

How Ontario's tourism relief funding opened the doors for outdoor dining for one Bancroft cafe



There's a café tucked in the Town of Bancroft that allows you to dine on a hearty Buddha bowl followed by a decadent butterscotch mini pie, all while taking in the views of the York River. Thanks to some generous funding, this hot spot that's popular with locals and visitors alike will offer a unique culinary experience for all.

Best of all, it's for a great cause.

How did they get there? It's a long (but good) story. Back in 2001, the Bancroft Community Transit was born when volunteer drivers started providing transportation services to those who needed it most. At the time, residents did not have access to public transportation in the town with a population of approximately 3,800.

This opened many opportunities to those requiring social assistance or those in need of a non-urgent medical appointment. The most vulnerable now had accessible, safe, and affordable transportation within their community.

The BCT built on their model and eventually received funding for their cause. In 2014, they built Heart of the Park which today hosts two enterprises, including the local hotspot, the Wattle & Daub Café as well as pedal and paddle rentals.

Wattle & Daub offers a menu filled with homemade goodies including soups, sandwiches and treats. The name was chosen as a unique conversation starter ? wattle and daub is a method of constructing walls in which vertical wooden stakes (or wattles) are woven with horizontal twigs and branches, and then daubed with clay or mud.

One of the walls in the café is constructed using this method. The staff there love it when someone asks the meaning behind the name ? it's a fun story that patrons will remember.

Income generated from these social enterprises helped the BCT run its four regular passenger vans, three mobility vans and one accessible pro-master van. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Director of operations at BCT, Gwen Coish, said this was a huge blow to the café.

?We went into full takeout mode in hopes that we could still manage to squeak by and meet costs,? she explained. ?Our staff were truly amazing, and they worked tirelessly to come up with unique ways to operate.?

And while it was a challenge - Gwen acknowledged that the café did take a huge hit ? they managed to retain their staff during the turbulent time.

However, with little to no money coming through the doors, all plans to expand and grow the social enterprise were put on hold. In 2022, Gwen and her crew applied for the Regional Tourism Relief Fund ? Ontario's Highlands, a program funded by Government of Canada through the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario which provides funding support to tourism entities within the Ontario's Highlands region.

They were stunned when they received a \$75,000 non-repayable contribution to help expand their plans for a new outdoor dining experience at the café.

?Oh my goodness,? Gwen said. ?This funding came at exactly the right time. Some of the stress has been eliminated as we can now move into 2023 away from the last few years with promise.?

The community and the café rely heavily on tourists, and now Gwen said the new and improved space will be enjoyed by the community and visitors as well.

The new outdoor seating space complements the outdoor oven and will allow the café to offer a new ?dining under the stars? experience, which will operate year-round. Staff are in the process of developing a new menu, themes nights and more. They are also working on marketing plans and preparing for the return of customers.

?Instead of spending a few years trying to build up our reserves in order to accomplish our vision,? Gwen commented. ?We are so very thankful.?

She thanked OHTO for their valuable help during the funding process.

?They have helped us create a unique experience, which will bring more people to our beautiful community,? Gwen said. ?And we are now ready to greet them.?

Submitted by the Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization