

Caledon has lots of tourism opportunities

By Bill Rea

When it comes to planning a tourism strategy for the Town of Caledon, this area has a lot of strengths on which to focus.

That point came out last Thursday night at a public input session on the proposed strategy, held at Town Hall in Caledon East.

There was a lot of discussion regarding the facilities being prepared at Caledon Equestrian Park in Palgrave, in anticipation of next Year's Pan Am Games. But there were also reminders of other athletic events that attract people to the area. Councillor Doug Beffort made a point of citing the example of the annual Pond Hockey Tournament held at Alton Mill.

Sandra Dolson, economic development officer with the Town, told the roughly 20 people at the meeting the Town obtained the services of Sierra Planning and Management in February to come up with the strategy.

Jonathan Hack of Sierra said the effort has already resulted in a large draft report, which is still subject to change, pending public comments.

The idea at this stage, he said, is to submit the report to Town council at their Sept. 9 meeting, with recommendations.

Hack pointed out there are tourism strategies at the various levels of government, starting with the Province, and including Regions, as well as groups like the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association. He added the aim of the Town's strategy is not to impede what's being done by the other levels of government, but rather to fill in gaps.

He explained the purposes of the strategy include identifying potential legacy opportunities associated with the coming Pan Am Games, facilitating local economic growth and tourism readiness, and maximizing the effectiveness of partnerships with other groups, like Hills of Headwaters.

Hack also said they are looking at long-term investment in tourism infrastructure while appreciating the importance of balancing that with the needs of those who already live in town. He said that can be done by making use of natural resources, such as the local trails.

The development of this strategy is a two-stage process which is now in the second stage. There has already been a considerable consultation process, including the Headwaters Partners in Tourism Symposium in March, surveys, workshops and visioning sessions, etc.

Hack said they conducted an online survey of people who have previously visited Caledon, in an effort to gauge who's been coming, what's attracted them and how much they have been spending.

In terms of Caledon as a destination, Hack said the draft report has indicated a number of strengths, including the unique environmental setting, nearness of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) markets, proximity to accommodations in neighbouring communities, heritage infrastructure and a wide range of tourism assets that highlight the rural setting. But there are some challenges too, including limited accommodation within town, a number of smaller tourism assets that mainly draw locally, dispersed tourism assets, and the fact Caledon is on an urban fringe, which blurs Caledon as being a rural destination and part of the GTA suburbs. As for where these people are coming from, Hack said they heard from about 350 responders, which he said should provide some useful information.

‘It is very much a regional market base,’ he said, adding it's spread around southern Ontario.

Sporting events is what attracted the bulk of the visitors, according to the survey, which was cited by about 110 respondents. The next frequently cited attraction was special festivals and events, with less than 40 responses. That was followed by visiting friends and relatives, other, spontaneous trips, business, tourism marketing and word of mouth.

About 30 of the respondents cited spontaneous trips, and Hack thought that was a key indicator. He also stressed to the audience that they shouldn't get the idea that most people come to Caledon for sports. He argued the survey gave a sense of what motivated the trips. They are also not suggesting the focus be on one area, such as equestrian.

Beffort cited the pond hockey tournament. ‘We have more of those events than you might think,’ he said.

In terms of level of satisfaction, Hack said the survey showed that almost 90 per cent of respondents were either highly or somewhat satisfied with their overall trip, and the total scores were more than 80 per cent when it came to equine activities and outdoor recreation. The satisfaction levels for camping and accommodations were lower; on the order of about 30 per cent.

Hack observed the close to 20 per cent who were not satisfied with the outdoor recreation could have had a number of reasons behind that.

‘It could be anything,’ he said, adding someone could have reacted badly because they couldn't find a trail. ‘There's a whole range of things that could get in the way of someone's satisfaction.’

There were also written comments submitted. They included criticisms, like the lack of accommodation and the fact that Caledon is

not viewed as a vacation spot. Among the positive aspects cited were the spots for mountain biking and places to eat.

‘Very picturesque,’ one person wrote. ‘Easy to get to. Lots of options.’

Local resident Barb Shaughnessy observed that tourism in Caledon is largely day tourism. If the draw is mainly from the GTA, she wondered if there's a need for hotels.

Beffort countered the problem is people don't want accommodation where it's needed. Hack commented that adding accommodation adds market.

He also pointed out there are some tourism-related projects in town that are at various levels of development. The Hampton Inn and Suites in Bolton and the improvements at the Bolton Camp property are currently under construction, he pointed out.

Projects have been approved, but construction has not yet started at Pinnacle Heights Golf and Country Club, Osprey Valley Golf Course and the Cheltenham Badlands. Development applications have been made for Cambium Farms near Cataract and the Kaneff Properties near Inglewood.

He also listed the various hamlets in Caledon, citing potential tourism functions. For example, Alton was listed as a possible arts and culture hub, leveraging on the Alton Mill and Millcroft Inn.

Hack also listed several guiding principles in the development of the strategy. They include understanding and evolving tourism in Caledon. He stressed that one is important, because it has to be done in Caledon with interested partners in the community.

Collaboration is important too, as he stressed it's essential all sides get what they want.

He also pointed to the need to develop a tourism season throughout the year.

‘This area has great potential,’ he stressed, pointing out there are six million people close by. But there needs to be support for community events to make them tourist events.

Some of the recommendations contained in the draft report could be addressed in the next year or two, including hiring a tourism officer, creating a state-of-the-art municipal tourism website and asset database, examining outdoor recreation possibilities in rehabilitated aggregate pits, exploring legacy opportunities (which is being done at the equestrian park).

Others are more achievable in the medium term (three or four years), such as land-use planning considerations, providing more visitor information in the form of print and online material, and working on more tourism and signature events.

Other actions would take longer, such as village improvements. Hack said that would apply to both private and public property to improve things for residents while providing amenities for tourists.

Former councillor Ian Sinclair pointed to the problems of too many people coming. He cited the number of people who go to Forks of the Credit to take in the fall colours. ‘We're getting overwhelmed,’ he said.

Hack agreed there needs to be a solution, but added everyone has to work on it.

Another man brought up the problem of littering. He cited the Badlands, commenting he goes there every summer and pulls 30 to 40 big bags of garbage.

Tamara Bangura, also of Sierra, said making the area more accessible, as well as making sure litter collection is a priority, should help.

One person at the meeting observed the more people who use the Caledon Trailway usually means less litter.