

# **Eastern Ontario Rail Trail Loop Community Engagement Plan Recommendations**

*Broadening support for the Loop and raising awareness as to how communities can better connect to it and provide needed trail user services*

May 13, 2025

## Introduction

**“Engagement is fundamental to trail network planning...occurring at every stage of the project to build the internal cohesion, political will and public enthusiasm needed to develop trail networks, activate them and realize their potential as hubs of thriving communities.”** – Rails to Trails Conservancy’s TrailNation Playbook

When complete, the Eastern Ontario Rail Trail Loop (the Loop) will be a 360-kilometer circular route along trails that connects portions of the Cataraqui Trail, the K & P Trail, and the Ottawa Valley Recreational Trail (OVRT) and will travel through the counties of Frontenac, Lanark and Renfrew, as well as the towns of Smiths Falls, Carleton Place and the Township of Rideau Lakes. the Loop traverses through portions of the Canadian Shield, Frontenac Biosphere Reserve, rolling farmland, and forested areas of Eastern Ontario.

This recommended community engagement plan, prepared by Cycle Forward, is intended to support project partners as they work to complete a **market ready trail system by 2030**. With a well-planned and executed engagement strategy, the partners can engage and involve a broad cross-section of the region in supporting the Loop. The main objective is to broaden support for the trail system itself. If regional residents and decision makers can get behind the notion of a connected, market ready trail, they will also support finding ways to improve trail-to-town connections, addressing market gaps, and fostering a trail-friendly culture.

## Approach

This engagement plan has been crafted based on the following beliefs and assumptions:

- The partners envision the Loop as an economic development opportunity for Eastern Ontario, a chance to reinvest in the region through outdoor recreation and trail-based tourism. The overarching goal is to gain Loop project supporters so that the partners can successfully complete a market ready trail system **with robust community support** by 2030.
- While a successful marketing plan in the case of the Loop will specifically target cyclists, winning trail supporters and becoming a more trail-friendly region requires engaging **all segments** of the regional community.
- Any trail tourism efforts will be approached from a civic tourism or community-centered tourism perspective. As the Ontario’s Highlands Tourism Organization (OHTO) thinks of it: “tourism is community, and community is tourism.” Essentially, investing in community (and trail) improvements results in communities worth visiting.
- This plan aligns with the approaches recommended in Rails to Trails Conservancy’s [TrailNation Playbook](#). The Playbook’s “Engagement” section<sup>1</sup> can be reviewed for additional guidance on community engagement.
- Marketing, branding, and communications are not substitutes for community engagement. Rather, engagement ought to be part of a larger communications plan. More information on the distinctions between engagement, communication, and marketing is contained in Appendix A, along with information on OHTO’s approach to Stakeholder Engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Authored by Cycle Forward

- The primary audience is comprised of regional residents, regardless of their roles within the community. A secondary audience includes cyclists from throughout Ontario and potentially as far as neighbouring Quebec, New York, and Vermont.
- A formal “Trail Town” initiative is not being implemented at this time, though the work being done is consistent with the Trail Town/trail-friendly approach and is in alignment with Ontario By Bike™ Network’s Bicycle Friendly program.

## Leadership and Collaboration

The beauty of a strong collaborative effort is in the sharing: of lessons learned, of resources, of ideas, and a vision. The success of this engagement plan – and of the Loop – relies upon leadership and collaboration within the partnership. OHTO currently serves as the partnership’s coordinating entity, leads associated marketing efforts, and is responsible for convening the partners to execute and evaluate the plan. As with any strong partnership, however, the project partners must contribute in a substantial manner, taking on leadership roles within their jurisdictions, hold themselves accountable, and coordinate with one another.

## Why Engage?

Engaging the broader community makes the vision of few the vision of many. Engaging the identified audiences results in others **becoming aware, feeling inspired, and taking action** – ultimately, sharing in the success of the Loop.

## Engagement Continuum

As mentioned, engagement should involve a broad cross-section of the region in supporting the Loop. People become engaged in different ways, sometimes with that engagement deepening.



## Benefits of a Completed Loop

The Trail Tourism Assessment, completed in February 2025, speaks to the values and benefits of trails, identifying benefits such as tourism, economic development, health improvements, conservation, and more. The Assessment should be consulted as the partnership plans to convey how the Loop brings value to the region. The economic viability of a market ready trail system certainly is a noteworthy “hook” and one that will be important to emphasize, but a multitude of benefits can be showcased to help reach those who are not motivated by the trail’s tourism prospects. Underscoring benefits beyond tourism also lays the groundwork for a trail-appreciative culture that is not overly reliant on visitation.

Among the “Additional Benefits” noted in the assessment are “improved community aesthetics and atmosphere” and “a strong sense of community and pride.” These are important benefits to emphasize as part of a community engagement plan. Consider this outreach an opportunity to do your very best community engagement work, not only bringing your citizenry along for the “ride,” but putting them in the driver’s seat in envisioning thriving, aesthetically pleasing, deep rooted places. It so happens that these places are linked by a signature trail Loop in the making.

It is important that the partners recognize that it doesn’t matter why regional residents and decision makers find value in the Loop. **Whatever their “why,” a trail-supportive community will help to advance the vision of a market ready trail system.**

## About “Trail Town” and Trail-Friendly Approaches

The partners are aware of the “Trail Town” approach to community development, which typically positions trail-adjacent communities to improve trail-to-town connections, address infrastructure and business needs, and generally cultivate a trail-supportive culture. There are more than two dozen multi-community Trail Town initiatives throughout the U.S. and Canada (Canada’s program being in Ontario: Trent-Severn Trail Towns). An organized Trail Town initiative certainly is a possibility for the Loop and will further bolster support, though **immediate engagement efforts are intended to build support for the trail system, not a program to occur along it.**

In the meantime, the partners in their engagement work can address ways for the communities to invest in trail-related infrastructure and begin addressing needed services. Trail-friendly, bicycle-friendly, and trail-oriented programs and investments can be enacted immediately. “Because the partners have identified cyclists as the Loop’s primary market, this plan includes the partners’ collaboration with the Ontario By Bike™ Network to leverage resources and support the engagement of primary audiences, specifically the business community and cyclists.

## Audiences

### Primary Audiences

*Elected Officials:* Includes elected officials in upper and lower tier municipal governments, who are primarily responsible for making local land use decisions. Their support for trail development, trail improvements, and related infrastructure connections into communities is essential to developing a market-ready trail system.

*Municipal Staff:* Includes staff who are responsible for managing and promoting their community's trails and interface directly with local elected officials and the general public.

*Business Community:* Includes business owners, managers, and employees who are positioned to make or advocate for bicycle-friendly products and services. Members of the business community can also advocate for the Loop and speak to their council members concerning the value of trails. This audience does not need to be limited to traditional tourism operators.

*Regional Cyclists and Trail Users:* Includes existing cyclists who live in the region and can provide firsthand testimonials regarding the possibilities associated with a connected regional trail system. In addition to cyclists, local walkers, runners, and other trail users can provide support and a sense of enthusiasm for the Loop. This audience can engage their friends, neighbours, and elected officials in supporting trail improvements simply because quality trails improve quality of life.

## **Secondary Audiences**

*Regional Residents:* Includes everyone. Broad-based grassroots engagement “leaves no stone unturned.” An aspired signature trail should be an integral part of the area that's commonly understood to be an asset and contributes to regional sense of place. Finding ways to engage the citizenry will make it more likely that people will use, appreciate, and support the Loop and its users over time.

*Schools, Hospitals, and Not-for-Profit Partners:* Includes any number of community organizations that recognize trails as assets and important social/community spaces. The potential for engaging with these community partners speaks to the many benefits of trails beyond economics and visitation. These audiences can be engaged early in the process as well as later after the Loop is fully established and marketed (at which point there will be more possibilities for them to use the trails and become involved in trail-related projects).

*Out-of-Region Cyclists:* Includes those beyond the immediate region who are already visiting trail segments and can provide testimonials that lend credibility to the vision for a connected trail system. They can demonstrate demand, humanize the audience, and give a glimpse into the visiting cyclist market. In addition to potentially engaging this audience, over time they will become part of the target market.

Other audiences to keep in mind:

- Area and provincial trail organizations
- Funders
- Provincial government/agencies/elected officials

## Incentives

With any audience, it is important to consider their needs and motivations and how to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome. Incentivizing their involvement is one possible way to increase support. In the nearby Kawarthas Northumberland region, for example, Regional Tourism Organization 8 closed a 2016 regional Trail Town workshop by announcing a related small grant program. The “community incentive award” incentivized community driven initiatives that would help further the regional tourism goals. Similar tactics have been used locally. In fact, when communities here are asked to collaborate, host meetings, and the like, there may even be some level of expectation that they will benefit from their involvement. Microgrants and other incentives might be considered as part of many of the engagement tactics outlined in this plan.

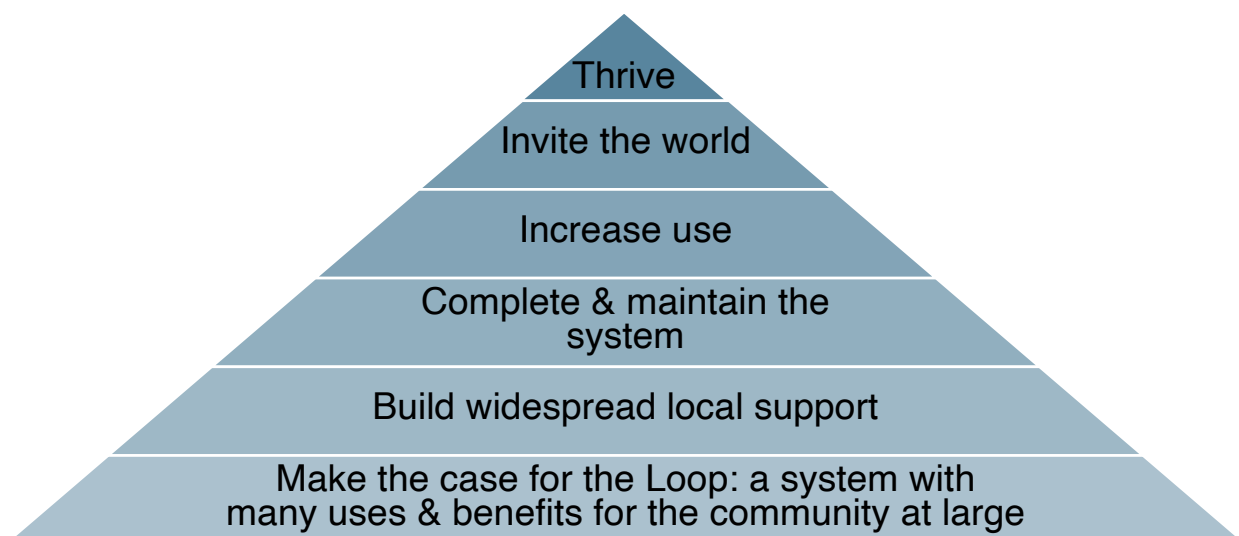
## Timeline

This recommended course of action includes items that begin in May 2025 and extend through to the end of the year, though many of the engagement tactics may continue into future years. Quality community engagement does not have an end date. Engagement efforts should continue at least until the 2030 goal is achieved, and likely on an ongoing basis.

## Engagement Strategies

The following community engagement recommendations are based upon the recognition that a broad base of regional supporters will position the partners to ultimately achieve their goals related to tourism and community development. The desired end state is attracting a visitor audience that contributes to the regional economy, while area residents use, support, and celebrate the Loop for their own reasons.

Like building blocks or the levels of a pyramid, the engagement plan and corresponding efforts are completed step by step with thriving communities as the end goal.



## Engagement Tactics

The following recommendations and timeframes are recommendations that the project partners may adjust as needed.

*\*Indicates tactics that represent key milestones.*

Engagement	Audiences	Priority Level	Responsible Entities	Desired Outcome
<b>First 1-3 Months</b>				
<b>Host Webinar.*</b> Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization (OHTO) will host a "The Trail Town Advantage" webinar as part of its "Expand Your Knowledge" program. This regional level engagement affords a way for OHTO and the project partners to initiate conversation around Trail Towns and the value of trails to the region's rural communities. The webinar will allow time to share the group's vision of the Loop as a signature rail trail experience and its anticipated impact on the region.	Project partners  Business community  Elected officials  Municipal staff	2	OHTO, County of Frontenac	Business and municipal leaders are more informed about the Loop and trail-friendly approaches.
<b>Engage with Elected Officials at Council, Committee, and Board Meetings.</b> Local elected officials make land use and other decisions that influence trail investments. Whether material or symbolic, their decisions are critical to the success of the Loop. Project partners will play a key role in gaining an early understanding of their councils' positions on the project as well as their wishes concerning priorities, timing, and public announcements.	Elected officials	1	Partners	Local elected officials express support for the Loop and (ultimately) illustrate their support with decisions and policies that help advance the project.

4-6 Months				
<p><b>Develop Program Materials.*</b> Develop materials that position partners to be consistent in their messaging: talking points, a one-pager, a slide deck, and a website landing page. Branded materials can follow as the idea begins to take hold. These materials are frequently requested in other trail coalitions that rely upon partners to advocate for the network.</p>	<p>All, but primarily:</p> <p>Funders</p> <p>Business community</p> <p>Elected officials</p>	<p>1</p>	<p>All partners, OHTO as lead</p>	<p>Informative and compelling branded materials are available for communications to the named audiences and help impact their decisions to support the Loop.</p>
<p><b>Collaborate with Ontario By Bike™ Network to host educational workshops for area businesses.*</b> The workshops should convey market data from their annual cycle tourism report and share information on how businesses can join the Ontario By Bike™ Network. The certification program includes 1,689 businesses, including about 30 that are in communities along the Loop (see the Trail Towns section of the Assessment report). Include in the workshop education on the types of cycling (rail-trail, mountain biking, gravel, bikepacking) being that at least the Cataraqui Trail is currently better suited for gravel and mountain bikes.</p> <p>This can also be presented as a single regional workshop if that is what resources can support.</p>	<p>Business community</p>	<p>1</p>	<p>Partners in collaboration with Ontario By Bike™ Network and with marketing support from OHTO</p>	<p>Through the workshop(s), the business community is more knowledgeable about the cycling market and takes steps to accommodate and attract the market.</p> <p>Businesses join the Ontario By Bike™ Network.</p>



<p><b>Kitchen Table Talks.</b> Whether across a kitchen table, in a local coffee shop, or while walking along the trail, the partners should develop a grassroots strategy that involves broadening the support base one person and conversation at a time. Build community teams who can coordinate outreach and help build support. Invite people to upcoming community engagement events.</p> <p>If viewing the TrailNation Playbook, the Dick Bias story provides a helpful early example from a time that rail-trails were not well understood or appreciated. Tempting to bypass, this strategy can help build an impressive support base.</p>	<p>All, but primarily:</p> <p>Individual local leaders and thought leaders</p> <p>Schools, hospitals, and not-for-profit partners</p> <p>Regional residents</p> <p>Regional cyclists and trail users</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>All partners</p>	<p>Community teams are established to take part in a grassroots campaign which results in a broad base of support across multiple sectors and all walks of life.</p> <p>Communities are truly enthused by the Loop and drawing benefit from it.</p>
<p><b>Bring Trail Users on as Advocates.</b> In 2020, Rails to Trails Conservancy launched its <a href="#">Trail Moments</a> campaign to begin collecting stories from trail users. The aim was to share stories about how trails make a difference in people's lives. There are other campaigns, but this one provides many great examples. Tie into the ongoing #trailmoments campaign or create something similar. Rely upon OHTO's marketing abilities and established audience with this effort.</p> <p>Similarly, trail use contests like "<a href="#">Get Your Tail on the Trail</a>" and the "<a href="#">Mammoth Trail Challenge</a>" incentivize increased trail use and create a sense of comradery among trail users. The Mammoth challenge occurs in the Fall shoulder season to inject some enthusiasm and economic activity along the trail. This could be a good approach regionally, or the campaign could be held until Spring 2026. While visiting cyclists are a target demographic, campaigns like these should invite participation among all sorts of local users (walkers, hikers, cyclists, etc.).</p>	<p>Regional residents</p> <p>Regional cyclists and trail users</p> <p>Schools, hospitals, and not-for-profit partners</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>All partners, OHTO as lead</p>	<p>A regionally appropriate campaign engages trail users to increase trail use and share their stories, further enthusing local communities about the Loop and the trails it connects.</p>

7-9 Months				
<p><b>Host Community Engagement Sessions.*</b> Per the partnership MOU, each partner will host a community engagement session to raise awareness, solicit input, and broaden the support base.</p> <p>When possible, the partners will include specific elements for which they are seeking input, a call to action, and information about the next steps. The sessions will be coordinated by the partners and facilitated by a local vendor that specializes in community engagement.</p> <p>Partners may coordinate to achieve efficiencies in vendor management, communications, outreach, and so forth. Partners may choose to host sessions virtually or in person (recommended) and can tailor their sessions based on local needs, resources, and current state of readiness.</p>	<p>All, but primarily:</p> <p>Trail organizations</p> <p>Regional cyclists and trail users</p> <p>Business community</p> <p>Elected officials and municipal staff</p>	1	<p>Renfrew County, Frontenac County, Lanark County, the Township of Rideau Lakes, and the Town of Smiths Falls</p>	<p>Five community engagement sessions that result in increased awareness as well as valuable input provided to the partners.</p>
<p><b>Secure Local Media Features.</b> Secure local and regional media features (print, digital, TV, radio) so that you can tell the story of the Loop and all the progress that is being made. If pitching regional outlets, emphasize visitor-ready trail experiences within the system.</p> <p>Invite media to cover the community engagement sessions</p>	<p>Regional residents</p> <p>Regional cyclists and trail users</p> <p>Elected officials</p> <p>Business community</p>	2	<p>OHTO with support from local partners (for local media outreach)</p>	<p>Positive local and regional media features further assist in broadening the support base and help promote the engagement sessions.</p>

<p><b>Launch Marketing Campaign.</b> In tandem with the media relations efforts, design an ad campaign aimed at local and regional audiences (and neighbouring regions). This campaign should create a sense of enthusiasm among local and regional residents while enticing cyclists within a 2–3-hour range to come experience portions of the Loop. For the locals, include a storytelling component (link back to the #trailmoments suggestion) that shows the potential of the Loop and how the trails already enhance the quality of life and the regional economy.</p>	<p>Regional residents</p> <p>Regional cyclists and trail users</p> <p>Elected officials</p> <p>Business community</p> <p>Out-of-region cyclists</p>	2	<p>OHTO with support from local partners (to identify stories)</p>	<p>Increased trail use and inquiries among cyclists within a 2–3-hour radius as well as awareness on the part of elected officials and business owners regarding increased use.</p>
<p><b>Lay the groundwork for a business network or affinity group specific to the Loop.</b> With a trail system that will ultimately be 360km, it is important that businesses are aware of other business services throughout the system. Ask a chamber of commerce or Main Street partner to organize or a couple of business leaders that are bicycle-friendly certified.</p>	<p>Business community</p>	3	<p>Business community with the partners' prompting and encouragement</p>	<p>A multi-community business network is established or preliminary conversations that ultimately result in a network take place.</p>
<b>10-18 Months</b>				
<p><b>Lead Creative and Tactical Placemaking Projects.*</b> Collaborate with community partners to take on creative and tactical placemaking projects (including some that are temporary in nature) to demonstrate success and progress related to trails. There are many ways to better connect to and celebrate regional trails.</p> <p>The idea here is to show that something is happening and that community and trail spaces are not static. Use the assessment document to find affordable opportunities. Visible success yields more community support.</p>	<p>All</p>	1	<p>Partners and their community partners</p>	<p>Improvement projects are completed in each community that tie back to needs identified in the assessment document. The projects <i>may</i> be funded, in part, through small grants that are announced during the community engagement sessions.</p>

<p><b>Host (and Encourage) Events &amp; Programs.*</b> A great way of winning trail supporters is to ACTIVATE trails with events and programs. The more people who are compelled to use the trails that make up the Loop, the more people who will eventually support the overall vision. Partner with local trail groups, parks and recreation departments, and others to host programs on the trails.</p> <p>In addition to the more easily executable programs (such as “walk with a doc,” weekly walking and biking groups, yoga on the trail, geocaching and scavenger hunt programs, etc.), consider special events that can be held on or along the trails. It helps to “meet people where they are,” and go beyond the typical 5K or fundraising bike ride. Inclusive engagement sometimes necessitates getting creative, like a “Howl at the Moon” 5K, a “haunted trails” event with ghost stories, a <a href="#">winter carnival</a> (NB), or other themed and original events.<sup>2</sup> Use the community engagement events as opportunities to crowd source ideas.</p>	<p>Regional residents</p> <p>Regional cyclists and trail users</p> <p>Schools, hospitals, and not-for-profit partners</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Partners and their municipal colleagues and community partners</p>	<p>Each partner plans and hosts events and programs to activate their section of trail.</p>
<p><b>Ontario by Bike™ Network Trips.</b> Continue to coordinate with Ontario By Bike™ Network. Their organized trips are already successfully bringing satisfied cyclists into the area to bike parts of the Loop. Consider finding ways to make a bigger splash with these rides, having local communities host the groups and offer a special welcome (like communities do with organized road and gravel cycling events, on a smaller scale).</p>	<p>Cyclists</p> <p>Trail organizations</p> <p>Municipalities</p> <p>Business community</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Partners and their municipal colleagues</p>	<p>Ontario By Bike hosts additional cycling trips in partnership with local communities and project partners.</p>

<sup>2</sup> A David Bowie-themed “Rebel Rebel Float Trip” Cycle Forward hosted in 2017 introduced a new audience to the Monongahela River. Most participants had not paddled the river before the event. It was the theme – not the float trip – that brought new people to the event.

<b>Appeal to cyclists as advocates.</b> Engaging visiting trail users can serve the dual purpose of having them feel a sense of connection to the area (and educating them on future ride opportunities) and collecting information that will help to make the case locally. Their testimonials, experiences, and interactions with locals can open hearts and minds to the awesome potential of the Loop. Collect stories from cyclists throughout the region. Collect their #trailmoments, have them share their experiences along the Loop, get to know them (their needs, their spending habits, their impressions of the area), and invite them to support the Loop effort.	Regional cyclists	1	Partners	More local and regional cyclists are advocates for the Loop, influencing their friends and neighbours' perspectives on the trail system.
<b>Influencer Trips &amp; Features.</b> Work to find influencers who may ride and post about portions of the Loop.	Out of region cyclists / influencers	3	OHTO	Influencers visit and post about the Loop and increase visitation results.

## Engagement Over Time

Community engagement is an ongoing process and is needed to continue support for even mature trail systems and networks. A market-ready or export-ready trail system needs this form of ongoing engagement to ensure that communities continue to invest in trails, provide trail-related services, and foster a trail-appreciative culture that will be felt by locals and visitors alike.

## Resources

- Rails to Trails Conservancy's [TrailNation Playbook](#) is a toolkit for those who manage multi-trail, multi-partner trail systems. It provides strategies for building and maintaining trail networks. In addition to the engagement section, the playbook provides helpful information pertaining to developing a project vision, coalition building, gap-filling strategies, mapping and analytics, and investment strategies.
- Pennsylvania Environmental Council's [Inclusionary Trail Planning Toolkit](#) is a guide to planning and programming equitable trail networks. It includes background information on inclusionary planning, case studies, and a number of planning tools. While not tourism focused, this guide likely includes some information that will help the project partners to engage in an inclusive manner.

## Appendix A:

### Expanding Upon Communication, Marketing, and Engagement

#### Definitions (courtesy Dragonfly Communications):

##### Engagement

Engagement's purpose is to generate buy-in to the concept and project and to ensure their participation in it. The audiences are also different, although there is some overlap in terms of targeting trail users.

##### Marketing

The purpose of marketing is to get a desired output (the call to action) from audiences. This can apply to engagement as well if the desired output is to get them to use the trail, be an ambassador for the trail, give money to the trail etc.

##### Communication

The purpose of communication is to effectively distribute a desired message to audiences. There is typically some overlap between communication, engagement and marketing.

### OHTO's Industry Engagement & Communication Strategy

Engaging with members, prospective members, and industry partners is essential to fostering a cohesive regional identity in Ontario's Highlands and ensuring that all tourism stakeholders are aligned and collaborating with OHTO toward a shared vision.

#### Stakeholder Engagement Process

The stakeholder engagement process utilized by OHTO recognizes the following principles:

- That ***the goals of stakeholders*** are important to consider for destination development
- That ***communicating the value of tourism*** is necessary to gain buy-in from stakeholders
- That a ***shared understanding of the destination's tourism brand*** and values is important to focus the collective efforts of stakeholders on a desired path
- That clearly outlining the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders is important to ***gain an understanding of expectations***, from the regional tourism organization down to the operator
- That successfully ***relaying communication and decision-making rationale*** is important for stakeholders' decision to commit to their role in destination development

Expected results from expanding and enhancing stakeholder engagement in the region are:

- An engaged stakeholder audience that actively participates in programming and opportunities
- A region infused with community pride that celebrates each other's successes
- A region filled with robust, diverse, and relevant tourism offerings
- A growing membership base with OHTO and an increased level of pride for membership
- A strong network of lasting relationships between OHTO and stakeholders

The success of the engagement process relies heavily on a solid communication system that will relay information on OHTO's brand, destination development strategy, and skills transferral to tourism stakeholders.

### **OHTO's Industry Engagement & Communication Strategy aims to:**

1. **Celebrate + Inspire** – Leverage a transparent communication platform that identifies and quantifies OHTO's industry success stories through visual and written storytelling; distribute inspiring examples of the results that are possible from partnerships with OHTO and utilizing the tools and resources.
2. **Build Engagement** - Build an industry engagement digital environment that allows OHTO to regularly inform, educate and support its stakeholders with responsible tourism resources and opportunities; enhance the perceived value of what OHTO has to offer.
3. **Build Capacity** - Build and support a regional tourism community; increase knowledge and skills within the industry to increase and improve tourism offerings and adoption of responsible practices in tourism development.
4. **Enhance Feedback** - Continuously measure and analyze results of engagement to ensure OHTO is on track and meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders; strengthen OHTO's ability to gather stakeholder feedback.

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