

Ontario Parks seeking innovative recreational experience ideas

BY MICHAEL RILEY Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Ontario Parks is on the lookout for ways to add recreation experiences for people to enjoy at their parks, while supporting local businesses, jobs and the provincial park system. Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks David Piccini revealed this in a request for information online press release from Feb. 15. Ontario Parks is inviting businesses, non-profits, community groups and entrepreneurs to share their ideas for a chance to procure funding for their idea and see it in action at a nearby park. Interested parties are asked to apply via the Ontario tenders' portal by March 4 at 11 a.m. Minister Piccini's RFI online press release from Feb. 15 sought to get innovative ideas from all private, public and Indigenous businesses, non-profit organizations, community groups and entrepreneurs to enact exciting new recreational experiences within Ontario Parks. The release suggests that interested individuals and organizations could operate their business or service at the parks, with a goal of generating revenue for themselves and for the parks' usage and care. They stress that the ideas with the biggest potential may get seed funding during future procurement. The proposed activities and services should bring new visitors, particularly in non-peak seasons and in parks that have capacity to accept more visitors to avoid overcrowding. Proposals must also be consistent with applicable provincial legislation and individual park management plans, which specify what activities can take place within a provincial park while protecting the park's ecology and environment, says Piccini in the release. The following examples are given by Ontario Parks regarding what these activities and services could be, but aren't limited to; a packaged picnic experience that offered a learning hike with a gourmet picnic, an artisan offering classes in a park, a fun experience or service for beach goers, hikers or visitors interested in plant and animal life, an innovative solution that would improve parks' accessibility, and much more. Ontario Parks invited interested parties to visit the Ontario tenders' portal at <https://ontariotenders.app.jaggaer.com>, search under 'current opportunities' to learn more about the request for information for innovative recreation experiences at Ontario Parks. All submissions are due by 11 a.m. on March 4. Ontario Parks is the largest provider of outdoor recreational experiences in Ontario, with over 11 million visits from people around the globe who participate in a myriad of activities like camping, swimming, fishing, boating and much more. The parks account for eight per cent of Ontario's landmass at over 82,000 square kilometres. There are over 330 Ontario Parks with more than 100 of the with camping and facilities for visitors. They also boast over 19,000 car accessible campsites and in excess of 8,000 backcountry/wilderness campsites. Their website is at www.ontarioparks.com. Lindsay Davidson is with the MECP and says that this initiative was announced as part of the Ontario 2021 budget as a way to provide more opportunities to enjoy Ontario Parks. He says that so far, Ontario Parks has heard positive feedback from several organizations that represent small businesses and businesses in the tourism sector. Ontario Parks will not receive any vendor ideas until after the Request for Information process closes at 11 a.m. on March 4, 2022, he says. Davidson says that the amount of seed money that each idea receives will depend upon the nature of the idea and that the scope of the RFI for innovative ideas is very broad. He says that the ideas could be large scale or small scale and could apply to one park or many parks. We're looking forward to building relationships with partners, including those from local communities, to bring exciting new ideas to Ontario Parks.