

## Staff Report

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**Report To:** Community Services Committee  
**Report From:** Jen Wright, Events Coordinator &  
Viveca Gravel, River District Coordinator  
**Meeting Date:** February 18, 2026  
**Report Code:** CS-26-011  
**Subject:** 2026 Tourism Year-End Wrap Up Report

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### Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report CS-26-011 respecting the 2025 Tourism Year-End Wrap and 2026 Tourism Plan, the Community Services Committee recommends that City Council receive the report for information purposes.

### Highlights:

- 2025 was a productive year at Tourism at the TOM.
- The Tourism landscape is changing, and staff continue to adapt and evolve services and marketing strategies.
- 2026 will bring new opportunities which includes Nature's Gateway Marketing campaign, Tourism APP expansion, Tourism Ambassador Program.

### Vision 2050 - Strategic Plan Alignment:

[Strategic Plan](#) Priority: Prosperous City – Supporting initiatives that increase competitive economic advantages for current and new businesses and their employees.

## **Background:**

Owen Sound Tourism delivers services under three key pillars:

- Product Development;
- Marketing and Promotion; and
- 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 and City-branded merchandise to help Visitor Services as well throughout the year.

## **Tourism Landscape**

The tourism landscape has changed dramatically in recent years, shaped by technological advances, shifting traveler preferences, and a growing focus on sustainability. Digital tools like AI-powered planning, contactless services, and virtual reality now define the travel experience, making it more seamless and personalized. Travelers increasingly seek authentic, immersive experiences, longer stays, and opportunities to engage with local culture, while niche markets such as outdoor adventures, cultural tourism, and sports travel are expanding rapidly. At the same time, sustainability has become a central consideration, with eco-friendly accommodations, and responsible tourism policies guiding both destinations and travelers. Economic and policy shifts further support this evolution, emphasizing strategic growth, local benefits, and resilient tourism models that cater to a post-pandemic world.

## **Partnerships are Crucial**

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 by assisting with our area's tourism planning, marketing, fundraising, and product development.
- **Tourism at the TOM:** Visitor Services was relocated to the Art Gallery building in 2024. 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, Grey Sauble Conservation Authority, The Roxy Theatre, Billy Bishop Museum, Owen Sound Attack and the Great Lakes Waterfront Trail Association, among others. The Sydenham Sportsmen Association represents the city to provide tourism information at more than 15 outdoor shows.

## **Analysis and Options:**

Community Services Committee received the 2025 Tourism workplan which was based on 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 the 2025 Tourism year and outline planning for 2026.

## **Savour Owen Sound**

The Savour Owen Sound event celebrated its 13<sup>th</sup> year in March 2025. The promotions were designed to highlight the dining options in the city and runs for 4 weeks.

- Each week, staff featured a different Savour Owen Sound restaurant on Facebook, through a website feature, and by hosting a contest for a \$50 gift certificate to the restaurant.
- The event featured 14 local eateries, each offering a unique special dine-in menu unique to their specific flavours.
- Total of 775 QR code scans recorded for Event Details.
- 432 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.
- European Bakery was the 2025 winner of the People's Choice Savour Skillet award.
- Digital stats during the March event include:
  - Reach 105,133
  - Views 166,060

This long-standing event that has traditionally celebrated local restaurants is evolving into a content based large reach digital campaign to better reflect how people now discover and choose travel experiences. Rather than focusing on residents within Owen Sound, in 2026 a content-based campaign with greater reach throughout Ontario will allow us to reach potential visitors outside the city—a particular draw for day-trippers and short-stay tourists—who are actively looking for destinations that offer great food, unique experiences, and a reason to travel.

The campaign will position the city as a culinary destination. This approach aims to drive increased visitation, longer stays, and greater economic impact for local businesses. It will also allow for flexible, cost-effective promotion, measurable results, and storytelling that can be shared widely across digital media, websites, and tourism platforms.

Ultimately, moving to a content based digital campaign with extended reach modernizes a trusted community initiative while expanding its reach and ensuring it continues to deliver value to restaurants, businesses, and the broader Owen Sound economy.

The 2026 campaign will ensure the month-long event moves forward in a sustainable manner acting as a tourism catalyst, positioning Owen Sound as a culinary destination.

## **SNOwen Sound Frolics**

SNOwen Sound Frolics returned for its 6<sup>th</sup> 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 13 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.

SNOwen Sound Frolics was created during the COVID-19 pandemic as a response to public health restrictions that limited in-person gatherings and traditional events. The initiative successfully provided a safe, locally focused way to support businesses and encourage community engagement during a challenging period. However, as conditions have changed and regular events and activities have fully returned, the original purpose of SNOwen Sound Frolics is no longer as relevant, and the event has come to a natural conclusion.

The funds that were previously budgeted for SNOwen Sound Frolics will be redirected toward destination marketing initiatives including Nature's Gateway. This reallocation ensures continued support for local businesses by promoting Owen Sound as a year-round destination to visitors outside the community. By focusing on destination marketing, the city can highlight signature restaurants, attractions, and activities, encouraging increased visitation, longer stays, and broader economic impact while using the budget in a way that aligns with current needs and strategic tourism goals.

## **The Salmon Tour**

The Owen Sound Salmon Tour showcases Owen Sound's unique connection to the Sydenham River during the annual salmon migration, mid-September to mid-October. This event combines traditional and modern promotional strategies, leveraging QR codes on posters around the city and distributing printed and digital maps. These measures enhance accessibility for diverse audiences, while a strong online presence provides real-time updates and engages the community.

The Salmon Tour's social media posts achieved top views overall for 2025, demonstrating its exceptional engagement with audiences:

- Views: 226,960

- Reach: 99,667
- Event responses: 1,423

In partnership with the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority, we were able to see a return of the popular Salmon Discovery Day. This event took place Saturday, October 4 and ran from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. offering participants a passport to stamp at each mapped location that could later be entered to win a prize pack. This family-friendly, accessible community event celebrates the annual Chinook salmon migration along the Sydenham River in an immersive and informative format.

The mostly self guided adventure had participants move through the city along the Sydenham River stopping at important or scenic locations. The event began at the West Side Boat Launch where parking was plentiful, and a restroom stop was available for those travelling a distance. The tour included several location highlights:

- A stop at the Community Waterfront Heritage Centre, where participants were able to learn about the rich history along Owen Sound waterfront.
- A walk across the new Downtown River Precinct (DRP2) boardwalk for an up close and unique view of the river.
- The Farmers' Market where participants were able to take in local farmers and vendors.
- The Art Gallery where participants were treated to some cookies and coffee and a nice break while taking in a portion of the film "All to Clear."
- The Mill Dam where members of the Sydenham Sportsmen Association shared information about the hatchery and stocking practices and where participants were treated to the sight of jumping salmon as they migrate over the fish ladder.
- Harrison Park the jewel in the City's crown where a selection of vendors lined the pathways offering "earth" based wares from animal figurines to crystals and antique fishing gear.
- The final stop was at the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority Arboretum where participants enjoyed a salmon taste by Café Gilou, information about the spawning beds up a short path and activities including a giant inflatable anatomically correct salmon.

This year partners were able to organize a jump on and off accessible shuttle service making the 2025 Salmon Discovery Day as accessible as possible.

This event emphasizes Owen Sound's strong connection to nature, conservation, and outdoor education.

2025 marked tourism's first partnership with Park Bus. Park Bus is a Canadian organization that provides affordable, bus transportation from major urban centers (Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Vancouver, and Halifax) to national parks, provincial parks, conservation areas, and outdoor recreation destinations across the country. It is a tourism-focused transportation initiative that connects people with natural destinations, reducing reliance on cars and encouraging outdoor recreation. Staff provided two full busses of participants with a guided tour. Staff heard participants marvel at the beauty of the city, its connection to nature and the diversity of locations and opportunities. Some participants took in a lunch in the River District while others spent time taking in more of what Harrison Park had to offer before completing the hike from Harrison Park to the Arboretum and Inglis Falls.

Staff will continue to work with Park Bus in 2026 to offer tours and experiences as opportunities arise.

In addition to those on the bus from Toronto, staff were able to connect with a young family who drove from Paris, Ontario to take in the tour as a day trip.

### **Marketing & Promotion Highlights Brochures and Publications**

Staff produce and update a series of brochures and publications each year to support tourism and help residents and visitors navigate Owen Sound. The most requested are the Owen Sound Maps and Attractions brochure and the Owen Sound Restaurant Guide.

The Attractions brochure includes a comprehensive directory of parks, trails, beaches, open spaces, and the River District.

Owen Sound's trail networks and self-guided tours are popular for walking, biking, and motorized recreation, with the Tourism team working with Grey County to promote the city as bike, ATV, snowmobile, and motorcycle friendly. Paid advertisements appeared in Rrampt, Georgian Triangle Tourism Association, The Owen Sounder, Sweetwater Music Festival, Salmon Spectacular, Georgian Bay Symphony, The Sound, and Escarpment Magazine, supported by complementary digital marketing efforts.

## **Nature's Gateway**

The Nature's Gateway campaign was developed as a unifying tourism narrative to position Owen Sound as the natural starting point for year-round exploration of Grey County and the Niagara Escarpment, while also reinforcing art, culture, and entertainment as the heart of the visitor experience. The concept grew from recognizing a consistent theme across visitor feedback, tourism data, and local assets: people come to Owen Sound for nature, but stay for the experience, culture, food, and community atmosphere. To harness this, the campaign was built as a seasonal content strategy spanning summer, fall, winter, and spring anchored by cornerstone articles such as "Top Ten Things To Do in Owen Sound this Fall". Long form web articles supported search engine visibility and trip planning, while tailored content for Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Spotify, and Google Ads extended reach through short form storytelling, visual hooks, and targeted calls to action. This approach allowed the City to maximize a single creative concept across multiple digital channels, ensuring consistent messaging, strong brand recognition, and cost-effective content production while reaching visitors at different stages of travel planning and inspiration.

The Owen Sound Tourism Development Fund (Municipal Accommodation Tax managing entity) allocated matching funds for the summer and fall campaigns to launch into the market. Funding applications will continue to be made to maximize impact in densely populated targeted areas.

Due to the success of this campaign staff have developed merchandise to compliment the messaging and plan to continue this through 2026.

Nature's Gateway Summer 2025 is ranked as the 5<sup>th</sup> most visited page on owensoundtourism.ca with 45,193 events (number of time users trigger an event or interaction).

### Summer/Fall Stats:

Impressions: 4,900,017

Clicks: 33,795

## **Owen Sound Tourism Website**

The Owen Sound Tourism website continues to grow. Throughout this year's, online campaigns—such as Savour Owen Sound, Salmon Tour, Summerfolk, Canada Day, and more, it features timely updates, and images that successfully engaged audiences, raised community awareness, and strengthened tourism branding.

The City of Owen Sound continues to benefit from having a tourism-specific website because it serves as a central hub for visitors to discover, plan, and engage with the destination. Unlike business specific websites, a tourism-focused site highlights attractions, experiences, events, accommodations, dining, and local activities, helping potential visitors easily see why they should choose the area. It also allows the city to showcase seasonal offerings, or special events, and share engaging content such as photos, videos, and itineraries.

From a marketing perspective, the tourism website increases visibility to both local and out-of-town audiences, supports digital campaigns, and improves search engine optimization when people are researching trips. Additionally, it provides valuable analytics on visitor behavior, which can guide promotion, partnerships, and service improvements and strengthens the destination brand, drives tourism, and helps the local economy by connecting travelers directly with experiences and accommodations in the area.

### **Website Stats:**

Views: 234,000

Event Count: 572,000

Top Pages Visited:

#1 - Camping & RV

#2 - Events & Festivals

Countries Visiting Site:

#1 - Canada

#2 - United States

Age:

#1 - 25 to 34

#2 - 45 to 54

### **New Tourism App**

The Owen Sound Tourism app was beta-launched in the summer of 2025 and is a free travel app developed by Owen Sound Tourism to assist visitors in exploring the area's attractions, natural beauty, and cultural sites right from their mobile devices. It functions as a digital travel guide, giving users access to key information about the Scenic City's landscapes, historic River District, parks, and trails while they're on the go.

Optimized for all mobile devices (with a free download from app stores), the app supports location-based discovery and includes curated stops, insider

tips, trail details, local stories, and highlights such as Inglis Falls, Bruce Trail access, and River District features—making it easier for visitors to plan their visit and explore at their own pace. The app will continue to be updated in 2026 with helpful information and tours such as Corkscrew City Tour.

### **Other Marketing**

- Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok)
- Monthly Eblast – once per month - 1515 subscribers

### **Merchandise**

City of Owen Sound branded merchandise includes toques, hats, t-shirts, sweaters, stickers and more and are available at The Attack Shack, City Hall and Tourism at the Tom.

### **Visitor Services Highlights**

In 2024 Tourism underwent a significant transition in response to Service Review Action 1 a.3. initiating a pilot project to combine Tourism services and the Tom Thomson Art Gallery.

The move relocated all 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 at the Tom now provides a unique opportunity to connect with visitors who are already engaged in cultural experiences. Gallery-goers are an ideal audience for discovering local attractions, restaurants, events, and recreational activities, encouraging them to explore more of Owen Sound during their visit. It also enhances the visitor experience by providing maps, brochures, digital information, or staff guidance, while also offering year-round visibility and promoting longer stays. Additionally, it strengthens partnerships between the tourism department and local arts organizations, reinforcing Owen Sound's reputation as a vibrant, arts-focused destination.

During the summer months, (May to September) Tourism Summer Ambassadors engage with visitors at City-run and partner events across Owen Sound, providing information about local attractions and leading interactive activities for youth, families, and children. They also support City and River District events by distributing brochures, sharing updates and news, and routinely delivering tourism materials throughout the community. This fall, 2 part time students stayed on to assist at Tourism to ensure coverage until Thanksgiving weekend.

Students attended several events over the summer months including, Wheel and Ride, TD Harbour Nights, The Hottest Street Sale, Outdoor Movie Nights, Summerfolk, Canada Day, One World Festival and The Salmon Derby.

The Tourism Centre welcomed 1,174 visitors in 2025, a 89.9% decrease from 2024.

## **Visitor Services**

From Victoria Day weekend through late November, Visitor Services recorded clear seasonal patterns in visitor activity between 2019 and 2025, with traffic consistently building through spring, peaking in July and August, and softening into the fall. While pandemic years created expected disruptions, a strong rebound followed, culminating in a record 11,604 visitor interactions in 2024. In 2025, 1,174 visitors were recorded, with lower numbers reflecting both the shortened reporting window and changes in how visitors access information. Data gathered by frontline staff shows that visitors continue to come from a mix of Grey Bruce, across Ontario, the GTA, other parts of Canada, the U.S., and overseas, demonstrating Owen Sound's broad appeal. Summer students were instrumental in this success, serving as enthusiastic ambassadors at major events, supporting Visitor Services, and ensuring tourism materials were consistently available at hotels, restaurants, and key locations throughout the community. Complementary Grey County Environics data, which measures tourism activity city-wide, confirms the same seasonal rhythm, showing strong growth through spring and summer and a typical fall softening. Together, these data sources indicate that while in-person Visitor Centre traffic naturally declines after peak season, overall tourism demand in Owen Sound remains strong and follows expected seasonal trends.

## **Looking Ahead to 2026**

In recent years, research and insights from Tourism Ontario and related provincial planning have shown that travellers increasingly rely on digital tools and online information when planning trips, which has fundamentally changed how people discover and engage with travel experiences. Rather than seeking out physical visitor information centres, most travellers now begin their journey with online searches, mobile resources, social media inspiration, and virtual planning tools long before they arrive — a shift that reflects broader trends in how tourists dream about, research, and plan travel in a digitally connected world. These changes have contributed to a decline in foot traffic at traditional tourism information centres, leading some

to close or reorient services toward virtual and online support as the preference for digital channels grows. Responding to this shift, Destination Ontario and industry partners are investing more in data-driven digital marketing, online research platforms, and virtual visitor engagement to meet travellers where they already are — on screens rather than in person.

### **Enhancing Visitor Experience and Services**

Owen Sound will continue to improve visitor services by creating a more welcoming atmosphere at the shared Tourism and TOM space. This includes adding clear messaging at the front counter and incorporating interactive features that engage visitors. Building on the success of the Visitor Services Pilot Project at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, services will be refined to maximize the impact of a combined reception and service area with the Library, Tourism, and Art Gallery.

### **Expanding Tourism Offerings**

Tourism experiences will be broadened and diversified. The Corkscrew City Tour will be enhanced with the self-guided option using a QR Code and a summer in person event. Successful events, such as Savour Owen Sound will be modified through a digital campaign inspiring travel to Owen Sound and positioning it as a culinary destination.

Additional digital campaigns will help support the overall tourism message for Owen Sound, continuing to focus on the top 10 things to do in Owen Sound during specific seasons with the overarching campaign of Nature's Gateway.

### **Leveraging Digital Tools and Engagement**

Continuous development of the Owen Sound Tourism App will help to grow and online first presence and provide exclusive content, and event notifications. Digital engagement will also be strengthened through expanded digital campaigns targeting key demographics with our visually appealing tourism website to keep content fresh and relevant.

### **Fostering Collaboration and Regional Partnerships**

Owen Sound will work closely with Grey County, RTO7, Tourism Ontario and neighbouring municipalities to coordinate tourism efforts, optimize budgets, and deliver inclusive and creative initiatives. Local organizations and businesses will be engaged to develop unique visitor experiences that highlight the area's cultural and outdoor assets.

## **Emphasizing Sustainability and Accessibility**

Tourism initiatives will prioritize eco-friendly and accessible experiences, including free bike rentals, self guided nature tours, and inclusive programming. These efforts will reinforce Owen Sound’s commitment to sustainability and accessibility in all aspects of tourism.

## **Year-Round Marketing and Continuous Improvement**

Owen Sound will promote itself as a destination for all seasons, highlighting unique winter and off-peak attractions, and ensuring consistent branding across all marketing materials and digital platforms. Visitor analytics and feedback will be monitored to improve services, adapt marketing strategies, and respond to emerging tourism trends and traveler preferences.

## **Resource Alignment:**

### **Financial Resources**

#### **2026 Budget**

<b>2026</b>	<b>Budget</b>
General	\$4,550
Publications & Brochures	\$16,500
Visitor Services	\$7,000
Prod Dev & Experiences + Marketing and Promotion	\$30,500
	<b>\$58,550</b>

Tourism research shows that trip planning and discovery today happen almost entirely online, including search engines, social media, mobile apps and user-generated content platforms — meaning travelers look for inspiration and make decisions digitally before they ever contact a tourism business directly. People are travelling more intentionally — focusing on sustainability, local experiences, and immersive activities — and they expect to discover and book these experiences online. Digital platforms can support: Custom itineraries, Online booking and reservations, Real-time updates, VR/interactive previews. All of which align with current traveller behaviour. Our budget for product development & experience and marketing and promotion reflect this.

## **Human Resources**

Due to current staffing changes, staff in other departments have been covering Tourism at the TOM in the interim.

## **Time and Scheduling**

N/A

## **Technology and Infrastructure**

N/A

## **Climate and Environmental Impacts:**

There are no anticipated climate or environmental impacts.

## **Communication Strategy**

The Community Services Committee will be provided a 2026 Tourism Update report reflecting the 2026 Tourism Workplan. To synchronize tourism messaging, staff collaboration with the County of Grey, RT07, and our tourism partners.

## **Consultation:**

- Grey County
- RT07
- Community Waterfront Heritage Centre
- Local hotels
- Grey Roots Museum and Archives

## **Attachments:**

Attachment 1 – Tourism Wrap Up Presentation

## **Reviewed by:**

Jen Wright, Events and Activation Coordinator

Viveca Gravel, River District Coordinator

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

Pam Coulter, Director of Community Services

## **Submission approved by:**

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Jen Wright, Events Coordinator at [jwright@owensound.ca](mailto:jwright@owensound.ca) or Viveca Gravel, River District Coordinator at [vgravel@owensound.ca](mailto:vgravel@owensound.ca).