

King council approves draft tourism plan

By Angela Gismondi

King has an abundance of tourism, hospitality and recreational opportunities that need to be tapped into.

That was the message Jamie Smyth, director of economic development for the Township of King, brought to the committee of the whole meeting Monday. Council approved a draft three-year community tourism plan in principle at the meeting.

In August 2013, Central Counties Tourism presented its partner communities with the opportunity to complete a Community Tourism Planning Guide, King expressed interest in the program right away. As a result, in partnership with Central Counties Tourism, King organized a Tourism Task Force that consisted of a variety of stakeholders in the tourism sector.

The Task Force came together for a series of five three-hour sessions to create framework for guiding tourism development and marketing efforts and came up with numerous opportunities to support tourism in King.

'It's all about optimizing the benefits available from tourism activities,' said Smyth, adding tourism advancement and promotion is part of the Township's community sustainability plan and economic development plan. 'What we have is a playground of things to do. We know we have a lot of best kept secrets. We know we have these hidden gems and locations that we need to promote more.' Tourism is an important economic driver, added Smyth.

'It's about partnering and leveraging for prosperity,' Smyth stated. 'We need to be investment ready and tourism ready to serve these visitors when they come to King.'

Until now, King has done its best in terms of tourism with a limited budget and resources by partnering with various organizations, including the York Region Arts Council, York Region Tourism and Hills of Headwaters, Smyth explained. While other regions, such as Hills of Headwaters and Durham, have dedicated time and resource towards it, York Region and King have been relatively static over the last five years. But all that is changing with the development of the task force and the community tourism plan.

Chuck Thibeault, executive director of Central Counties Tourism, said the draft plan is a result of a partnership between Central Counties and King Township.

'King was the first municipality to jump at this,' Thibeault said. 'This is not going to be a study that is going to sit on the shelf. Central Counties is going to help you implement it.'

He added tourism can be an economic driver in any community.

'When you create a destination, it doesn't matter where it is,' said Thibeault. 'As long as they (tourists) are coming from outside of your municipality and spending money in your municipality, in your eyes those are tourists.'

Members of council were excited to hear about the plan.

'When I got on board with this council three years ago I had no idea what King had,' said Councillor Avia Eek. 'King has it all.'

Mayor Steve Pellegrini said tourism is an important part of the puzzle for the Township.

'This is the last piece of the puzzle we need to put King all together,' said Pellegrini. 'It all fits so nicely together and it's amazing. It's great that we're moving forward with this.'

Councillor Peter Grandilli did not agree.

'I don't think we're going to make any money,' said Grandilli. 'Maybe my view of tourist is different than what many of you see as tourist. When I go somewhere, I want to see nice things, which we don't have. We need infrastructure. Let's put that in place first.'

Councillor Linda Pabst responded there is a reason why everyone calls the township 'beautiful King.'

'Well I think King Township happens to be one of the most beautiful places in all of southern Ontario,' said Pabst. 'We have beautiful farms, equestrian facilities and Cold Creek Conservation Area. We have to promote our community in order to be successful in any endeavor.'

Pellegrini couldn't pass up the opportunity to respond to Grandilli's comment.

'I happen to take extreme great pride in this community,' said Pellegrini. 'I think we have some of the finest events in Ontario.'

There are people from all over and they come here because it's a special place. We're going to have to get you on a bus. We're going to take you out and show you what King is all about.'

Councillor Eek said Grandilli's mind set is an excellent example of why King needs a tourism plan.

'I do respect your opinion but your comments and your mind set are exactly the reason why the tourism plan needs to move forward,' said Eek, adding there is more than one kind of tourist and although touring farms may not be Grandilli's idea of a good time, there are people who are interested in that type of tourism. 'We've got a tremendous opportunity to leverage the money we have so we can attract tourism. It's not going to happen overnight but I think you're going to be surprised at the end of the day. These are baby steps. We need to start somewhere.'

With that, council approved the staff recommendations to receive the draft three-year community tourism plan in principle. Staff is expected to report back to council with a refined plan and progress report in November 2014.