, and collaborations with local shops, attractions, and happenings.

Tourism spent \$15,000.00 on publications in 2024, offset by \$2,370 in advertising revenue. Publications were distributed throughout the region at Visitor Centres and racks at various locations throughout the city and offered at local events. Over 16,000 Restaurant Guides and 16,500 OS Map & Attractions were distributed.

Marketing & Promotion budget for 2024 was \$16,500.

Visitor Services Highlights Include:

In 2024, Tourism underwent a significant transition in response to Service Review Action 3 a.3. initiating a pilot project to combine Tourism Services within the Tom Thomson Art Gallery location.

This move relocated operations from the former CN Rail Station, which historically shared space with the Community Waterfront Heritage Centre and operated seasonally from May to October. Tourism services commenced in May at the new location within the Gallery, providing a base for the City's three tourism ambassador summer students. At the Service Review Ad Hoc Committee held October 9, Committee received a report [Staff Report AG-24-005](#) regarding this pilot and it was decided to extend this initiative, ensuring that services will continue in the Gallery location for a full calendar year beginning in 2025.

Tourism Summer Ambassadors travel and attend City-run and other third party events in the City tracking visitor counts, delivering information about Owen Sound, and leading activations for youth, families, and children. The students also offer support to Events and the River District by distributing information, news, and brochures while routinely delivering Tourism Brochures throughout the City.

[The Corkscrew City Tour](#), Wheel n Ride, [Mid-week Music](#), [TD Harbour Nights](#), Hottest Street Sale, [Outdoor Movie Nights](#), [Summerfolk](#), [Emancipation Festival](#), [Sound Waterfront Festival](#), [Salmon Spectacular](#), [One World Festival](#), and [Hockeyfest](#) are just a few of the local events Tourism Staff and Summer Ambassadors supported in 2024.

The two-day Sound Waterfront Festival, held at Kelso Beach from June 30 to July 1, was organized by the City Events and Activations Coordinator with support from Tourism staff. The event showcased regional performers, activities, vendors, and community partners. Tourism staff played a key role by assisting with setup and teardown, managing the front gates and performers, and hosting a tourism booth that offered activations and information for guests.

Owen Sound Tourism continues to provide free cruiser bike rentals, complete with a helmet, lock, handlebar shopping bag, and basket, making it easier for tourists and residents to explore the city. A jogger/carrier attachment is also available for families or support animals. The bikes were used 52 times and included adventure packages designed to inspire personalized, city-wide tourism experiences by bike. This complimentary service encouraged local shopping, discovery, and a healthy, active lifestyle.

The Visitor Information Centre welcomed 11,604 visitors in 2024, a 44.98% increase from 2023.

Visitor Services Count:

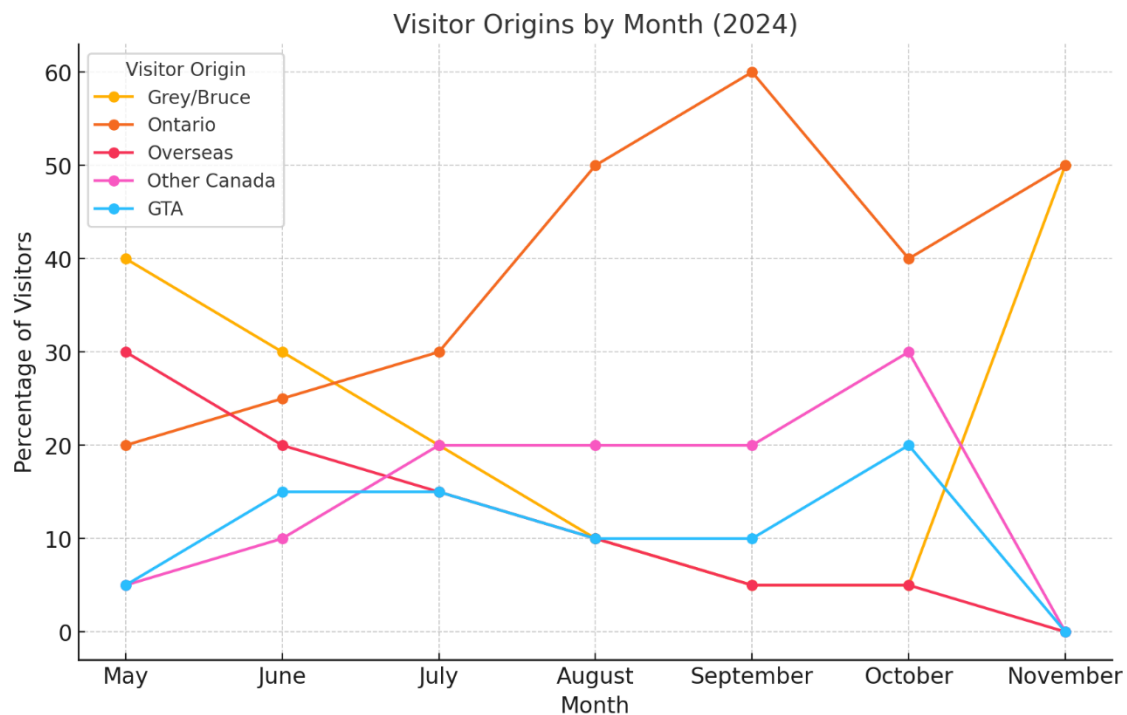
Recorded customer count for Visitor Services (in-person & Events) in 2019 – 2024, from Victoria Day weekend to-date (late May to end of November):

MONTH	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
May	463	-	-	367	420	593
June	1263	-	307	1283	2545	3008
July	1275	180	779	1232	1790	3506
August	1152	383	879	968	1611	4013
September	1102	54	251	696	1212	207
October	274	-	78	326	330	275
November	-	-	-	-	-	2
Dec	-	-	-	-	-	TBD
TOTAL	5,529	617	2,294	4,872	8,004	11,604

Visitor data is gathered through manual counters and observations by frontline staff at events and at Visitor Services. Visitor numbers in 2024 were 11,604 showing an increase of 44.97% over 2023.

Visitor Origins:

Recorded monthly from May to end of November (December not included in report due to timing):



The graph shows the distribution of visitor origins from May to November 2024. Visitors from Grey/Bruce were prominent early in the season, peaking at 60.99% in June, declining through August (22.73%), and rebounding to

50% in November. Ontario visitors, including those from the GTA, steadily grew throughout the summer, reaching 49.09% in August and maintaining strong representation into the fall, accounting for 50% of November visitors.

Overseas visitors contributed significantly early in the season (33.33% in May) but decreased to 4.55% by August, recovering slightly in October (30%) before dropping to 0% in November. Visitors from other parts of Canada peaked in August (23.64%) and remained moderately represented into October but were absent in November.

The data highlights seasonal shifts, with local visitors dominating early and late in the year and Ontario-based visitors maintaining a strong presence throughout. November's low visitor numbers reflect the off-peak season but show continued interest from Grey/Bruce and Ontario audiences.

Observations:

Visitor Services in 2024 saw significant growth, with visitor numbers increasing significantly compared to previous years. May recorded 593 visitors, up from 420 in 2023, while June reached 3,008, surpassing the previous year's 2,545. July and August hit new highs with 3,506 and 4,013 visitors, respectively. Visitors came from a diverse mix of the GTA, Grey/Bruce, other parts of Ontario, Canada, and overseas. Interests focused on galleries, museums, brochures, cycling, and events, with most visitors aged 45-64. This growth reflects the success of the new location in attracting and engaging a wider audience.

Tourism Ambassador Program

The Tourism Ambassador Program was in the planning and development stages in Fall 2024, with a targeted launch in Spring 2025. This program is designed to align tourism messaging across the region, providing consistent and engaging information to visitors. It aims to educate and empower community stakeholders, businesses, and their staff to serve as ambassadors for local experiences, fostering a welcoming environment that highlights the unique attributes of our area. A free subscription feature is also planned for those who wish to receive direct updates on program developments and new offerings. While this initiative was categorized under Visitor Services, its emphasis on consistent messaging and the promotion of local experiences strongly contributes to Marketing and Promotion efforts across the region. The River District Coordinator is supporting the planning and implementation process for this initiative.

2025 Initiatives and Recommendations

Enhance Visitor Services:

- Add clear messaging at the front counter of shared Tourism and TOM space and add interactive features at Visitor Services to create a more welcoming atmosphere.

Expand Tourism Offerings:

- Enhance the Corkscrew City Tour with self-guided options and quarterly events with larger group capacity.
- Build on successful events like Savour Owen Sound and SNOwen Sound Frolics by introducing new activities and partnerships.
- Expand the salmon migration event with guided tours, workshops, and local business partnerships.

Leverage the New Tourism App:

- Launch and promote the new app as a central tool for visitor information, itineraries, and real-time updates.
- Continuously develop app features to offer exclusive content, discounts, and event updates.

Foster Regional Collaboration:

- Strengthen partnerships with Grey County, RTO7, and neighbouring municipalities to coordinate tourism efforts and stretch budgets.
- Work closely with local organizations to develop inclusive and creative tourism initiatives.

Use MAT to Boost Tourism:

- Support the implementation of the Tourism Strategy developed in consultation with the Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT) committee and BC Hughes consultant.

Build on the Visitor Services Pilot Project:

- Continue supporting the Service Review goal to explore combining the Library, Tourism, and Tom Thomson Art Gallery into a shared reception and service space.
- Refine services based on the pilot project's success at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery.

Invest in Ambassador Training:

- Continue training and implementation of local Tourism Ambassadors program.
- Equip ambassadors with tools like app training, local points of interest, and business knowledge through curated digital resources.

Focus on Sustainability and Accessibility:

- Promote eco-friendly and accessible tourism experiences, such as free bike rentals and nature tours.
- Highlight Owen Sound's commitment to inclusivity and sustainable practices.

Year-Round Marketing Strategy:

- Shift focus to promoting Owen Sound as a destination for all seasons, with unique winter and off-peak attractions.
- Support consistent branding across all marketing materials and digital platforms.

Enhance Digital Engagement:

- Expand social media campaigns to target key demographics and increase engagement.
- Keep the tourism website updated with fresh content and visually appealing design.

Support Local Businesses and Culture:

- Partner with local businesses and cultural organizations to create unique experiences for visitors.
- Highlight Owen Sound's culinary, cultural, and outdoor assets in all promotional efforts.

Monitor and Adapt:

- Use analytics and visitor feedback to improve services and marketing strategies.
- Stay responsive to emerging trends in tourism and traveller preferences.

These simplified recommendations align with Owen Sound's tourism goals, leveraging new tools like the app, MAT, and ambassador training to position the city as a vibrant, year-round destination.

The Chamber of Commerce is working with BC Hughes to develop a Tourism Action Plan. The 2025 Tourism plan for the City may include actions that respond to short-term recommendations from this strategy.

Financial Implications:

The City's 2024 Tourism Budget was \$179,546.69.

	2024 Budget (\$)	December YTD (\$)
Tourism	179,547	181,684
Publications and Brochures	15,250	6,199
Visitor Services	-3,000.00	-424
Product Dev and Experiences	15,500	7,721
Marketing and Promotion	15,000	14,140
	240,715.73	209,320

(Note: The expenses relating to the former physical location are contained in the Tourism budget).

The financial implications of this report are covered in existing 2024 operating budgets approved by Council.

The table above does not capture the net revenues from Municipal Accommodation Tax as these revenues have not completed their year-end reconciliation at the time the report was generated. The Treasurer's year-end financial update will include a reconciliation and report of MAT revenues earned in 2024.

Communication Strategy:

The Community Services Advisory Committee will be provided a 2025 Tourism Update report reflecting the 2025 Tourism Workplan.

To synchronize tourism messaging, staff collaborate with the County of Grey, RTO7, and our tourism partners.

Consultation:

Grey County

RTO7

Aidan Ware, Director & Chief Curator - Art Gallery, Culture, Tourism

Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services

Attachments:

None.

Recommended by:

Melissa Crannie, Tourism Marketing Coordinator
Aidan Ware, Director & Chief Curator - Art Gallery, Culture, Tourism
Pamela Coulter, Director of Community Services

Submission approved by:

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Melissa Crannie, Tourism Marketing Coordinator, at mcrannie@owensound.ca or 519-371-4440 Ext. 1245.