

Hastings County launches proactive COVID-19 response plan

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By Chris Drost

During the last week of May, Hastings County council approved an Economic Development and Tourism COVID-19 Response Plan aimed at proactively addressing the economic impact of the pandemic. The plan is broken down into three phases, each reflecting the amount the economy has opened, from lockdown in Phase 1, to some businesses reopening in Phase 2, to Phase 3 when all businesses are open and students are back to school. The importance of reliable high-speed broadband is highlighted right at the beginning of the plan in recognition of how critical this is to the local economy. The Eastern Ontario Regional Network will be continuing to identify gaps in service and determining what can be done at a local level to offer support. Over 1,000 businesses have been interviewed since the pandemic began and the results indicate a deep impact on local business. A total of 44 per cent described the impact on their business as very significant and drowning fast, while a further 34 per cent are experiencing a significant impact. The survey also revealed that 33 per cent of the business respondents have had to lay-off staff and 29 per cent have had to reduce the hours for their employees. Only 23 per cent of respondents are currently selling online, while 64 per cent are not. A further 11 per cent plan to sell online in the future. According to Andrew Redden, economic development and tourism manager at the County of Hastings, Phase 1 has already kept them busy interviewing business owners, providing one on one coaching through Mark Hanley, establishing an online interactive map showing what is open and how service is being provided, setting up webinars to help entrepreneurs learn about e-commerce and advocating through associations such as the Tourism Industry Association, Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization and others. "It has been a bit of a challenge for our business coach Mark Hanley to meet with individuals in the traditional way out at coffee shops since they have been closed, but I would encourage businesses to reach out to him for help," says Redden. Hanley's number is 613-391-0350 or email hanleym@hastingscounty.com. This confidential, one-on-one business coaching is a free service provided through the county. Phase 2 of the plan, when some businesses have re-opened, will be a time for celebration according to Redden. They will also be doing the hard media launch of the new Hastings County website, www.hastings.ca. The county will work with businesses to help them navigate the measures required for re-opening. For Phase 3 a five-point action plan has been established. The first action will be the establishment of a Tourism Industry Task Force to help analyze data, act as a sounding board, facilitate experiential tourism development and create a destination attraction campaign. This group has actually already been formed, according to Redden. The task force will work with different sectors such as the forest industry through BAFIA, agriculture through the OFA and Harvest Hastings and retail/restaurant sector by working with chambers of commerce, BIAs and other business organizations. "Agriculture is doing really well," says Redden. Some growers have moved into offering delivery service and there are ideas being developed around hubs. The second point of the action plan is to engage local ready anchor institutions to help drive the recovery. "Economic development is all about how to get people to spend locally," explained Redden. In Phase 3, the plan is to focus on encouraging members of the community working for anchor institutions such as teachers and government workers to get out and spend in their local community. The buy local campaign will also encourage seasonal residents to spend in the area although Redden says, "The county will be cautious about this message until the provincial state of emergency has been lifted." Additionally, Harvest Hastings is going to be transformed into an online store, according to Redden. "One of the challenges with regard to tourism is to know who our new target market is. The other challenge is knowing what is open," explained Redden. Redden believes there is hope for mainstreet but he says, "business owners will have to be imaginative, understand that people are buying online and that your place of business needs to be a cool place to experience. Animating the street is also important," he added. Part of Action Item 3 revolves around remote workers. They are working on a "tourism test drive" that will encourage potential remote workers to come here to stay and play and then pitch some properties with the hope they will move here permanently. "The county wants to see people come and stay here long-term to increase our permanent population," says Redden. Input for this action item will be obtained from the planning departments, municipalities and Realtors. Action Item 4 goes back to the business coach, or enterprise facilitation, playing a key role in the survival of Mainstreet. Not only will the business coaching with Mark Hanley be promoted, but the enterprise facilitation networking boards that once existed, will be re-established. "This time we will have a networking board for North Hastings as it was a challenge for board members to attend meetings when there was just one for the entire county," says Redden. They will be looking for individuals who are well-connected, especially in the areas of law, finance and marketing. The fifth Action Item is to support large-scale investment

with a new investment team. This effort will include sparking bigger investment and innovation concepts and ways for accessing capital. A list of equity and other investors and organizations will be created to help establish the team. Individuals would be invited to pitch or present their ideas to the team.