

DestinationGUELPH:

A community-based tourism strategy, driving economic development

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Introduction

With hundreds of globally competitive communities now pursuing the social and economic benefits that are commensurate with a robust tourism industry, maintaining a sustainable and enduring tourism industry no longer happens solely by great marketing and geographic good fortune – it must now be designed.

To assist Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in shifting their focus to this new reality, a project called DestinationNEXT was launched. This ground breaking work was completed by InterVISTAS Consulting on behalf of the Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI).

DestinationNEXT offers an in-depth analysis of industry trends and DMOs of the future. This work culminated in the development of a scenario model which outlined four distinct scenarios that all DMOs could find themselves in. It also identified three transformational opportunities that DMOs need to embrace in order to be effective and relevant in our changing world:

1. **Moving from broadcast to engagement:** DMOs have typically focused on purchasing print, television, radio or online advertisements. This focus needs to shift to more two-way communication with visitors through social media and on-the-ground interactions.
2. **Building and protecting the destination brand:** DMOs need to become more of a Destination Marketing and Management Organization (DMMO), where they play an active role in managing the destination's brand and product offering.
3. **Evaluating and evolving the DMO business models:** New collaborations and partnerships are evolving in the market and DMOs need to embrace these opportunities.

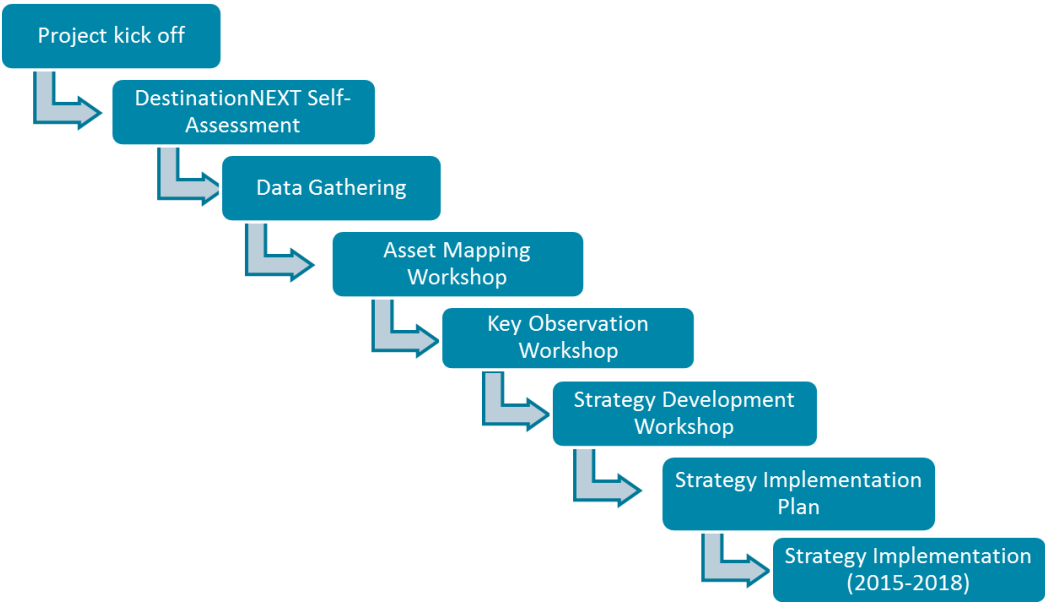
Given its reputation as being a 'petri dish' of tourism innovation in Canada, coupled with an opportunity to support Guelph in enhancing its brand and product offering as a tourism destination, RTO4 engaged InterVISTAS to leverage the tools from DestinationNEXT to develop a tourism strategy for Guelph.

This strategy development process built upon the thinking from the Premier-Ranked Tourist Destination Project completed in 2005 with Guelph. Premier-ranked highlighted Guelph's core product offering in outdoor/nature, festivals and events, downtown heritage and sports. This process in 2015 sought to validate those product offerings and use DestinationNEXT as a platform to engage the community in developing a renewed strategy.

The process has been community-driven, with participation from a Steering Committee composed of civic, business and community leaders. Bringing a disparate group of stakeholders from across the community was an important step in establishing momentum for strengthening Guelph as a tourism destination.

Figure 1 outlines the extensive process that was undertaken for developing this tourism strategy. DestinationNEXT was used as the underlying framework for analyzing the destination, identifying priorities, and setting forth a focused strategic implementation plan. This work was done over the course of a nine month period, reflecting the Steering Committee’s desire to be thoughtful, deliberate and inclusive as it set forth a vision and strategy for growing Guelph’s tourism market.

Figure 1. Strategy Development Process



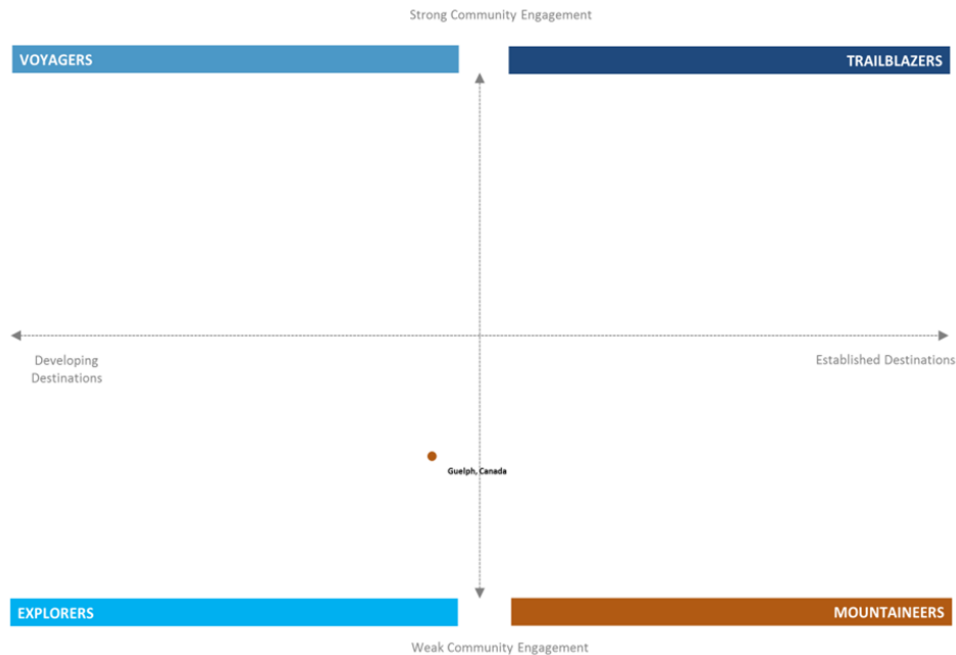
This document outlines the tourism strategy for Guelph over the next 3 years. It begins with an overview of the key findings from the extensive data analysis process. The core elements of the strategy, including strategic goals and initiatives is provided.

The Situation Today

DestinationNEXT Self-Assessment Results

One of the first steps in this strategy development process involved the Steering Committee completing the DestinationNEXT self-assessment. The assessment involved a rating of the relative importance and perceived performance for 20 variables related to destination strength and community support and engagement. Figure 2 outlines the consensus position of the Steering Committee.

Figure 2. Guelph DestinationNEXT Self-Assessment Result



The scenario plot demonstrates that Guelph is in the ‘Explorers’ scenario which represents a developing destination with weak community support and engagement. DMO’s and destinations in the Explorers scenario desire an inspired tourism vision and activated community to make it happen. They need to build recognition and acceptance within the community that transformational change is needed. They also need to rally the community to work together towards a realistic vision and strategy.

A detailed review of the results highlights a few key takeaways which were further validated throughout this process:

- Governance and funding were both rated as the areas that require the greatest improvement in the community support and engagement driver.
- Solidifying the DMO’s funding base and demonstrating a strong ROI also need to be addressed.
- Guelph’s tourism brand is weak. Promoting and engaging the destination will require a unified brand story that focuses on Guelph’s key assets.
- The self-assessment reinforced the importance that festivals and events play in Guelph’s tourism offering. While the self-assessment showcased the strength of festivals and events, it will be critical to infuse innovation every year to keep them relevant and interesting over time.

Key Observations on Guelph as a Tourist Destination

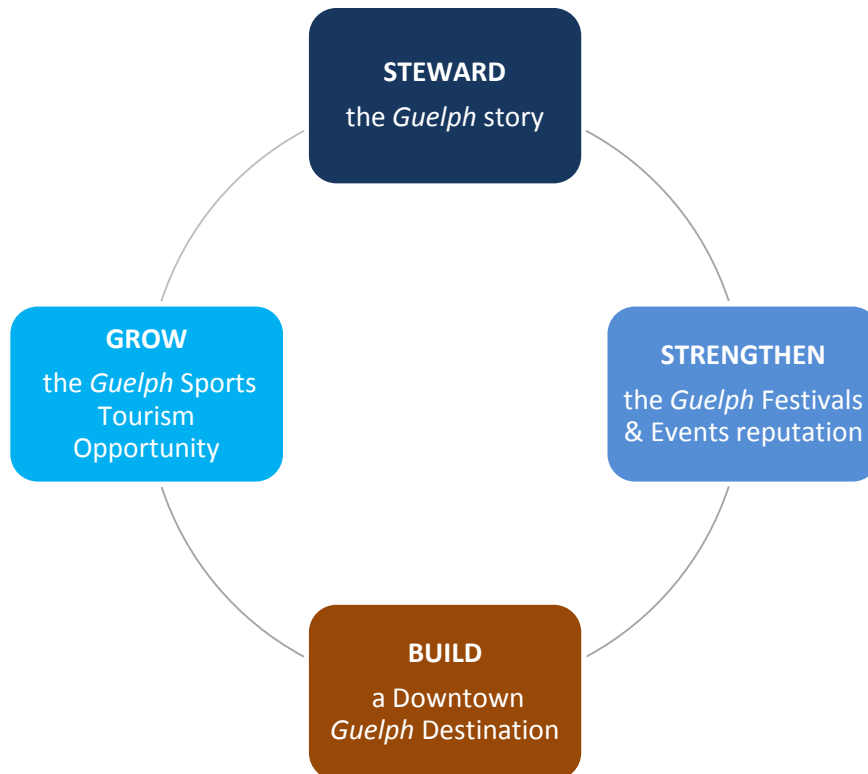
The extensive data analysis and consultation process lead to a series of key observations about Guelph as a tourist destination. These observations provided important context in identifying key priorities and areas of focus for this tourism strategy.

- 1. Guelph is primarily a festivals and events destination, with some elements of sports tourism, which largely draws visitors from the surrounding region.** There is also evidence that that Guelph's tourism assets are geared towards adults with very little for children to see or do. A core element of this strategy needs to consider the Guelph's tourism brand and the development of additional events and attractions that will differentiate Guelph as a destination.
- 2. Guelph is unique in terms of urban centres in Ontario in that there is a relatively intact historic downtown.** The richness of this history is an embodiment of Guelph's heritage which comes to life through the myriad of cultural and artistic festivals and events can be further leveraged.
- 3. The development of this strategy with wide involvement from civic, business and community leaders is a good first step in overcoming recent instabilities with Visit Guelph.** Proposals to move Visit Guelph outside of the municipal government was raised a number of times in the consultations, and was noted as a root cause of some of the confusion and uncertainty related to the role and function of Visit Guelph. The strategy should consider deliberate steps to maintain the momentum in bringing partners together to coordinate the destination brand and product.
- 4. New revenue sources need to be evaluated in order to adequately invest in tourism infrastructure, marketing and product development.** Guelph taxpayers carry a large portion of the costs for operating Visit Guelph. Most destinations around the world have some revenue generation mechanisms from tourists (e.g.: accommodation taxes) that should be considered in developing the strategy.
- 5. Guelph needs a recognized, welcoming and unified tourism brand.** The steering committee rated Guelph's brand as the 2nd most important Destination Strength variable, but was rated the lowest in terms of performance. It has been mentioned in many reports and consultations that Guelph does not have a unified tourism brand and that the brand can be confusing to visitors. There is also a perception that Guelph is not interested in and not easy to do business with.
- 6. Limitations with data collection make it difficult to measure and monitor the performance of the destination.** This is not uncommon for smaller communities around the world. However, tracking and reporting on performance will be a critical component to gaining and maintaining community support for any increases in DMO funding.
- 7. While Visit Guelph and some operators have a good social media presence, there is room for improvement.** The digital presence for many "unheard" businesses would be radically improved by attending to user-generated content site profiles and details. Festivals are one sector which could benefit from improving their online rankings.

Strategy

Strategic Goals & Initiatives

This Strategy Map provides an overview of the four strategic goals that Guelph will focus on in the next five years.



What follows is an overview of each of the strategic goals and initiatives.

Strategic Goal #1 – STRENGTHEN Guelph’s Festival and Events Reputation

Establish Guelph as the premier festival and events destination for attendees and organizations.

Festivals and events are a cornerstone of Guelph’s tourism product. There is demonstrated strength in the music segment which has some brand awareness and recognition across Ontario. There is also a positive critical mass of artists, recording studios and other infrastructure which supports aspiring artists.

Issues	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not optimized • Fragmented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage downtown link • Capacity building • Collaboration, non-traditional and traditional partnerships

Strategic Initiatives

- Conduct a detailed review of current strengths, audiences and bottlenecks within Guelph’s festivals and events space
- Develop coordinated and seamless planning/execution processes
- Measure and report performance metrics
- Establish a forum to bring event organizers, the business community and tourism operators together to deliver a seamless, exceptional experience
- Identify opportunities to better utilize existing spaces and venues
- Leverage Canada 150 opportunity

Strategic Goal #2 – BUILD a Downtown Guelph Destination

Activate and animate downtown’s potential as the vibrant gathering place and stage for showcasing Guelph’s character and vibe to visitors and residents.

Guelph is unique in Ontario in that there is a relatively intact historic downtown. The richness of this history is an embodiment of Guelph’s heritage which comes to life through the myriad of cultural and artistic festivals and events. With leadership from the BIA and merchants, there are opportunities to leverage this current momentum.

Issues	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to engage business community and other stakeholders. • Perception shift needed for easier downtown hosting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage, celebrate and showcase cultural strength and share in the downtown setting. • To rally/realize downtown’s secondary plan and overall vision.

Strategic Initiatives

- a) Design and promote year-round downtown animation program
- b) Advance implementation of Downtown Secondary Plan
- c) Galvanize a cohesive downtown community
- d) Measure and report animation impact

Strategic Goal #3 – STEWARD the Guelph story

Develop a sustainable destination model for Visit Guelph and tourism stakeholders.

Over the last 10 years, there have been a number of studies conducted on the mandate and business model of tourism partners in Guelph. The more recent Operational Review resulted in a Tourism Advisory Committee which has been created by City Council to advise on a number of issues related to the role and function of Visit Guelph. Beyond these actions at a local level, a key transformational opportunity outlined in DestinationNEXT relates to DMOs shifting to a Destination Marketing and Management Organization where they play a key role in managing the brand of a destination.

Issues	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of clarity across stakeholders and DMOs regarding roles and functions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transparent collaboration• Leverage/coordination/VG to take a leadership role

Strategic Initiatives

- a) Establish role and function of tourism partners
- b) Measure and communicate economic impact
- c) Develop a community of practice across Guelph to support collaboration, coordination and information sharing
- d) Transition Visit Guelph from a Destination Marketing Organization to a Destination Marketing Management Organization
- e) Shift from broadcast to engagement
- f) Showcase Guelph’s agriculture heritage and evaluate current assets and potential for new product development

Strategic Goal #4 – GROW the Sports Tourism Opportunity

Collaborate with Guelph partners to best service and leverage existing sports tourism events and determine the growth potential of sports tourism, and the economic and lifestyle benefits.

While Guelph has a few ‘leading’ sporting venues, the University of Guelph is a significant driver of this success. In working with regional partners, there are opportunities to grow Guelph’s sports tourism offering.

Issues	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The University of Guelph is not Guelph• Disengaged local sporting organizations• Funding• Community engagement• No strategy and weak infrastructure within the city• No metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Align sports tourism with community needs• Increase linkages to downtown

Strategic Initiatives

- a) Formalize the partnership between the City, University of Guelph, RSTO and other regional partners
- b) Quantify partner benefits
- c) Define and implement an exceptional, made-in-Guelph sporting experience
- d) Engage local amateur sporting organizations
- e) Identify opportunities to better utilize existing spaces and venues

Strategic Implementation

From the outset of this process, there has been a commitment across the Steering Committee and RTO4 to continue supporting the execution of this tourism strategy after it was developed. Analyzing Guelph’s assets and opportunities, and identifying a vision and set of priorities was the easy part. Now work needs to be undertaken to execute in order to strengthen Guelph both as a destination as well as the level of community support tourism receives.

RTO4 has committed to play an important role in supporting strategy execution. Steering Committee members have also recommitted to continuing its work in guiding and implementing the strategy. With this phase of the process completed, there is recognition of the need to expand the membership of the Steering Committee through the formation of working groups.