

City of Hamilton



Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework

Executive Summary

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Recommendations

Short-Term (2006-2007)

- 1 **Recommendation: That Hamilton develop a strategic tourism plan.**

Background: The need to develop a strategic tourism plan was also identified in the tourism cluster within the Economic Development plan that was approved by Hamilton City Council in 2004. The strategic tourism plan should consider three key issues:

a) Access to Tourism Markets – Located half-way between our country's top two tourist destinations – Toronto and Niagara Falls – Hamilton's proximity to those markets, to the traffic between them, and to the tourism gateways each represents is an opportunity that would be the envy of almost every community in Canada. As Hamilton develops its tourism plan, leveraging these markets will be critical to any success the City achieves.

b) Leveraging Hamilton's unique geography as a tourism asset – It is clear that Hamilton will not maximize its tourism sector until it maximizes the attractive potential of its natural surroundings. There is a need to make linkages between current programs/offering (ex. Hamilton Harbour, Lake Ontario, Hamilton Conservation Authority, RBG, Cootes Paradise, the Niagara Escarpment, trails, waterfront and waterfalls) to identify appropriate cluster and packaging opportunities.



c) While developing the strategic tourism plan, the marketing focus should be on Hamilton's strength, which is "niche attractions"– Other options include Hamilton developing its current weakness (mass market attractions) into a strength or Hamilton pursuing a plan that attempts to accomplish both.

- 2 **Recommendation: That Tourism Hamilton gather more customer data to define better who Hamilton's tourism customer is and will be in the future.** The survey instrument should gather core information including what the tourism customer's needs are and what the customer's level of satisfaction is with the tourism experience offered in Hamilton.



- 3 **Recommendation: That Tourism Hamilton act as the "broker" to help foster partnerships within the local tourism industry.** Beginning in Q1 of 2006, the Board of Directors will host regular meetings of their sectors. Communication within Hamilton's tourism industry is identified in Tourism Hamilton's 2003-2007 Business Plan as a "key issue", and developing partnerships is consistent with addressing this issue.

- 4 **Recommendation: That Tourism Hamilton advocate a multi-prong strategy be undertaken to address "downtown friendliness" to help Hamilton's urban tourism.** The strategy should address safety and cleanliness of the downtown core, including working with the Downtown Task Force on Safety & Cleanliness (originated from Tourism Hamilton Board of Directors resolution); (2006-2007) Tourism customer service training programme for taxi industry and transit; (2006-2007) build on Downtown Ambassador Program; move forward with recommendation in "Review of Tourist Information Centres" report (approved by Tourism Board, Winter 2005); and encourage the City to fully implement the Downtown Secondary Plan and Downtown Transportation Plan.

Long-Term (2008 – Beyond)

- 5 **Recommendation: That Tourism Hamilton work with the local tourism industry in developing packages that provide value-added and leverage current visitation levels.** To address the issue of "visitor spending", Tourism Hamilton to work with partners (through networking sessions) to help research "best practices" and other "like" offerings in similar communities to get a sense of realistic (higher) pricing that is available to them and develop saleable packages for Hamilton businesses.
- 6 **Recommendation: That Tourism Hamilton analyze the customer data to fully determine the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) market, its opportunities and how to include promotions for the VFR market while maintaining focus on external tourism markets.** Stakeholders identified the importance of the VFR market, which is supported statistically as an important market for Hamilton.
- 7 **Recommendation: That Tourism Hamilton continue its emphasis on travel media relations, undertake more effective marketing and act on the recommendations outlined in the "Report on Tourist Information Centres" which calls for construction of gateway information centres and enhanced e-marketing capacities to proactively promote Hamilton's tourism experiences.** Hamilton is consistently ranked as a "pleasant surprise" indicating that the city's story needs to be positioned more effectively and consistently. Hamilton's image as a tourist destination is identified as the top issue in Tourism Hamilton's 2003-2007 Business Plan, and this issue is consistent with Hamilton's image perception.
- 8 **Recommendation: That Economic Development create and implement an accommodation investment strategy.** Tourism Hamilton's 2003-2007 Business Plan identifies Hamilton's accommodation inventory as the second key issue, so addressing this issue is consistent with the Business Plan.

Introduction

The completion of Hamilton's Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework (PRTDF) in November 2005 marks a significant accomplishment in the evolution of the City's tourism industry. It is, however, just one step in the complex and on-going process of energizing and maximizing tourism in the City. The findings, discussions and analysis prompted by the PRTDF must translate into action in order for the report to have value. With that in mind, this Executive Summary focuses on the key findings, themes and recommendations identified by the PRTDF. Ultimately, the power of the Framework will be in its ability to inspire action.



The Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework

The Ontario Ministry of Tourism & Recreation (OMTR) developed the Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework to help tourism destinations across the province define their competitive positions within the provincial, national and international tourism markets. At least eighteen Ontario communities are now in various stages of completing the PRTDF. These communities range from well-known tourist areas such as Niagara, Toronto, Muskoka and the Thousand Islands, to communities to which tourism has not traditionally been a defining characteristic such as Sarnia/Lambton, Mississauga, Durham and, of course, Hamilton. The PRTDF is an inclusive process, designed to obtain the most current and accurate information available in the market.

Executed properly, it will be a frank assessment of Hamilton's current status as a tourist destination. It identifies the City's tourism attributes, assets and liabilities, both real and perceived, and gives rise to a number of recommendations and suggested courses of action. The value of the PRTDF increases exponentially, of course, because of its adoption by numerous communities, thus allowing for meaningful comparisons as well as the identification of common issues and trends.

For all that it is, Hamilton's Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework is not a plan for developing the local tourism market. Instead, it is a critical, even necessary springboard for developing such a plan. It is a catalyst and a resource that will define its true value in the planning and implementation it inspires and informs.



Findings

Defining Hamilton's Current Tourism Status

The PRTDF final report captures a broad range of quantifiable, qualitative and anecdotal data designed to describe Hamilton's tourism industry as accurately and thoroughly as possible. In fact, the PRTDF represents the most comprehensive and insightful analysis ever of not just Hamilton's tourism industry, but of the tourism sectors of almost every Ontario community participating in the process. The collected data provide the platform for fact-based, but subjective ratings on a three-point scale in response to almost one hundred different questions. Answers to these questions are all one of YES, ALMOST or NO, representing achievement, progress or challenge, respectively. By far the majority of Hamilton's answers fall into the ALMOST category, reflecting a tourism market that has much to be proud of, but much still to accomplish.



Hamilton's middle-of-the-road status – reflected in the predominance of the ALMOST rating – is the defining characteristic of the PRTDF findings. While Hamilton clearly has a number of significant tourism strengths and weaknesses, these do not dominate the local tourism landscape. Hamilton's tourism industry, in fact, currently has no discernable brand in the marketplace. Instead, the City is in the unique position of being able to shape its own tourism future in an absence of factors, attractors or influences that would force movement in any particular direc-

tion. This “almost” status may seem problematic; it certainly could be. On the other hand, it represents a great opportunity for tourism in the City of Hamilton. With the PRTDF as a catalyst, Hamilton’s tourism stakeholders have the ability to affect powerful change and drive the tourism agenda according to a well-planned and well-informed strategic direction.



Key Influences

If Hamilton’s tourism industry is going to move decisively in either direction from its current middle-of-the-road status, that move will follow the path defined by two key influencing factors that appear repeatedly in the PRTDF: market access, and niche versus mass attractions.

Access to Tourism Markets

Hamilton’s geographic location within the Ontario and Canadian tourism markets is both its greatest opportunity and its greatest challenge. Located almost exactly half-way between our country’s top two tourist draws – Toronto and Niagara Falls – it is highly unlikely that Hamilton will ever rise to match those two markets for tourism activity. However, Hamilton’s proximity to those markets, to the traffic between them, and to the tourism gateways each represents is an opportunity that would be the envy of almost every community in Canada. As Hamilton develops its tourism strategy, a constant awareness of this market will be critical to any success the City achieves.

Niche Attractions versus Mass Attractions

The second powerful characteristic of the Hamilton tourism market is the discrepancy between the strength of the City’s ability to attract niche markets and its inability to attract the mass market with its current roster of attractions. Logically, this situation leads to one of three conclusions: Hamilton should focus on marketing its strength (niche attractions), Hamilton should develop its current weakness (mass market attractions) into a strength, or Hamilton should pursue a plan that attempts to accomplish both. This issue has been and will continue to be a focus of almost every Hamilton-based tourism discussion. Ultimately, Hamilton’s tourism industry needs to select one of the three options and pursue it aggressively if it hopes to drive positive change in the marketplace.

Points of Emphasis

While Hamilton’s tourism market status and its two key influences link every, or almost every aspect of the PRTDF, the process also identified a number of secondary findings or issues – all important – with slightly more limited impacts. An awareness of these issues will be critical to developing an informed and effective tourism plan. These points of emphasis vary from collections of descriptors of the Hamilton tourism market, to observations of the ways tourists react to Hamilton’s offerings.



Identifying “Core” and “Supporting” Attractions

The PRTDF identified Hamilton’s core attractors as falling into five categories (with key examples listed):

- Theme Parks
- Museums and Galleries
- Gaming
- Shopping
- Outdoor Activities

Supporting attractions include:

- Historic Sites
- Cultural Attractions
- Sport Events and Golf



Unique Geographic/Natural Assets

Hamilton’s geographic assets are significant. The Bay (Hamilton Harbour), Cootes Paradise and the Niagara Escarpment are impressive examples of Canada’s natural heritage and taken as a group, their proximity and location within the urban environment make them unique in the marketplace. As impressive as these geographic/natural assets are, however, they have not yet had the powerful impact on tourism that they could. The waterfront is in the relatively early stages of what looks to be a dramatic renaissance, but the escarpment is under-utilized. Optimistically, the escarpment is a prominent feature of several existing and potential projects with the ability to attract tourism interest. These include the Bruce Trail, the Hamilton Conservation Authority’s current lands and new park initiatives, as well as the significant escarpment-connected holdings of the City of Hamilton and the Royal Botanical Gardens. It is clear that Hamilton will not maximize its tourism industry until it maximizes the attractive potential of its natural surroundings.

Tourism Value

The PRTDF found that Hamilton consistently offers value for the tourist dollar. This would clearly make Hamilton not just an attractive staging ground for day trips into the more expensive markets of Niagara Falls and Toronto, but also an accessible supplementary tourism option to those dominant markets. On the other hand, Hamilton's value proposition translates into lower tourism revenues, resulting in less money to invest in program enhancement, facility development and marketing. Part of Hamilton's tourism strategy needs to be a well-conceived plan to retain its attractive value proposition while enhancing the City's ability to attract up-market visitors by offering the type of attractions, accommodations, shopping and dining that will inspire longer stays and greater spending.



Visitor Spending

In a finding that is clearly linked to tourism value (above) and holding visitor interest (below), the PRTDF reveals that visitor spending in Hamilton is startlingly below the provincial averages for all types of travel. This statistic represents an enormous opportunity for tourism in Hamilton. For most tourism areas, attracting visitors and tourists is likely the biggest challenge in expanding the market. In Hamilton, however, the tourism industry and the City could experience a significant economic boost without attracting a single additional visitor, simply by increasing visitor spending. Any tourism development strategy should have that target as one of its primary goals.



Holding Visitor Interest

Hamilton suffers from a lack of a wide range of memorable core experiences that would make it easier to keep people engaged for more than a single day. The findings of the PRTDF indicate that visitors to Hamilton can generally experience everything they want to without having to stay overnight. This speaks to the niche character of Hamilton's tourism industry, but also represents an opportunity for the City to have a dramatic impact by holding visitors' interest just a little longer. By creating and/or marketing tourism offerings that could extend a visitor's stay by just a few hours, Hamilton could trigger a dramatic increase in visitor spending, with all of the accompanying benefits of that change.

Customer Satisfaction

When a Hamilton-based attraction does its own exit or usage survey, it generally finds that Hamilton is a friendly and hospitable host. Unfortunately, Hamilton's tourism industry is simply not conducting enough customer satisfaction evaluation for the results that do exist to be widely meaningful or for those results to have a real, informative influence on any changes within the marketplace. Clearly, gathering more customer satisfaction data needs to be a priority for both individual tourism stakeholders as well as for the industry as a whole.

Market Stability

Hamilton's tourism market displays an enviable stability. Of course, that also means that Hamilton's tourism market also displays an absence of the revenue-driving visitation peaks that most leading tourism destinations experience. There is no particular time of year, sector or special event that is make-or-break for local tourism. This is either the result of or the perpetuating factor in (or more likely, both) Hamilton's middle-of-the-road tourism identity.



Reason for Travel

As a share of the total provincial tourism market, Hamilton's friends-and-relatives visitation is double its business trip share and four times its pleasure trip share. This information clearly indicates where the short-term marketing possibilities lie (VFR tourism), as well as which areas have the greatest long-term growth potential (business and pleasure travel).

Surprising our Visitors

Hamilton seems to be a pleasant surprise to almost everyone who visits the community. Some people may see this as a reflection of a tourism industry that provides a quality experience, while others may think it simply reflects low expecta-



tions. In reality, it is probably a combination of both. Travel media coverage of Hamilton is particularly reflective of this phenomenon. See headlines like "Hamilton has way more to offer than dirty smokestacks" (*The Montreal Gazette*), "Hamilton: Steeltown's gritty exterior hides inner beauty" (*The St. Catharines Standard*), and "Hamilton: So much more than steel" (*The Ottawa Sun*). These positive reviews indicate Hamilton's tourism strength, but the surprised tone indicates a significant problem with perception and identifies the need to create a more magnetic tourism identity.

Developing Partnerships

Partnerships are developing within Hamilton's tourism industry and there are some successes, but at the same time, communication within the industry also appears to be a frequently-cited weakness. Feedback from focus-group participants on this subject was consistent in identifying effective sector partnerships as a high priority,

but feedback was mixed as to the success of the current partnership efforts. Clearly, existing partnerships need to be enhanced and expanded while leaders within Hamilton's tourism industry need to make it a priority to work with a partnership model on any new initiatives that arise.

Downtown Friendliness

The condition of downtown Hamilton is an impediment to attracting tourism. In this case, perception is reality and, as one participant said, "The perception is that downtown is not safe. Many folks are not comfortable walking east of James Street." Another participant was even more blunt: "Customers won't come back because of what they see on the street." The safety and cleanliness of the downtown core are serious concerns, ones that must be addressed immediately as a necessary step to revitalizing Hamilton's urban tourism. Even if the downtown were cleaned up, however, its "user-friendliness" needs to be enhanced. Some participants cited the need for enhanced funding for Tourism Hamilton so it could provide improved and relocated visitor centres and possibly a roving, on-the-street ambassador program. Ideally, informal Hamilton greeters like taxi drivers, bus drivers and hotel staff would also be included in a modified version of the ambassador training.



Accommodation Selection

One focus group participant said, "There is a lack of hotel rooms in Hamilton, especially rooms that people actually want to stay in." This assessment appears accurate. There is clearly a paucity of high-end hotels and few recognizable name-brand

hotels (at every price level) that make people feel instantly comfortable in choosing their accommodations. Downtown Hamilton was the focus of much of this feedback, but it applies to the entire City.



Hamilton needs to develop a more complete and recognizable accommodation menu in order to attract tourism and group tourism in particular (conventions, sport events, etc.).

Insurance Issues

Though the PRTDF questionnaires were not set up to elicit comments or information about the role that insurance plays with tourism stakeholders, this issue was an unsolicited topic of discussion at almost every focus group. Participants, especially from agritourism, accommodation (particularly bed & breakfast operators), festivals/events, outdoor sports, and sport venues, identified the costs and demands of appropriate insurance as being significant impediments to creating profitable or sustainable operations. They also noted that the demands insurance companies place of these types of organizations impede the fostering of both a positive client experience, as well as hiring and training staff. Though obviously cost was the significant factor, the demands of insurance companies including training for staff, facility requirements, staff-to-visitor ratios and other non-monetary issues were also significant concerns. It is clear that addressing insurance issues in some way – perhaps with consolidated purchasing or some extended partnership arrangements – will do a great deal to help advance Hamilton's tourism industry and particularly its smaller stakeholders.

Next Steps

While the “Points of Emphasis” listed in this report should inform and enhance any number of tourism-related initiatives, activities and actions, Hamilton’s current “Tourism Status” and the City’s two “Key Influences” should have the most powerful impact on the development of any important long-term tourism development strategy.

Hamilton’s tourism industry is not currently well-defined. Its strengths and weaknesses are not numerous or significant enough to outweigh the fact that the dominant feature of the industry is its “middle-of-the-road” character. While this undefined character presents a challenge currently, it is actually an advantage to moving forward and putting the Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework to work as a foundation document for the re-visioning of Hamilton’s tourism industry. Though Hamilton lacks a definitive tourism brand, that does not mean it cannot develop one. In fact, that should be the ultimate goal of any strategic tourism plan for the City.



Using the PRTDF as the launching pad, Hamilton’s tourism industry should develop a strategic tourism plan that follows two guiding principles, previously introduced to this report as the “Key Influences.”

Achieve Access to the Nearby Tourism Markets

Hamilton’s tourism strategy should capitalize on its position between Toronto and Niagara Falls. To address this opportunity, the strategy should



include actions as simple as improving signage on key Niagara Falls-Toronto routes (a common suggestion from the PRTDF focus groups) and tactics as complex as creating a coordinated marketing plan that includes Hamilton’s neighbouring and more well-known tourist regions.

Of course, penetrating the market on Hamilton’s doorstep will be impossible if Hamilton cannot describe its tourism offerings effectively to that market. This is where the second Key Influence becomes so important.

Package and Market Niche Attractions, Create Mass Attractions, or Both

Hamilton has a number of very strong niche markets that could be enhanced and amplified by bringing to them a specific focus. Packaging and marketing Hamilton’s attractions in the areas of military history, galleries and art, natural heritage, and/or industrial heritage – just to name four examples – are all strong possibilities identified by multiple participants in the PRTDF. To highlight two specific examples, one focus group participant identified the potential in creating an “Arts Trail” to highlight and market Hamilton’s strength in that niche segment. Other respondents gravitated toward the City’s natural heritage, with water being a



particularly compelling theme. Citing Hamilton’s numerous waterfalls and the city’s revitalized waterfront, more than one person suggested branding Hamilton as the “City of Moving Water” or something similar.

Another option, either as a complement to the marketing of bundled niche attractions or as an alternative, is that Hamilton could develop a sentinel, truly premier-ranked tourist attraction that will reach across market segments and attract a mass audience. Of course, this type of attraction does not materialize often and would, almost by definition, require an investment of a scale not previously seen in the Hamilton tourism industry. Any tourism development strategy, however, should allow for the possibility of establishing such an attraction and incorporate the process and infrastructure required to keep aware of opportunities and, for example, to bid for any sentinel attractions that arrive, for lack of a better term, on the open market.



A Plan Made of Concrete Actions

Regardless of the specifics, the key next step is to create a plan for developing and enhancing Hamilton’s tourism offerings, tourism service and tourism brand. That plan should reflect the contents and findings of the Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework and it should distill to specific actions that are measurable and deliver, or at least test, strategies designed to capitalize on the incredible potential inherent in the Hamilton tourism market.

Conclusion

The Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework asked for a commitment from the stakeholders in the Hamilton tourism industry. In asking for their participation, the authors of this report entered into an informal contract to deliver a report that reflects the findings and input from the stakeholders, but also inspires action. That action is the critical next step that will validate over a year's worth of work. Hamilton's Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework will only find its value in the activity it inspires and informs.

Just as the PRTDF authors have an obligation to Hamilton's tourism industry, so do the stakeholder participants have an obligation to themselves. Hamilton's tourism industry has a responsibility



to participate in the development of a plan to put the PRTDF to its best and most influential use. Hamilton has great tourism potential, that much is clear in the findings of this report. The completion of the Premier-Ranked Tourist Destinations Framework is simply one step in the long process to capitalize on that potential. The real work begins now.

Appendix Methodology and Process

This Executive Summary captures and highlights the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Framework, but by no means does this brief document encompass the scope of the comprehensive report.

For a full analysis of each question and issue referenced here, as well as an exhaustive record of feedback provided and resources consulted, please refer to the complete PRTDF document.

Under the guidance of the Tourism Hamilton Board of Directors, which served as the steering committee for this project, one senior member of the Tourism Hamilton staff worked full-time on the PRTDF for sixteen months. Her efforts were augmented by numerous temporary staff, as well as significant commitments from Tourism Hamilton's executive director and other members of the permanent staff team. The coordinator's core project, and the foundation of the PRTDF, was a broad-based, inclusive information-gathering process that incorporated both written surveys



and in-person focus groups. Tourism Hamilton sent out 1,383 surveys to tourism industry stakeholders. Each market segment received a customized survey designed to elicit the information that would be most meaningful to that particular type of tourism-related activity. The 367 responses (a 27% response rate that came as the result of significant follow-up by the key staff leads and leadership volunteers) fell into sixteen sub-sectors, each of which then gathered for an in-person focus group to allow for interaction and elaboration beyond the confines of the questionnaires. Participating stakeholders were all included in one of the following market segments:

- Accommodation
- Accommodation – Bed & Breakfast
- Agritourism
- Convention / Banquet Facilities
- Festival and Events
- Art / Cultural Organizations (For-Profit)
- Art / Cultural Organizations (Not-For-Profit)
- Golf
- Heritage Sites
- Indoor Attractions
- Outdoor Sports, Parks and Attractions
- Restaurants
- Shopping
- Sports Venues / Events
- Transportation
- Travel Trade



Tourism Hamilton gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the Ministry of Tourism & Recreation and Service Canada.

