



Visit Oakville

STRATEGIC PLAN REFRESH

2023-2026



Photo credit: Bronte BIA



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Introduction

This document is an updated strategic plan, building from the areas of focus and strategic initiatives from our 2019-2022 Strategic Plan. The previous strategic plan was built on three pillars: Marketing & Partnerships, Experience Improvement and Curation, and Tourism Advocacy. Despite Covid-19, which significantly affected the tourism landscape throughout this period, we as an organization have managed to push forward significant accomplishments since 2019, including the *Visitor Experience Assessment Strategy (VEAS)* project, developing a marketing plan and a refreshed brand, launching a Tourism Investment Fund, and increasing our partnership activities. Of the 14 strategic initiatives from the 2019-2022 plan, seven (7) have been completed, five (5) are in progress, and two (2) have yet to begin. From this place, we find ourselves in need of an updated strategy to guide our staff, board members, and organization into the next three years of operation.

As a strategic plan refresh process, it was important to determine required updates to the key areas of focus (i.e., the pillars) as well as the strategic initiatives from the previous strategy to build on, and what new initiatives were needed to move in our desired direction. To do this, we worked with our consultant partners to conduct background and macro-factor research, hosted a virtual industry and partner session, as well as conducted interviews with key informants. Throughout the process we asked questions related to the current tourism context and how this has changed since 2019, areas of opportunity and challenges that we as an organization must consider in our work, and specifically how the previous plan's pillars and strategic initiatives resonate given the landscape and needs of today. Next, we engaged in two strategic planning sessions, one with staff and one with the strategic planning task force made up of Visit Oakville board members and the Executive Director, to analyze required updates using the information from the research process. We are proud of our work to sustainably market and develop tourism in Oakville, and are excited to continue to do this, along with our many wonderful partners, in the years to come.



The Tourism Landscape

The context in which Visit Oakville operates has changed significantly since 2019, and this new context must be considered in strategic planning. Important macro-factors for Visit Oakville to consider include: legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic; the raised social consciousness related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); the ongoing climate crisis and its consequences; and changes in visitor behaviour specifically around how they access information and what kinds of experiences they are looking for. At the destination level, Visit Oakville must consider how to leverage the opportunities and combat the challenges of this new tourism landscape, including how the organization can support Oakville's tourism businesses in dealing with these changes. A strong tourism industry is essential to the wellbeing of the destination.

In 2020, pandemic-induced lockdowns changed workplace culture, making work-from-home more acceptable and encouraging many businesses and organizations to switch to online offices. These shifts had big impacts on the labour market as workers changed jobs and even industries, often moving to higher-paying positions with more security. Labour shortages are now commonplace in the tourism and hospitality industries, especially amongst front-line staff. The COVID-19 pandemic also changed the way people shop and travel. Visitors have new expectations for advanced booking, contactless exchanges, mobile-first interfaces, and travel options closer to home. At the same time, the pandemic showed us the risks of relying on global supply chains and inspired new interest in supporting local businesses. Visitors have also shown a desire for meaningful, transformative, and purposeful travel, while rampant inflation has tightened visitor wallets. Taking note of these changes and considering how they will impact Visit Oakville and the organization's stakeholders is essential to the strategic planning process.



Photo credit: Bronte BIA

We have also seen a shift in social consciousness around diversity, inclusion, equity, and bias, spurred in part by the murder of George Floyd and the widespread protests that followed. In May 2021, the discovery of 215 unmarked graves at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School launched a nationwide awakening around Indigenous rights and reinforced the urgency for stronger action towards reconciliation. In March 2023, the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada welcomed delegates from around the world to Winnipeg for the International Indigenous Tourism Conference. At the event, Indigenous tourism was positioned as a tool for reconciliation in Canada, as a provider of meaningful employment to Indigenous peoples and through opportunities for intercultural exchange. At the organizational level, stakeholders underlined DEI initiatives as important for Visit Oakville both internally as well as through the organization's external communications and programs. One important example of this is building relationships with Indigenous tourism organizations across jurisdictions, and exploring how Visit Oakville can support Indigenous tourism entrepreneurs. Stakeholders also noted the role that Visit Oakville can play in supporting local tourism businesses with their DEI efforts, whether that's by hosting workshops featuring DEI experts or connecting businesses with practical resources. These efforts will help make Oakville a more welcoming place to live, work, and visit- for everyone.



Across the 2019-2023 period, the climate crisis has continued to worsen and interest in sustainable, values-driven businesses (including tourism providers) has grown. Climate change is already having an impact on tourism destinations around the world, with ski resorts lacking snow and summer destinations plagued by wildfires. For Oakville, these impacts may include an increased risk of flooding from more frequent and serious storms, hotter summers days with the heat island effect and increased risk of droughts and water shortages, and a higher chance of E. coli contamination in Lake Ontario, to name a few. In response, the Town of Oakville and many other municipalities in Ontario, have declared a climate emergency. The tourism industry must acknowledge its role in the climate crisis. Tourism now accounts for between 5% and 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Increasingly, pressure is being felt by organizations like Visit Oakville to respond and prepare the industry to operate more sustainably.

Visitors today are more discerning than ever and looking to connect with the places they visit through authentic, immersive experiences. Increasingly, visitors seek a sense of fulfillment through their travels, even when they are close to home. Destination marketing and management organizations around the country are working with entrepreneurs and business owners to develop meaningful travel experiences that reflect a sense of place. In addition, sustainable tourism is a growing preference among travellers, and it is becoming increasingly important to the viability of tourism experiences. Visitors today want to contribute positively to the communities they visit. At the same time, visitors now expect everything to be available online, from planning tools to pre-booking tickets to accessing reviews. Organizations like Visit Oakville will need to keep pace with increasingly complicated traveller demands when it comes to information sharing and technology. Importantly, Oakville as a destination must carve out a niche and build upon this through details that improve the experience across the visitor journey, such as wayfinding, signage, activities on offer, and ambassadorship.



Strategic Plan

Mission, Vision, Purpose

Mission

To make people fall in love with Oakville.

Vision

Coming soon.

Purpose

To be a top-of-mind destination for people to spend and stay.



Woven Threads

The woven threads described below are values and ways of operating that create the fabric of this strategic plan and weave through all three pillars, as well as the strategic initiatives. They embody Visit Oakville's approach to our work, and they inform everything we do. We embrace each of these woven threads in all the activities we engage in.

Welcoming to everyone:

We strive to help everyone who visits Oakville and works in the tourism industry here feel welcome, embraced, and celebrated. We do this through actions like marketing and messaging that is inclusive of a diversity of people; sharing resources with our tourism industry and partners about Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and by asking ourselves, who is missing from our engagements and partnerships? What voices have not been heard?

Sustainability in tourism:

A thriving tourism industry that is economically, socio-culturally and environmentally sustainable is our goal. Declaring a commitment to fighting climate change, finding ways to curb emissions through advocating for increased transit options and bike-friendly corridors, and encouraging experiences and activities that appeal to a diversity of visitors and residents are some ways we are working towards this.

Collaboration and Partnerships:

Meaningful relationship building with our many community groups is core to our operations, and increasing the number of partnerships and collaborations is a priority for us. This could show up as partnering with a resident association on an Oakville ambassador campaign or supporting the development of new visitor experiences in collaboration with industry.

Decision-making backed by data:

In order to be strategic with the path forward and drive innovation, all our major decisions to be informed by data. For example, we track increases in visitor numbers per target market to determine which of our marketing efforts are working, and which ones need adjustment.

Embracing technology:

We aspire to embrace technological advances in the travel and tourism industry, from using technology to collect user-generated stories to gathering important visitor experience data to sharing information about Visit Oakville's work with our stakeholders.

We love Oakville:

Celebrating how and why Oakville is a great place to live and visit is our reason for being and always comes out in the way we talk about Oakville, how we engage with our industry and partners, and how we advocate for a sustainable tourism industry here.



Strategic Pillars

Pillar 1: Storytelling.

Destination marketing to inspire more visitors to come to Oakville year-round, stay longer, and spend more, is the centre of our role. We endeavour to market the destination, our tourism businesses, and experiences in a way that embraces the uniqueness of Oakville and its sense of place to attract visitors who will love Oakville as much as we do. This pillar has us co-creating the shared narrative of our town, and telling those stories in clever, effective, and meaningful ways through traditional and contemporary marketing and communications efforts and initiatives, both online and in-person.

Pillar 2: The Visitor Experience.

Visitors are more discerning than ever, and competition for the tourist dollar is at a peak. Care and consideration towards the experience the visitor has in Oakville is essential to our mission and purpose. This pillar is about improving and nurturing the visitor experience by providing visitors with enhanced visitor information, better infrastructure such as more transit options and public washrooms, and more diverse experiences that celebrate Oakville, and align with the destination narrative.

Pillar 3: Tourism Advocacy.

The value tourism brings to the community is often misunderstood and it is our role to build greater support for the tourism industry among Oakville's various stakeholder groups. We advocate for tourism in many ways. We advocate to the community as a whole around the importance of tourism to our way of life here; we advocate to our partners around the essential role Visit Oakville plays in Oakville's tourism success; and we advocate for the protection and care of Oakville itself through committing to sustainable tourism practices, offerings, and management.



Strategic Initiatives

Pillar 1: Storytelling Strategic Initiatives

1.1 Work with stakeholders to develop destination narrative.

An essential first step to helping visitors fall in love with Oakville is establishing a genuine, place-based destination narrative that will resonate with them. Developing this narrative is not something that Visit Oakville can do in isolation, and we are committed to working with our partners to determine key elements of this narrative. At the same time all our decisions will be backed by research. We will consult visitor data to ensure that Oakville’s narrative resonates with our target markets. Although there is no “single story of Oakville,” it is important to keep the main narrative simple so that it can be easily and effectively shared. Complementary mini stories will be used to add diversity and richness to Visit Oakville’s marketing efforts, and we will look to our partners and stakeholder for these. We know that storytelling is also a powerful tool for building pride of place and engaging residents as ambassadors.

1.2 Develop marketing and media relations plan for year 1.

While developing Oakville’s destination narrative, we will continue to market Oakville as a great place to visit. To guide us through this interim process, we will develop a marketing and media relations plan for year 1. This concise document will prioritize our visitor-facing marketing and media relations efforts while we develop Oakville’s destination narrative in collaboration with our partners.

1.3 Develop marketing and media relations plan for years 2-3.

With a strong destination narrative in hand, the next step is to share this story with our stakeholders. This means visitors but also residents, business owners, and all our partners! To do this, Visit Oakville will develop a marketing and media relations plan for years 2-3. The plan will outline the platforms and technologies we will use to connect with each of our audiences, including how we can leverage search engine optimization (SEO). This also means personalized marketing tactics for our various target markets with an awareness of touchpoints all along the visitor journey. Our marketing and media relations plan will consider both online and in-person opportunities to share and bring Oakville’s story to life, from websites, to signage, to conversations with local business owners. We know from our Visitor Experience Assessment Strategy (VEAS) project, that there is a clear need for more articles and blog posts featuring Oakville as a destination. For this reason, our new plan will outline how we will develop new partnerships with traditional media and a diversity of content creators.

Related VEAS Recommendation:

11. Invest in improving the SEO of the destination. (e.g., Teaming up with a diversity of bloggers for content development such as listicles, blogs, social media, etc.)

1.4 Engage stakeholders and partners to amplify destination narrative online and in-person.

Oakville’s stakeholders play a key role as ambassadors for our community, which means it is essential that they are equipped with the tools to amplify the destination narrative. Visit Oakville is committed to engaging each group strategically to ensure better results. This could mean designing a how-to guide for businesses and connecting them to training opportunities, hosting socialization sessions with partners, or disseminating an awareness campaign for residents (and their visiting friends and relatives).

Related VEAS Recommendation:

8. Support businesses with using online and in-person visitor touchpoints to generate a sense of place and add value to the visitor experience.



Pillar 2 The Visitor Experience Strategic Initiatives

2.1 Implement visitor experience assessment strategy recommendations.

Recommendations and learnings from the Visitor Experience Assessment Strategy project are woven throughout this refreshed strategic plan document. Visit Oakville is committed to implementing the recommendations of the VEAS and understands that to do this, the recommendations need to be prioritized across a timeline that considers available resources and potential for impact.

2.2 Support development of bookable experiences based on the destination narrative.

To bring Oakville’s destination narrative to life, Visit Oakville will support businesses and entrepreneurs in developing bookable experiences that reflect the destination narrative and fill gaps in Oakville’s visitor offerings. We will work with our partners so that the experiences are offered at different times of the day/week/year to reduce seasonality and increase visitation when Oakville needs it most. We will also work to ensure that there are a variety of experiences at different price points to align with the needs of target markets. At the same time, we know that inviting residents to participate in local experiences builds ambassadorship and can help businesses make ends meet in the low seasons while increasing satisfaction in our visiting friends & relatives markets. Marketing these experiences will be a top priority for us, along with exploring cross-promotion opportunities.

2.3 Continue and expand themed itinerary development based on target visitors.

Visit Oakville will continue and expand the development of themed itineraries, including developing at least one itinerary for each target market. When the destination narrative is established, it will be woven into the itineraries; however, these itineraries are also an opportunity to promote niche aspects of Oakville’s offerings and the stories associated with these. Opportunities to use technology to improve the visitor experience of the itineraries will be explored.

Pillar 3 Tourism Advocacy Strategic Initiatives

3.1 Continue to build relationships with tourism partners.

In alignment with Visit Oakville’s, 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, we will continue to build and grow our relationships and collaborations with local business owners, event organizers, BIAs, resident associations, the Town of Oakville, and other current and potential partner organizations. Through this process we will advocate for the actions we know will make Oakville a better place to live and visit. We are committed to developing meaningful relationships with diverse tourism partners, including Indigenous tourism organizations.

Related VEAS Recommendation:

16. Consider launching a resident engagement and awareness campaign, building from the Talk of the Town, Tourism Excellence Awards, and Taste of Oakville initiatives.

3.2 Grow awareness about Visit Oakville and Visit Oakville's work.

We will regularly share news and updates of Visit Oakville’s successes, challenges, and projects with the Town of Oakville, Council, and Halton Region. We will host “Tourism Talks” to highlight Oakville’s local visitor assets as well as education and training opportunities for partners about tourism as a force for good, highlighting the ways tourism contributes to Oakville as a community.

3.3 Support sustainable tourism development in Oakville.

As a voice for the tourism industry in Oakville, we recognize the role Visit Oakville must play to set an agenda for sustainable tourism. For example, we acknowledge that tourism has contributed to the climate crisis and we are committed to working with our partners to advocate for sustainable tourism development, including by sharing resources, information, and training opportunities with Oakville’s tourism businesses to inspire positive action. Moreover, we know that to be a welcoming community for all, our destination partners must be equipped with the tools to make this happen. We are committed to connecting our partners with the necessary resources and tools.

Related VEAS Recommendation:

5. Advocate for better transit options between the Oakville GO/Bronte GO stations and downtown, (e.g., bike rentals between BIAs; branded electric vehicles; share tourism perspective in conversation around major GO Train development.)

Related VEAS Recommendation:

6. Share information and resources that increase business capacity around diversity, equity, and inclusion. (e.g., business training resources, etc.)



Cross-pillar Strategic Initiative (The Visitor Experience x Tourism Advocacy)

4.1 Develop a capital investment strategy that identifies and supports the common needs of residents and visitors.

We understand that the needs of residents and visitors often align. What makes Oakville a great place to visit also makes it a great place to live. We will work with our partners to develop a capital investment strategy that identifies the common needs of residents and visitors so that we can drive investment where it will have the greatest impact.

Related VEAS Recommendation:

3. Advocate to have essential facilities available year-round. (e.g.: plowing sidewalks in winter, keeping bathrooms open in the winter, bike sharing, wayfinding, etc.)



Strategic Plan Summary Chart

| Pillar 1: STORYTELLING | | Pillar 2: THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE | | Pillar 3: TOURISM ADVOCACY | |
|---|--|---|---|--|--|
| Strategic Initiatives | Metrics | Strategic Initiatives | Metrics | Strategic Initiatives | Metrics |
| 1.1 Work with stakeholders to develop destination narrative. (Y1) | Robust engagement process complete Destination narrative established | 2.1 Implement visitor experience assessment strategy recommendations (Y1, Y2, Y3) | Recos prioritized across timeline # of recos implemented | 3.1 Continue to build relationships with tourism partners. (Y1, Y2, Y3) | # of new tourism partnerships developed |
| 1.2 Develop marketing and media relations plan for year 1. (Y1) | Y1 marketing and media relations plan in place and being implemented | 2.2 Support development of bookable experiences based on the destination narrative. (Y2, Y3) | # and diversity of bookable experiences developed and in the market | 3.2 Increasing awareness about VO and VO's work (Y1, Y2, Y3) | Awareness level across time and audiences # of press releases out about VO's work # of presentations to council, Town, Halton Region |
| 1.3 Develop marketing and media relations plan for years 2-3. (Y2) | Y2-3 marketing and media relations plan in place and being implemented | 2.3 Continue and expand themed itinerary development based on target markets. (Y1, Y2, Y3) | At least one itinerary developed per target market. % increase in target markets using yearly PRIZM assessment | 3.3 Support sustainable tourism development in Oakville. (Y1, Y2, Y3) | Stakeholder-backed tourism value statements developed #of learning opps for businesses on sustainable tourism practices |
| 1.4 Engage stakeholders and partners to amplify destination narrative online and in-person. (Y2, Y3) | # of socializations undertaken (e.g., workshops, etc.) Creation of how-to kit for business Resident/visitor awareness of destination narrative (in Y3) | | | | |
| | | Cross-pillar Strategic Initiatives (The Visitor Experience x Tourism Advocacy) | | | |
| | | Strategic Initiative | | Metrics | |
| | | 4.1 Develop a capital investment strategy that identifies and supports the common needs of residents and visitors. (Y2) | | Capital investment strategy created | |



Actioning the Plan

With a refreshed strategic plan to guide our work across the next three years (2023-2026) and building off the successes of the past three years, the future of tourism in Oakville is bright. We know that by advocating for the type of tourism we want to see, committing to improving the visitor experience, and sharing inspiring stories about Oakville, we can make Oakville a better place to live, work, and visit.

We have a strong understanding of the threads that are woven through all our work, the pillars that support this strategic plan, and the strategic initiatives that will bring it to life across a three-year timeline. Next steps will be to undertake action planning, so that we have a clear path forward each step of the way.

We also understand that collaboration will be essential to Visit Oakville's success in the next three years. Strong relationships with our partners will mean that efforts are not duplicated across organizations and that we can all put our efforts into impactful work.

