



## **Southwold Economic Development Committee**

# **Agenda**

**Thursday, February 5, 2026 at 8:00 am**  
**Township Council Chambers – Municipal Office Fingal**

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1. Call to Order
2. Approval of the Agenda
3. Disclosure of Pecuniary Interests
4. Approval of the November 6, 2025 Minutes
5. Economic Development Plan Update
  - a. 2020 Community Economic Development Plan (for reference)
  - b. Ministry of Rural Affairs re: ROD Program
  - c. Draft Timeline/Workplan
  - d. Recommendations:
    - To Council for Southwold EDC to engage a consultant and oversee all aspects of the project
    - Direct staff to prepare an RFP for consulting services
6. Elgin County Economic Development and Tourism Update
  - a. Economic Development and Tourism Plan
  - b. 2026 Performance Plan – Economic Development and Tourism
7. Development and Infrastructure Updates:
  - a. Fingal Reconstruction
  - b. Shedden/Fingal Sanitary Servicing
  - c. WWTP Updates for Shedden & Talbotville
  - d. Parks and Trails Master Plan Project Update

8. New and Other Business
9. Next meeting date, time and location – Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup> based on draft Economic Development Timeline?
10. Adjourn



## **Southwold Economic Development Committee**

### **Meeting Minutes**

**Thursday, November 6, 2025 at 8:00 am  
Council Chambers/Webex Meeting**

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Present: Deputy Mayor Justin Pennings  
Councillor John Adzija  
Steve Bushell  
Barry Harrison

Regrets: Michelle Hoffsuemmer

Staff/Resource: Aaron VanOorspronk, Director of Infrastructure and Development  
Jeff Carswell, CAO/Clerk  
Carolyn Krahm, Manager of Economic Development  
& Strategic Initiatives  
Tanya Wilson, Elgin Business Resource Centre

Guests: Scott Young  
Tanya Buttinger  
Stuart Lackey

#### **1. Call to Order**

Deputy Mayor Pennings called the meeting to order at 8:05 am.

Since several potential committee members were in attendance as guests, committee members, staff and the guests introduced themselves.

#### **2. Approval of Agenda**

The Committee approved the agenda for the November 6, 2025 meeting.

### **3. Approval of the October 9, 2025 Minutes**

The Committee approved the minutes as drafted from the October 9, 2025 meeting.

### **4. Development and Infrastructure Updates**

Director of Infrastructure and Development Services, Aaron VanOorspronk reported on the following matters:

- a. Fingal Reconstruction – Construction start is anticipated for November 16<sup>th</sup>. Aaron reviewed the potential timing and encouraged people to sign up for updates on the project to stay informed on road closures and local impacts. Additional consultation with the farming community will be taking place to review possible impacts on larger equipment on Fingal Line in particular.
- b. Shedden/Fingal Sanitary Servicing – The Shedden Union Road project is nearing completion. The contractor is completing work to remedy any infiltration and complete commissioning of the sewer. The road will remain as base asphalt over the winter. The contract awards for the Fingal Pumping Station and the Fingal Reconstruction Project with the County were awarded at the September 22<sup>nd</sup> Council meeting. Construction schedules and required detours are being developed and will be communicated shortly.
- c. WWTP Updates for Shedden & Talbotville – The Shedden WWTP contract has been awarded, with construction to start in the fall.
- d. Parks and Trails Master Plan Project – Staff are compiling input from Council on the draft plan. Once incorporated by the consultant the plan will be circulated to committees and the public for additional input, prior to finalization by Council.

### **5. Elgin County Economic Development Update**

Carolyn Krahm, Manager of Economic Development & Strategic Initiatives, provided updates on the following matters:

- Reviewed the Fall 2025 Economic Update
- Highlighted nominations for the St. Thomas & District Chamber of Commerce Impact Awards are being accepted until November 16, 2025
- Reviewed the Fall 2025 Tourism Update
- Encouraged members to share information about the 2026 Southern Ontario Tourism Conference with tourism-related businesses in the community

## **6. Feedback on Elgincentives Community Improvement Plan Review and Update**

Carolyn Krahn provided an update on the Elgincentives review. Members were encouraged to review the information and complete the questionnaire. The County and local municipalities are working to implement the updates in early 2026. It is anticipated that the first intake under the updated CIP will be in spring 2026.

## **7. Feedback on October 15 Cultivating Success: The Fall 2025 Elgin County Business Networking Event**

Committee members provided positive feedback on the Business Networking Event. Steve Bushell advised the sub-committee is planning two events in 2026 (spring/fall). He also advised that one more representative from Southwold to sit on the planning sub-committee would be helpful. Dutton-Dunwich and West Elgin each have two members, and additional representation would be helpful.

## **8. New and Other Business**

Committee members made several inquiries:

- Water Hauling to Oneida Reserve – the contractor was originally hauling from a hydrant, but has been setup on the bulk water station
- DHP Subdivision, Shedden – Aaron provided updates on activity and status of the development
- Questions regarding planned designed for the Highway 4/Longhurst/Clinton Line area – staff will investigate what information the Township has for the intersection design
- Township Industrial Lands – the lands remain designated for industrial development and continue to promote – The County will be completing an RFP for an Employment Lands/Industrial Attraction project which would include the Township industrial lands

## **9. Next Meeting date, time and location**

The next meeting was scheduled for December 4, 2025 at 8:00 am.

## **10. Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 8:58 am.

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Chairperson, Justin Pennings

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Staff Resource, Jeff Carswell



TOWNSHIP OF  
**Southwold**



## Southwold Township Community Economic Development Plan

Mellor Murray Consulting  
June, 2020





**Recommended by the Southwold Economic Development Committee on June 16, 2020  
Adopted by Township of Southwold Council on June 22, 2020**

June 2020

## **Southwold Township Community Development Plan**

### **Project Management**

Alan Smith, Elgin County

### **Southwold Township Economic Development Committee**

Councillor Peter North, Chair

Councillor Justin Pennings

Steve Bushell

James Carder

Barry Harrison

### **Southwold Township Support Staff**

Ken Loveland, CAO

Jeff Carswell, Treasurer

Mark Maseo

Jessica Silcox

### **Consultant**

Aileen Murray, Mellor Murray Consulting



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## Introduction

The Southwold Township Community Economic Development Plan was created in collaboration with the Southwold Economic Development Committee, Southwold Township and Elgin County. This plan is intended to coordinate the efforts of volunteers, business and community leaders, municipal staff and other stakeholders committed to building the local economy.

This plan was assembled in several stages. Phase One included a resident survey and market threshold analysis conducted in 2017. Southwold Council held an economic development workshop to provide direction for the plan in June 2019. In July 2019, residents, community leaders and business representatives participated in a community workshop to provide their insights on the priorities and opportunities for Southwold's economic development plan. The Southwold economic development committee provided input throughout the development of this plan. Their direction and insights have been incorporated throughout.





## About Southwold Township

Southwold Township is a community of approximately 4,421<sup>1</sup> residents with urban centres in Shedden, Fingal and Talbotville. The Township is located in the centre of Elgin County with Lake Erie to the south. Southwold Township is adjacent to two large urban centres. St. Thomas (pop. 38,909<sup>2</sup>) is on the east and London (pop. 383,822<sup>3</sup>) is to the north.



Southwold is a predominantly rural community with a rich agricultural base. Highway 401 crosses the northern edge of the Township.

Community amenities include area fruit orchards, maple syrup bushes and on-farm markets, Southwold Prehistoric Earthworks, Shedden Keystone Complex, Fingal Wildlife Management Area and a summer camp and retreat centre.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada 2016 Census

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid



## Research

The economic and demographic analysis provided some key insights into Southwold Township.

- Southwold's median age is 44.7, slightly older than the provincial average
- Average household income is similar to the provincial average
- Typical annual shelter costs are \$15,700, much lower than Ontario's \$21,000
- Southwold's economy is highly connected with neighbouring municipalities. 90% of the 1,900 jobs are filled by residents from other municipalities. 90% of 1,600 employed Southwold residents commute outside the Township for work.

Market Threshold Analysis identifies gaps in the local economy by comparing the proportion of firms by sector and employment compared to the Ontario average. The Market Threshold Analysis identified opportunities in the retail, finance, insurance, real estate and professional and other services sectors.

### Under-represented Sectors

 <b>Retail</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gasoline Stations</li><li>• Health and personal care</li><li>• Grocery stores</li></ul>	 <b>Finance, Insurance, Real Estate</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vehicle Insurance</li><li>• General financial services</li><li>• Health insurance</li><li>• Life insurance</li></ul>	 <b>Professionals &amp; Other Services</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restaurants</li><li>• Legal fees</li><li>• Health care (eye care, dental health, personal care)</li><li>• Other (funeral, hair grooming)</li></ul>
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## Community Consultation

A survey of 347 Southwold Township residents conducted in 2017 provided insights into their shopping patterns and preferences. They described Southwold Township as friendly and inviting with a strong community base. They said Southwold was quiet, peaceful and a nice place to live. They also referenced the rural countryside and agricultural base.

They expressed a strong desire for additional opportunities for jobs, stores and recreation in Southwold Township. The respondents said they shopped most regularly in St. Thomas followed by London and then Shedden and Talbotville. The most popular response to the types of businesses needed in Southwold included coffee shops, convenience and gas stores, restaurants and grocery stores. Other popular answers included recreation and activities, pharmacies and drug stores and medical services.

The respondents reported that the most popular features in Southwold Township were:

- **Local activities:** recreation opportunities, shopping, rural agriculture and farming,
- **Specific destinations:** Picard's Nuts, Fingal Wildlife Management Centre, Wayside Inn, Whistlestop antique store, Talbotville Berry Farm, Keystone complex
- **Events:** Rhubarb festival, tractor pull and Shedden fair



## Visioning Workshops

The second phase of Southwold's Economic Development Plan began in 2019 with consultation with the Southwold Township Council and a community workshop.

### **Southwold Council**

Southwold Council established the following priorities:

- Ensuring the former Ford Assembly Plan lands have the services required to attract investment
- Creating greater awareness of Southwold Township with branding, logo design and signage,
- Combatting Green Lane Landfill image
- Small business support and education
- Embracing change, innovation and collaboration
- Connecting residents, businesses and stakeholders.

Their vision for Southwold's future include a growing population with new residential development and small businesses with a reduced number of vacant properties, particularly in Fingal and Shedden. They expressed a desire for enhanced infrastructure in the Township's industrial parks, highspeed internet, cycling trails and public transit connections.

Southwold Council wants to collaborate with Elgin County on economic development efforts. Their key economic development priorities are: exploring transit options for residents and establishing an updated brand and logo for Southwold Township.



## Community Workshop

The Economic Development committee hosted a workshop for 15 local residents, businesses, community groups, regional and municipal government representatives in July 2019. The workshop highlights are summarized below:

### Economic Opportunities:

- existing industrial land (especially the former Ford lands).
- Proximity to London and St. Thomas
- Residential growth
- Southwold's lower tax rates
- Eco-agri-tourism

### Barriers to Realizing Southwold's Economic Potential:

- Limited financial resources
- Infrastructure: lack of natural gas, high-speed internet and local service amenities
- Community Vision: competing cultures/growth management

### Key Economic Development Initiatives:

- Marketing and branding plan
- Support for new and existing businesses
- Red tap reduction, supporting new ideas
- Development of industrial lands
- Capitalizing on on-farm services
- Supporting business diversity



Community Workshop July 10, 2019



## Vision and Mission

The vision and mission are the underpinnings of the community economic development plan. The mission is a statement of what the organization does and why. The vision describes the future the organization is working towards.

Southwold Township Council established the following Vision and Mission as part of its Corporate Strategic Plan in 2018.

### **Southwold Township Mission:**

Providing a healthy, safe community to all residents, businesses and visitors by providing services in an economical manner to further growth and prosperity.

### **Southwold Township Vision:**

- A thriving, community-oriented municipality that continues to grow and prosper by enabling and pursuing residential, agricultural and commercial growth opportunities through expansion of key municipal services.
- The sense of community will be strengthened by promoting a wide variety of consumer-friendly services, such as health, culture, connectivity, parks and recreation.
- Council and staff will serve the ratepayers of the community with a caring attitude focused on customer service.



## The Southwold Township Community Economic Development Plan


Southwold Township's Community Economic Development Plan is the culmination of the economic and demographic analysis and community consultation. It builds upon the Southwold Township Strategic Plan and provides focus for the economic development efforts. The vision statement was established by the Southwold Township Economic Development Committee in 2018. It describes the economic future this plan is intended to create for Southwold Township.

### Southwold Township Economic Development Vision (2018)

Southwold Township is a thriving centre of economic opportunity for business and residents and a welcoming destination for visitors.

### Goals and Objectives

Goals are the general intentions and ambitions that the community wants to achieve. Objectives are the precise actions or measurable steps to move closer to the goal. The following goals and objectives will provide the foundation for the economic development strategic actions detailed in the remainder of this report.


		Goal	Objective
	1	<b>Community Engagement</b>	Leverage resident and business volunteer efforts to implement Southwold's economic development plan.
	2	<b>Investment Readiness</b>	Provide the required elements to facilitate investment.
	3	<b>Branding/ Communication</b>	Establish professional branding, marketing tools and messages to share Southwold's value proposition for residents and businesses.
	4	<b>Business Development</b>	Bring increased commercial and community activity to the settlement areas in Fingal and Shedden. Attract and support a diversified business base. Expand Southwold's Tourism product offering.
	5	<b>Enhanced Infrastructure</b>	Support business and residential infrastructure needs.





## Strategic Actions

Strategic actions provide the detailed series of individual tasks required to achieve the goals and objectives outlined in the Southwold Township Community Economic Development Strategic Plan.

	Goal 1	Community Engagement
	<b>Strategic Objective</b>	Leverage resident and business volunteer efforts to implement Southwold's economic development plan

The Community Economic Development Strategic Plan recognizes the critical role of the community in developing and implementing the economic development strategic plan. The Keystone Complex building is an example of what can be achieved in Southwold Township when residents, local business and government work together on a shared vision.

Like the Keystone Complex, the success of this plan is dependent on the ongoing engagement of local community leaders and businesses in partnership with local and regional government. The Economic Development Committee can continue to provide this leadership. Currently the committee membership is low. Additional members are needed to share the load and the responsibility of implementing the plan.

This plan provides a long list of actions that can contribute to the economic vitality of Southwold Township. It will be important to begin with some small, achievable goals to engage and motivate others. In the first year of implementation, the committee should establish two to three priority projects to establish the process and ways that they will work together, learning from their initial successes and challenges. These small steps will help to prepare the community for the larger, more complex initiatives in future years.

Connecting with the existing business members will be a critical first step. The committee should adopt a modified Business Retention and Expansion program using a combination of County and municipal staff, elected officials, economic development committee members and community volunteers to visit the businesses in Southwold.



These visits will serve a number of purposes:

- Creating an updated inventory of all local businesses and services
- Troubleshooting any local issues businesses are facing
- Review of all barriers to current business activity and growth
- Identification of any opportunities to support and grow their businesses
- Facilitate data driven decision making by Council
- Connect local businesses with local resources when and if they need assistance.

Volunteers should be encouraged to mobilize and support local community events such as clean up days in Fingal, Shedden and Talbotville, a community picnic, a night market, and a special seasonal community event for fall harvest or Christmas. These events are intended to reinforce residents' and local businesses' connections to the community while creating an environment that supports further economic activity and investment. Where possible, these events and other community activities should be held in the Main Street areas of Fingal and Shedden in order to animate the area.

The community can start to address the vacant storefronts in Shedden by establishing a pop-up business or shared office space in one of the vacant buildings at Shedden's four corners. This shared or temporary space would provide much needed room to grow for an early-stage business and mutual support and combined services such as internet and office services for a collection of independent business owners.

Southwold Township should build on its strengths as a friendly, neighbourly community by establishing a welcome committee for new residents and businesses. The committee would ensure residents and businesses are familiar with the local businesses, business communities and rich community activities and help them to become active engaged members of their new home.

The community should work with the Elgin Business Resource Centre and the Small Business Enterprise Centre to ensure that small business networking events and business seminars are held in the Township to further connect local businesses while supporting their profitability and growth.

The library is a hub of community activity. The community should ensure that the library has a collection of small business resources (as recommended by the Elgin Business Resource Centre and Small Business Enterprise Centre). The




community should also consider hosting small business seminars and networking events at the library to further reinforce the library's role as a source of small business supports.

### **Community Engagement Actions:**

1. Recruit additional economic development committee members
2. Establish 2 to 3 priority economic development projects per year
3. Develop a Southwold business retention and expansion program
4. Establish a volunteer event committee to host clean up days, a community picnic and/or night market
5. Establish a committee to host a special event
6. Create a welcome committee for new residents and businesses info on local businesses
7. Encourage the hosting of community events in Shedden's four corners.
8. Host Small business networking events
9. Ensure the library has small business resources and workshops
10. Open one of the vacant buildings in Shedden's four corners for pop-up businesses or shared offices.



	Goal 2	Investment Readiness
	<b>Strategic Objective</b>	Provide the required elements to facilitate investment

Investment readiness refers to the community's tools and capacity to address, receive and support business investment. Communities that are investment-ready have the appropriate combination of physical land and buildings, community data, planning policies and procedures, economic development expertise and marketing tools to support business retention, expansion and attraction.

Southwold Township should start by compiling the typical economic development community profile data and ensure it is available on the Southwold Township website and is shared with Elgin County Economic Development.

The community can highlight the key features for business in a one page 'lure brochure' as a tool to initiate discussion with existing and prospective businesses. The brochure will also support the County's investment attraction efforts. A digital version of the brochure is appropriate in most instances.

The Township should be proactive in assembling as much data as possible on the former Ford property. This information should include the property status including when it would be available for purchase and redevelopment, the environmental status and the servicing on-site. The former Ford property information package should also include information on Elgin County's brownfield incentive programs and other relevant programs that could help offset the environmental remediation and infrastructure investment costs on the property.

The Township should also have a database of available industrial and commercial land and buildings in Southwold Township. The inventory should include information on the owner and sales agent, asking price, property specification, servicing, permitted uses and accompanying maps. This information should be available online if possible.

Finally, the community should identify business ambassadors for the community with a proven track record in the community who are prepared to share their experience doing business in Southwold Township. These ambassadors can




provide testimonials for inclusion in the lure brochure and meet with prospective investors if required to address their individual questions.

### **Investment Readiness Actions**

1. Compile economic development data to share on the Southwold website and with Elgin County's Economic Development Department
2. Create a small one-page lure brochure with links to the Southwold and Elgin County economic development website
3. Compile data on the former Ford lands including status, environmental conditions, servicing, brownfield programs and potential funding programs
4. Prepare a database of commercial and industrial land and buildings in Southwold
5. Use local business ambassadors to help make the case for investment.



	Goal 3	Branding/ Marketing
	<b>Strategic Objective</b>	Establish professional branding, marketing tools and messages to share Southwold's value proposition for residents and businesses

Southwold Township's current logo is dated and doesn't reflect the changing economy and future opportunities for investment. The Township should invest in a new logo and branding package to reinforce its progressive vision. The community has many strengths and opportunities that should be highlighted in the economic development data and promotional material. The branding should include key messages targeting new and existing residents and prospective and existing businesses.

Southwold Township's website should be expanded to include more information on the economic development opportunities in the community. The Community Profile data (outlined in goal 2) should be compiled and prominently displayed on the Township website and shared with Elgin County Economic Development and the local business community.

Commercial opportunities are tied to the residential growth anticipated in Southwold Township (especially Talbotville). The website should include information to support resident attraction and integration. Both the industrial/commercial and residential webpages should provide links to the broader data available on the Elgin County website.

The website should include a directory of all Southwold businesses including home-based and small businesses. This directory can be the foundation for a shop local program that encourages residents and local businesses to support Southwold based businesses. The website is also an appropriate platform to profile successful Southwold Township businesses. The community can further support the local business base by celebrating a local business leader of the year.



## **Branding/ Marketing Actions**

1. Update Southwold's branding to reflect the changing economy and future opportunities
2. Establish consistent, key messages targeting prospective and existing residents, and prospective and existing businesses
3. Build on the strengths and opportunities in the community (safe, affordable, family, friendly, open spaces, proximity to larger centres, available property)
4. Compile Southwold's community profile data (demographics, business profile, servicing, resources)
5. Update the Southwold Township website to include resident and business attraction info with links to Elgin County
6. Establish an inventory of Southwold businesses (include home-based and small businesses)
7. Develop a shop local program featuring home-based and small businesses
8. Profile success stories on the Southwold website
9. Celebrate a local business leader of the year.



	Goal 4	Business Development
	<b>Strategic Objective</b>	Bring increased commercial and community activity to Fingal and Shedden. Attract and support a diversified business base. Expand Southwold's tourism product offering

Community stakeholders expressed a desire for increased commercial and community activity in Fingal and Shedden. A downtown development task force consisting of the businesses and property owners in the downtown should meet and identify the desired fixed asset improvements required to make the downtowns more attractive. These elements may include repairs to the existing sidewalk and roads, investment in planters and street furniture and updated signage.

Community volunteers should be encouraged to plan and host special events such as a farmers' market, night market, food truck event and entertainment in the downtowns. (previously referenced in Goal 1)

Establishing a Business Retention and Expansion program (also referenced in Goal 1) will provide an opportunity for local business to provide insights on their experiences doing business in Southwold Township. The visits will help inform Southwold on the issues local businesses are facing. It also provides an opportunity to share information with the businesses on funding programs and other business supports to retain and expand these businesses.

The four corners in Shedden is a well-trafficked intersection. The Township should work to establish the junction as a centre of community activity and pride. The Township should consider providing one of the empty storefronts for short-term rental to Southwold businesses over the business Christmas season in November and December. Local community groups such as the Scouts, Guides or 4H should be encouraged to set up a Christmas tree, cider/hot chocolate and gift-wrapping service at the four corners in the weekends leading up to Christmas. The four corners would also be an excellent location to stage a food truck type event.

The Township should build on the growing popularity of cycling, Elgin County's cycling initiatives and the relatively less populated roadways (compared to the GTA) to encourage the four corners as a cycling rest or rally spot, complete with designated parking, picnic tables, a repair centre, bike rack and signage showing cycling routes of various distances or themes.





The market threshold analysis data completed in Phase One of this project should be updated to provide current market potential. This data can identify specific businesses to target to establish operations in Southwold Township. An initial target group may include businesses located elsewhere in the region who may be open to establishing a satellite operation.

Southwold Township can support the sale or lease of available properties in Southwold Township by profiling available land and buildings in the community. These efforts could include providing detailed property information on the Southwold Township website (including the realtor contact information). The local high school and elementary schools could be engaged to develop window décor for vacant commercial space to beautify the location and add visual interest while also providing the owner/realtor contact information. The Southwold library (located in Shedden) should investigate the potential for extending WiFi access to the downtown area to support local residents and businesses needing access and providing another source of traffic in the community.

The Township should also ensure it is leveraging all County economic and tourism efforts. For example, Elgin County and the Southwest Ontario Tourism Corporation (SWOTC) are supporting the development of Alternative Accommodation such as Airbnb and VRBO operations to encourage tourism activity in the region.

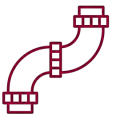
### **Business Development Actions**

1. Establish a downtown development taskforce to:
  - Identify required improvements, e.g. Sidewalks, roads, planters, signage, street furniture
  - Host special events to increase traffic
  - Organize farmers' markets, night markets, food truck events and/or entertainment
2. Establish regular business visits (BR&E) trouble-shoot, provide info on funding, business supports



3. Bring additional activity to Shedden's four corners:
  - Short-term rental for November/December
  - Scouts/4H to sell Christmas trees, cider, gift wrapping service
  - Food trucks
  - Establish a cycling rest or rally spot with parking, picnic tables, repair centre, bike rack, maps
4. Share market threshold analysis data
5. Target existing businesses located elsewhere to open a branch in Southwold
6. Profile available properties on Southwold and Elgin County websites
  - Prepare sales sheets for available properties (for website and realtors)
  - Develop window décor (with high school, elementary school students), provide contact info
  - Wi-Fi in library to extend to downtown
7. Host a workshop for alternative accommodation with Elgin County and SWOTC



	<b>Goal 5</b>	<b>Enhanced Infrastructure</b>
	<b>Strategic Objective</b>	Support business and residential infrastructure needs

Southwold Township must ensure that it has the infrastructure to ensure existing businesses can prosper and grow and to make sure the community can compete for investment with other jurisdictions.

The community has recognized the opportunity for greater economic activity resulting from recent residential growth. Continued residential growth is also dependent on the provision of the appropriate water, waste water, power and broadband servicing.

Communities are recognizing that broadband access is becoming just as important to business development and attraction as other hard infrastructure elements. Broadband access is important across industries including Southwold's agriculture sector, target industries such as retail, finance, real estate and professional services, tourism related businesses and home-based businesses.

Southwold Township should explore opportunities to expand inexpensive and reliable broadband services throughout the Township with providers who are targeting rural communities such as Packetworks. The Township should continue to support the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) Initiatives to access government funding and support for a regional broadband network across the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus region.

The Economic Development committee, Township and County staff should establish and agree upon priority areas for infrastructure enhancements. With these priority areas established, they should prepare for future budgets and funding programs by developing the business case and preliminary estimates for the required infrastructure investments. The business community should be encouraged to provide specific information on the impact these infrastructure enhancements would have on their businesses. Once completed, the business case and investment requirements can be shared with the local MPP and MPs so they are able to advocate for Southwold Township as the opportunity arises.



Southwold Township should also explore opportunities and examples of other rural communities that have engaged in private public partnerships to support infrastructure investment.

### **Enhanced Infrastructure Actions**

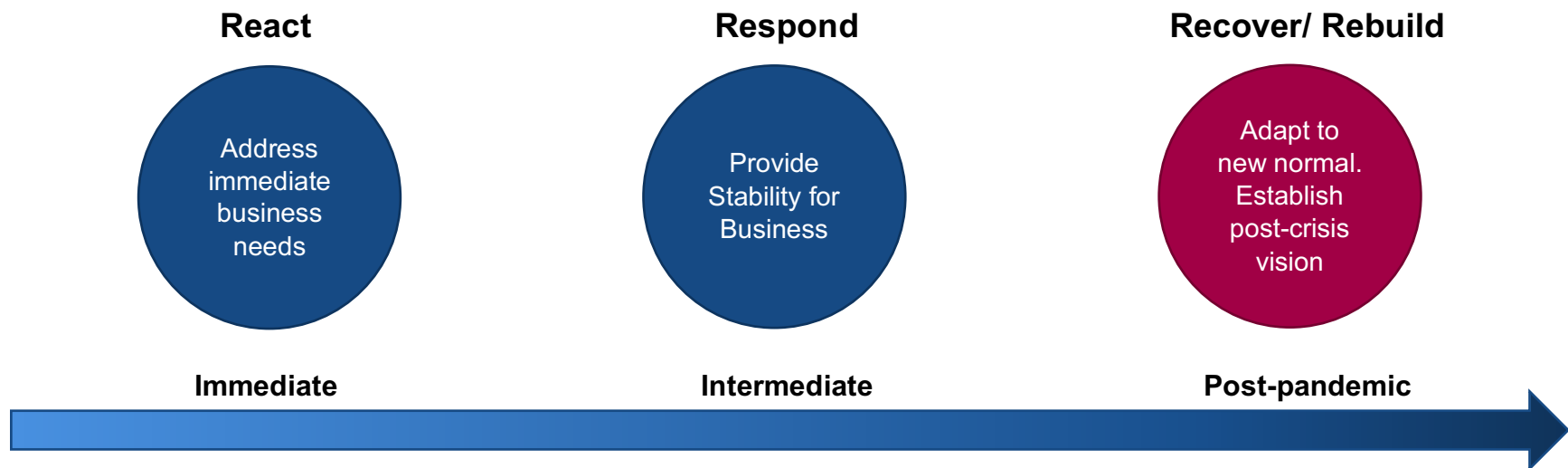
1. Work with broadband providers to expand offering in Southwold
2. Support the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) initiatives
3. Develop an infrastructure investment strategy:
  - Identify priority areas for infrastructure enhancements
  - Prepare preliminary estimates and funding application info to be incorporated into future funding programs
  - Assemble business testimonials on the potential for Southwold with infrastructure enhancements
  - Share infrastructure requirement information with local MPP, MPs
4. Research private/public partnership examples for future infrastructure investment



## COVID-19 and Economic Development

This Community Economic Development Plan was developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This plan provides the vision of the economic future in Southwold Township and steps to achieve that vision. They are based on fundamental economic development principles, investment readiness, community needs and desires.

The pandemic has resulted in a health and economic crisis. The State of Emergency declared in Ontario (March 17, 2020) effectively shut down all non-essential businesses in the province. At the time of writing this report, governments and businesses are addressing the immediate needs for business during the COVID crisis and are beginning to consider the intermediate-term plans to return business stability as restrictions begins to ease.



The recommended actions in this strategy will help Southwold Township recover and rebuild the local economy as the pandemic crisis dissipates. The actions are identified as short-term (overlapping with the pandemic recovery or within one year post-pandemic), medium-term (two to three years post) and long term (four years plus). Some recommendations for community events may have to be postponed, others may need to be modified to reflect changing norms for events.



The economic recovery efforts for Southwold Township should align with the three phase model of react, respond and recover as follows:

### **React**

This phase focuses on assisting businesses to remain viable until they can generate revenue again. The Southwold Economic Development Committee should work with Elgin County and other local economic development partners to advise local businesses on the various government programs designed to provide funding support. The committee may also want to follow the examples of other communities in Ontario who are establishing shop local programs, gift card sales, Go Fund Me campaigns and digital and Ecommerce programs to address the loss of revenue.

This is a good time to update Southwold's business directory, establishing benchmark data to track changes to the local economy as a result of the pandemic. The Southwold Economic Development Committee will want to remain engaged with the Elgin-St. Thomas Economic Resiliency and Recovery Task Force, to stay informed on pandemic responses and programs. It will be important to support regional data collection including business surveys to ensure Southwold's needs are included in the survey results.

### **Respond**

This phase identifies and addresses what businesses need to restart operations. The Economic Development Committee should work with Elgin County Economic Development, other economic development partners and other levels of government to provide businesses with information on how to keep their staff and customers safe. Businesses will need access to information on new operating protocols. They may need assistance in accessing PPE equipment. They may also benefit from consultation with business advisors on strategies to adopt their business models as consumer behaviour and safe practices evolve.

### **Recover**

In the longer-term, the economic development committee should monitor any changes and identify any emerging gaps in the local market. The pandemic may also create some opportunities for the local economy. For example, resident attraction efforts may be bolstered by the growth of work from home options and greater interest in moving out of the density in the GTA.



## Implementation Plan

Goal 1	Community Engagement		
Objective	Leverage resident and business volunteer efforts to implement Southwold's economic development plan		
Actions		Time Frame	Priority
1. Recruit additional economic development committee members		Immediate	High
2. Establish 2 to 3 priority economic development projects per year		Short	Medium
3. Develop a Southwold business retention and expansion program		Immediate	High
4. Establish a volunteer event committee to host clean up days, a community picnic and/or night market		Medium	Medium
5. Establish a committee to host a special event		Medium	Medium
6. Create a welcome committee for new residents and businesses info on local businesses		Long	Nice to do
7. Encourage the hosting of community events in the four corners area		Medium	Medium
8. Host small business networking events		Medium	Medium
9. Ensure the library has small business resources and workshops		Short	High
10. Open one of the vacant buildings in Shedden's four corners for pop-up business or shared offices		Long	Medium



Goal 2	Investment Readiness		
Strategic Objective	Provide the required elements to facilitate investment		
Actions		Time Frame	Priority
1. Compile economic development data to share on the Southwold website and with Elgin County's Economic Development Department		Medium	High
2. Create a small one-page lure brochure with links to the Southwold and Elgin County economic development website		Medium	High
3. Compile data on the former Ford lands including status, environmental conditions, servicing, brownfield programs and potential funding programs		Medium	High
4. Prepare a database of commercial and industrial land and buildings in Southwold		Medium	High
5. Use local business ambassadors to help make the case for investment.		Long	Medium





Goal 3	Branding/Marketing		
Strategic Objective	Establish professional branding, marketing tools and messages to share Southwold's value proposition for residents and businesses		
Actions		Time Frame	Priority
1. Update Southwold's branding to reflect the changing economy and future opportunities		Medium	High
2. Establish consistent, key messages targeting prospective and existing residents, and prospective and existing businesses		Medium	High
3. Build on the strengths and opportunities in the community (safe, affordable, family, friendly, open spaces, proximity to larger centres, available property)		Long	Medium
4. Compile Southwold's community profile data (demographics, business profile, servicing, resources)		Short	High
5. Update the Southwold Township website to include resident and business attraction info with links to Elgin County		Short	High
6. Establish an inventory of Southwold businesses (include home-based and small businesses)		Immediate	High
7. Develop a shop local program featuring home-based and small businesses		Long	Medium
8. Profile success stories on the Southwold website		Long	Medium
9. Celebrate a local business leader of the year.		Long	Nice to do



Goal 4	Business Development		
Strategic Objective	Bring increased commercial and community activity to Fingal and Shedden. Attract and support a diversified business base. Expand Southwold's tourism product offering.		
Action	Time Frame	Priority	
1. Establish a downtown development taskforce to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify required improvements, e.g. Sidewalks, roads, planters, signage, street furniture</li> <li>Host special events to increase traffic</li> <li>Organize farmers' markets, night markets, food truck events and/or entertainment</li> </ul>	Medium	Medium	
2. Establish regular business visits (BR&E) trouble-shoot, provide info on funding, business supports	Short	High	
3. Bring additional activity to Shedden's four corners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short-term rental for November/December</li> <li>Scouts/4H to sell Christmas trees, cider, gift wrapping service</li> <li>Food trucks</li> <li>Establish a cycling rest or rally spot with parking, picnic tables, repair centre, bike rack, maps</li> </ul>	Medium	Medium	
4. Update and share market threshold analysis data	Long	Medium	
5. Target existing businesses located elsewhere to open a branch in Southwold	Long	Nice to do	
6. Profile available properties on Southwold and Elgin County websites <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prepare sales sheets for available properties (for website and realtors)</li> <li>Develop window décor (with high school, elementary school students), provide contact info</li> <li>Wi-Fi in library to extend to downtown</li> </ul>	Long	Medium	
7. Host a workshop for alternative accommodation with Elgin County and SWOTC	Medium	Medium	



Goal 5	Enhanced Infrastructure		
Strategic Objective	Support business and residential infrastructure needs		
Action		Time Frame	Priority
1. Work with broadband providers to expand offering in Southwold		Medium	High
2. Support the Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) initiatives		Ongoing	Medium
3. Develop an infrastructure investment strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify priority areas for infrastructure enhancements</li><li>• Prepare preliminary estimates and funding application info to be incorporated into future funding programs</li><li>• Assemble business testimonials on the potential for Southwold with infrastructure enhancements</li><li>• Share infrastructure requirement information with local MPP, MPs</li></ul>		Medium	High
4. Research private/public partnership examples for future infrastructure investment		Long	Medium

Ministry of Rural Affairs

Ministère des Affaires rurales

Office of the Minister

Bureau du ministre

777 Bay, 28th Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2J3  
Tel: 647-329-1485

777, rue Bay, 28<sup>e</sup> étage  
Toronto (Ontario) M7A 2J3  
Tél. : 647-329-1485



January 16, 2026

Jeff Carswell  
CAO/Clerk  
Township of Southwold  
cao@southwold.ca

Dear Jeff Carswell,

Congratulations! Your organization's application, Southwold Community Economic Development Plan, has been **conditionally approved** for up to **\$22,137.50** in funding through the **Rural Ontario Development (ROD) Program – Community Development Stream**.

The ROD Program supports initiatives that strengthen rural communities and foster strong rural businesses across Ontario. It aligns with the province's **Rural Economic Development Strategy**, which focuses on building safe and strong communities, supporting business development and attraction, and growing the rural workforce.

Ministry staff will be in touch shortly with **details on next steps**, including instructions to complete the administrative requirements for the Contribution Agreement that sets out the necessary conditions for payment.

We kindly request that you **do not announce this funding publicly** and that this decision be held in **strict confidence** until the Government of Ontario makes a public announcement. The ministry will coordinate with you in advance of any public announcement of your project.

Thank you for your commitment to supporting a thriving rural Ontario.

Sincerely,

Lisa Thompson  
Minister of Rural Affairs

- c. Scott Duff, Director, Rural Policy and Economic Development Branch,  
Ministry of Rural Affairs

## Economic Development Plan – Draft Timeline/Workplan

Date	Action	Responsible
February	Council approval of a Contribution Agreement	Staff/Council
February 5	Recommend to Council that EDC be delegated authority for the project, engaging a consultant, providing oversight for the project	Staff/Southwold EDC
February 9	Council consider recommendation	Council
February 12	Issue RFP 3 weeks for responses	Staff
March 5	RFP Submission Deadline	
March 12	EDC Meeting Review submissions Select consultant or shortlist for interview/more info	Southwold EDC*
March 16 – 20	If needed, interviews, review more info	Southwold EDC*
March 26	If needed, Select consultant	Southwold EDC*
April	Project Kick-off	Consultant/Southwold EDC
May - August	Project Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental Scan of present and past activities</li> <li>• current Ec Dev Plan and situation</li> <li>• community engagement</li> <li>• creation of Final Ec Dev Plan</li> <li>• implementation plan</li> </ul>	Consultant, Southwold EDC/Staff
Early September	Southwold EDC Recommendation of Ec Dev Plan to Council	Southwold EDC
Mid-End to end of September	Adoption of Economic Development Plan by Council	Council

\*subject to Council approval of Southwold EDC taking the lead on the project and delegated authority to engage a consultant.



# Economic Development and Tourism Plan

2025







## Economic Development and Tourism Plan

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December 2025

Prepared by:



**McSweeney & Associates Consulting Inc.**

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## Acknowledgment

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The creation of the Economic Development and Tourism Plan relied on input received from a dedicated group of community stakeholders. Thank you to all residents, business owners, organizational leaders, and other community members who participated in the engagement process. Your input, vision, knowledge, and experience helped shape the County's path forward.

A heartfelt thanks to the Elgin County team and local municipal partners for the time, input, and direction you dedicated to developing this plan and its actions. Together, Elgin County will move forward in a meaningful and impactful way.



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## Executive Summary

Elgin County, located in Southwestern Ontario, is next to the urban centres of London and St. Thomas. With a population of about 52,000, the County is comprised of seven local municipal partners (LMPs): Aylmer, Bayham, Central Elgin, Dutton Dunwhich, Malahide, Southwold, and West Elgin.

The County's economy is largely driven by agriculture and manufacturing, with a growing tourism sector. Elgin County is home to large agricultural operations, smaller family-owned farms, and key industrial facilities, including food processing plants, manufacturing sites, and warehousing and logistics operations. The County's natural beauty and historical towns, including Port Stanley, Sparta, and Port Burwell, attract visitors from across southwest Ontario.

The regional economy has seen significant change since 2022 with increased manufacturing attraction, and the redevelopment of the Former Psychiatric Hospital Lands in Central Elgin providing a mixed-use community with a range of housing options.

With the completion of the 2022-2025 Elgin County Economic Development and Tourism Strategy, Elgin County required a five-year Economic Development and Tourism Plan to take them through 2026-2030.

This Plan is about...

- Building on the County's previous economic development Plan and all of the other good work that has been done in the past.
- Further strengthening and diversifying the local economy.
- Providing direction and guidance to Elgin County's economic development and tourism activities for both the short and long term.

The Economic Development and Tourism Plan has been developed by Elgin County, with input from the seven LMPs along with representation from local businesses, community members, and local and regional organizations, with the intention to help drive economic success, growth, and investment. This Plan is unique to Elgin County and is designed to strengthen the County's economy, attract investment, support local businesses, and grow tourism.



## Process

This Economic Development and Tourism Plan was built through a four-step process. Each of the steps built upon the previous work, with initial work focused on high-level “discovery”: an understanding of previous guiding documents and strategies as well as data on the local labour force, business, and industry strengths. Consultative work began in Step 2 where a better understanding of on-the-ground realities was established. Next, the project moved from understanding to action, with the development of a Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results (SCOAR®) Analysis and a working session designed to identify tangible, realistic actions. Step 3 continued with a further narrowing of objectives during a Strategic Action Planning Session and a draft Plan. The project concluded with the Final Plan being presented to Council.

### Step 1: Discover

#### Current Status Review.

- Document Review.
- Situational Economic Analysis.
- Informal Investment Readiness Assessment.

### Step 2: Define

#### Stakeholder Engagement.

- One-on-one interviews.
- Online survey.
- Focus groups.
- Staff priority setting session.

### Step 3: Develop

#### Strategic Development & Implementation Plan.

- SCOAR®.
- Working Session.
- Strategic Action Planning Session.
- Draft Plan.
- Implementation Plan.

### Step 4: Deliver

#### Present the results.

- Final Plan completed.
- Presentation to Council.



## Step 1: Discover: Current Status Review

---

To begin the process, an in-depth review of the current situation in Elgin County was undertaken. This included the completion of a Community and Situational Analysis that shows the picture of Elgin County through a quantitative lens, alongside a document review that provides a snapshot of the key initiatives undertaken by the County and LMPs.

### Document Review

A literature review was conducted to understand the local climate and economic realities impacting Elgin County, and across Ontario. This review included local documents, County documents, and development strategies. It allowed for a better understanding of the findings from the project's quantitative data analysis and qualitative conversations with local stakeholders. Documents reviewed include County wide and LMP economic development documents. This list can be found in **Appendix B**.

### Community and Situational Analysis

The Community and Situational Analysis is an informational piece crafted in the summer of 2025 and does not prescribe a certain solution; instead, it presents a statistical perspective within the local context.

It began with an assessment of the people (socio-demographics) that make up the County to provide a snapshot of the local population and highlight potential future opportunities.

The local labour force and economic picture were further profiled, presenting data on business counts, labour engagement rates, overall jobs and sales figures by industry, and export/supply chain data per sector.

Finally, community assets were also highlighted, showcasing the County's wealth of schools, strong quality of life, and social service assets.

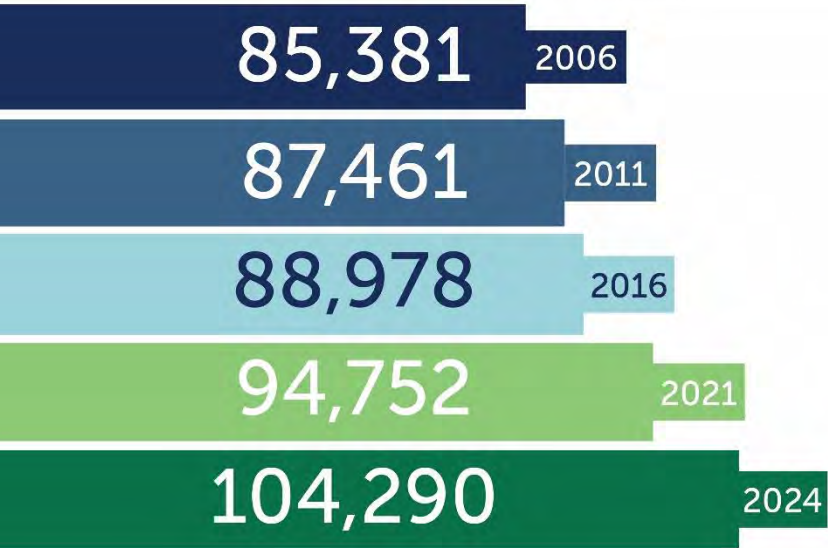
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**The following two pages present the demographic snapshot as profiled in the Community and Situational Analysis.**

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# Elgin County Demographic Snapshot



## Population Profile

MEDIAN	AVERAGE
County Age 42	County Age 42
Ontario Age 40	Ontario Age 42



## Highest Education

Population ages 25-64



## Household & Earnings



of the County's population spends 30% or more of total household income on shelter costs.



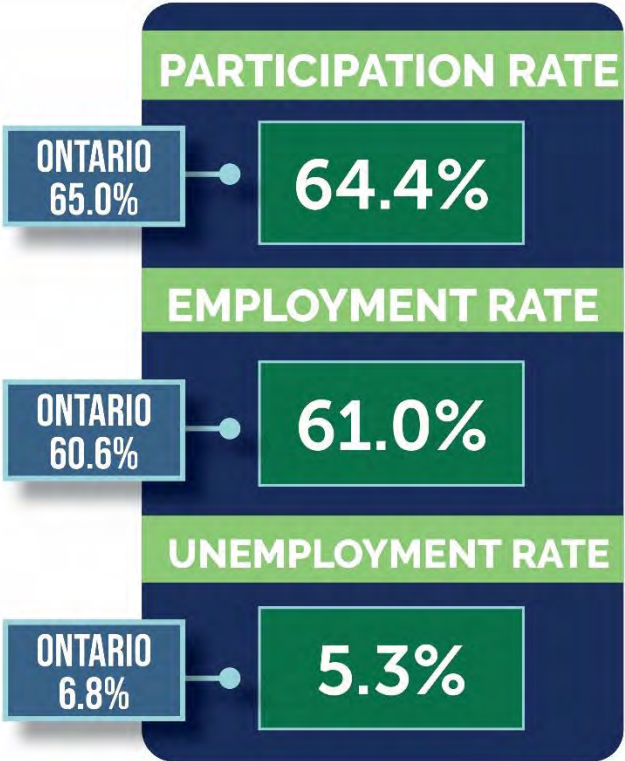
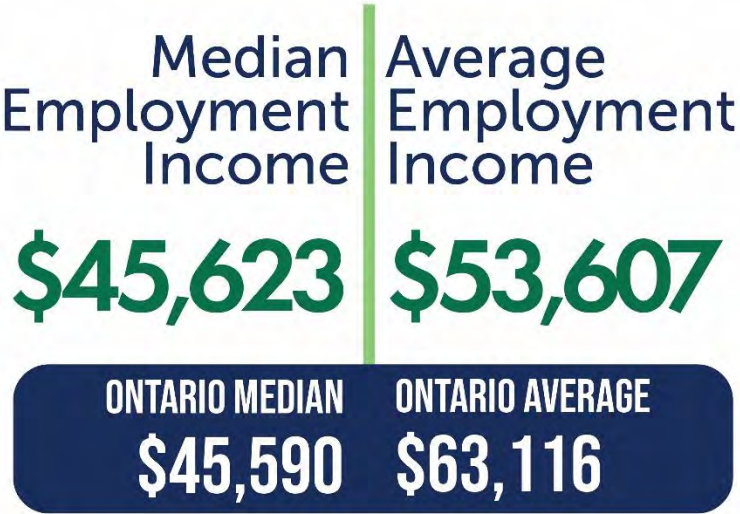
All data sourced from Manifold SuperDemographics 2025, unless otherwise specified.



# Elgin County Demographic Snapshot



## Labour Force & Local Economy



## Top 5 Sectors by Industry\*

\*By labour force employment for people living in Elgin County.



## Top 5 Sectors by Occupation\*

\*By labour force employment for people living in Elgin County.





## Step 2: Define: Stakeholder Engagement

To better understand the community and to gather qualitative insights into Elgin County, consultations took place over the month of July 2025. The consultations included representation from service organizations, manufacturing and trades, LMPs, business organizations, tourism and agriculture providing input from 167 participants. The information was gleaned from:

- One-on-one phone interviews
- Online survey
- Focus groups



**167** people participated in the consultation process.

## Step 3: Develop: Strategic Development & Implementation Plan

### SCOAR® Analysis

Once the background research and initial consultations were completed, the 'developing' process began with a summation of the findings of the initial consultations and data analysis, presented through a SCOAR® Analysis. The SCOAR® was used as the fundamental basis to determine the four themes, as directed by consultation.

The results of the Elgin County SCOAR® analysis can be found in **Appendix A**.



## Working Session

A half-day working session in September 2025 consisted of 31 participants to review consultation findings. Participants included a good cross section of key stakeholders representing tourism partners, businesses, business organizations, LMPs and County staff.

The Strategic Working Session provided an opportunity for participants to begin to develop a set of draft strategic actions that would form the base of Elgin County's Economic Development and Tourism Plan, inclusive of a 5-year action plan.

The Working Session was based around four themes:



## Strategic Action Planning Session

To ensure that the actions aligned with the aspirations and vision of Elgin County and supported the needs of the LMPs, the draft actions were distributed to representatives inclusive of all seven LMPs for their review and feedback.

Based on the results of both the quantitative and qualitative research, a draft set of strategic actions were prepared for review. During the strategic action planning session, there was a candid discussion with staff where the actions were vetted and approved.



## Step 4: Deliver: Final Economic Development and Tourism Plan

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The Plan does not speak specifically to individual core and emerging sectors. Instead, the focus of the Plan is on building and supporting the entire Elgin County economy. Agriculture, Tourism, Manufacturing, Healthcare, Clean Energy and Creative Industries should all see themselves and be supported and advanced by drawing on various actions across the five goals.





## Economic Development and Tourism Actions

### Alignment with Elgin County Council's Strategic Plan (2024-2026)

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The Elgin County Economic Development and Tourism Plan actions presented here are grounded in the vision and priorities outlined in the Elgin County Council Strategic Plan (2024–2026), ensuring consistency and accountability across the organization. Council's plan emphasizes collaboration and sustainability as guiding principles, and those themes helped shape the actions below, ensuring that economic development and tourism decision-making reflect a clear connection with Council initiatives.

Specifically, with respect to economic development and tourism, Council's Strategic Plan highlights the importance of fostering a resilient and competitive local economy, with a focus on investment attraction, business retention, and the promotion/support of key sectors such as agriculture. This document's actions build on these priorities by building out concrete steps the department can take to enhance the County's ability to create employment opportunities, protect and drive agricultural growth, strengthen local business ecosystems, and enhance the Elgin County brand.

Equally important are the commitments to agriculture and pride of place, both of which are deeply interwoven within Elgin County's identity. This was reiterated throughout the consultative period and addressed in both the Council Strategic Plan and this current Plan. Council's plan underscores the protection of prime agricultural lands and the promotion of value-added agri-business opportunities, and the below actions seek to similarly promote the community's agricultural roots. At the same time, pride of place is reflected through initiatives strengthening arts and culture, quality of life, and County assets. Together, the actions below, across both economic development and tourism, have sought to capture and reflect the values and ideals set forth by County Council, aligning the department's objectives with the rest of the organization and Council.

The following actions were developed through extensive consultation with key economic development partners, LMPs, and County staff. The plan addresses the available resources, priority needs and what actions will bring the most value to the County, the LMPs and its partners.



## Economic Development Goals and Actions

### Goal 1: Investing in Elgin County

Elgin County has significant opportunities over the coming decade to grow local business sectors. Supporting potential investors along the manufacturing supply chain and in more niche, small business environments is important, but to do so the County should have the necessary infrastructure in place, to support incoming businesses.

**Action 1:** Support and implement the Employment Lands and Investment Attraction Plan now being developed.

**Action 2:** Advance an Elgin County Infrastructure Plan to understand infrastructure requirements to have shovel ready urban and rural land available to support investment.

**Action 3:** Develop an Elgin County Community Profile that provides a comprehensive overview of the County specifically geared to investors and site selectors and encourage each LMP to build a similar Profile. Update annually.

**Action 4:** Work with local realtors, private land developers and property owners to create an up-to-date inventory of commercial and industrial land and buildings which are currently for sale or lease.





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## Goal 2: Supporting and Growing Local Business

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Growing local business is paramount to success in Elgin County. Ensuring local businesses are supported, feel heard by the County, and operate in an environment that continues to encourage their success will help ensure the County remains a business-first community.

**Action 1:** Work with the County planning department to review bylaws and policies within the County to encourage the establishment and expansion of home-based businesses.

**Action 2:** Encourage and support the expansion or development of local business groups (i.e., Chambers of Commerce, BIAs, local business groups) to strengthen the business community. For example, work with the Elgin/St. Thomas Small Business Enterprise Centre to ensure there is a comprehensive list of available resources to support businesses in the County. Work with similar local business groups to help provide opportunities for businesses to better incorporate e-commerce within their businesses.

**Action 3:** Support local businesses in promoting their products and expanding their markets while strengthening Elgin County's regional profile.

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## Goal 3: Diversifying Local Agriculture

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With over 130,000 hectares of farmland, agriculture plays a vital role in Elgin County's economy. By adopting new technologies in agribusiness, from food processing and alternative fuel generation to organic farming and aquaculture Elgin County's businesses are meeting the growing demand for innovative, high-quality products.

**Action 1:** In alignment with County Council's Strategic Plan, support agri-business diversification and continue working to protect prime agricultural land.

**Action 2:** Promote the Agricultural Hall of Fame to highlight the importance of agriculture in Elgin County. Launch an ongoing event that celebrates agriculture and includes the induction of new members into the Hall of Fame.

**Action 3:** Work with the LMPs to define clear bylaws around on-farm business diversification.



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## Goal 4: Continue Improving the County's Collaborative Relationship with Local Municipal Partners

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County Council continues to take a regional approach while respecting the unique identities of the LMPs. The County and the LMPs should continue to work together through their team approach to building identity and promote each other's strengths and identities knowing that the whole of the County is only as strong as the individual parts.

**Action 1:** Establish clear protocols relating to investment inquiries and economic development related information, to determine when and how communications are established between the County and LMPs.

**Action 2:** Encourage each LMP to designate a representative to be the main point of contact for the County, to share information and meet on economic development initiatives.

**Action 3:** Continue to provide (and receive) regular economic development updates to and from LMPs and the City of St. Thomas that may be of interest to their businesses.

**Action 4:** Establish a formalized protocol between the LMPs and the County to coordinate efforts to reduce duplication and increase awareness when new development or business permits are taken out at the LMP level.

**Action 5:** Work with the LMPs to align development processes and procedures to effectively reduce duplication and provide a timely and effective process focused on growing investment. This could include:

- Standardized permitting and processes across the County.
- Coordination between the partner municipalities and the County to improve zoning and infrastructure to have what is needed to attract investment.
- County-developed templates for potential use by partner municipalities.





## Goal 5: Strengthening Community Development Across Elgin County

Community development and economic development go hand in hand. With a strong quality of place, an attractive, safe environment with job opportunities, people will be actively interested in living in and investing in Elgin County.

**Elgincentsives**, Elgin County's countywide Community Improvement Plan (CIP) Program, provides financial assistance for private property improvements that specifically contribute to economic development. This program contributes to the community development and economic well-being of the County.

**Action 1:** Continue to provide funding for Elgincentsives, with a consideration to extending the program to include in its spring 2026 update:

- Downtown beautification projects.
- Accessibility infrastructure.
- Public art/placemaking initiatives.
- Affordable housing supports.

**Action 2:** Collaborate with regional partners, and/or support funding applications, if opportunities arise, to provide public transportation within the County.

**Action 3:** Determine the viability of partnering with community organizations (e.g., BIA, Small Business Enterprise Centre) on a business support program (e.g., Win This Space).

**Action 4:** Engage with businesses operating directly in rural downtown and village cores to offer marketing support, resources, and to be a collective voice, when needed.



## Tourism Goals and Actions

### Goal 1: Focus on Product Development

Tourism product development is the process of creating and refining experiences, services, and attractions to meet the needs and demands of tourists, which ultimately strengthens a destination's tourism offerings. This can include identifying gaps in the market, developing concepts based on a destination's resources and visitor needs, and planning the creation and marketing of these new or enhanced products, such as unique tours, accommodations, and cultural experiences.

**Action 1:** Expand the opportunities around the existing trail system (i.e., Great Lakes Waterfront Trail) and provide experiences to discover Elgin County's history, natural environment and cultural heritage.

- Build partnerships that will help to expand the trail-based experience in Elgin County (i.e., businesses, local organizations, government).
- Research funding opportunities (i.e., Rural Ontario Development Program) that support product development for multi-modal transportation tourism.
- Expand self-guided trail-based itineraries (e.g., day trips, weekend, or whole week itineraries) and ride guides.

**Action 2:** Develop visitor itineraries that package destinations to maximize day trips, and bus tours highlighting history, arts and culture, natural attractions, food, etc.

**Action 3:** Ensure policies are in place that support local businesses interested in alternative accommodations.

**Action 4:** Partner with government tourism organizations to support local businesses in developing market-ready tourism experiences.





## Goal 2: Build on Existing Tourism Strengths of the County

Limited infrastructure in the LMPs can make it a challenge to attract new tourism assets to Elgin County. Because of this, Elgin County has been proactive in promoting existing tourism assets through the development of a variety of guides (Visitor Guide, Taste Guide for Savour Elgin and Fall for Elgin).

Work with the existing tourism-based businesses to provide them with the support that they need to be successful.

**Action 1:** Build on the success of the Savour Elgin program and enhance the culinary trail experience, promoting local businesses through new products.

**Action 2:** Support and promote tourism-based businesses that are for sale to encourage likeminded businesses to continue in these locations.

**Action 3:** Work with the County planning department and LMPs to ensure that information is available for existing agriculture businesses interested in expanding into agritourism.

**Action 4:** Engage stakeholders through methods including site visits, seasonal e-newsletters, annual familiarization tours, and project specific working groups (i.e., Ride the Bine) to better promote the County.

**Action 5:** Continue to promote local festivals and events, and connect them to local businesses, events and experiences in the area.



## Goal 3: Build the Elgin County Brand

Elgin County has worked considerably to build operational capabilities and its tourism brand, but continued efforts can seek to unify messaging and amplify awareness of what the County has to offer to residents of municipalities outside Elgin County.

**Action 1:** Explore new approaches to marketing and promotion by partnering with tourism operators to promote tourism and strengthen the Elgin County tourism brand.

**Action 2:** Use the ‘people focused’ rebranding of the economic development website as an identifier/brand for both economic development and tourism.

**Action 3:** Review and strengthen Elgin County’s tourism marketing plan.

**Action 4:** Continue to build a positive relationship with Ontario’s Southwest Regional Tourism Organization to better take advantage of their programs and funding streams.

### Out of the Box Idea

Elgin County struggles to market a unified, branded experience due to its vast geography. Many businesses are spread out considerably from one another, and this can make it challenging for visitors to engage across the County.

To combat this, determine interest from local businesses in undertaking a “tourism passport” style activity, with visitors being able to collect stamps (or something similar) from participating businesses across the County. Those who successfully complete their passport can redeem their passport for promotional Elgin County materials (e.g., t-shirts, etc.).





## Appendix A – SCOAR® Analysis

### Economic Development SCOAR®

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#### Strengths

- Located in southwestern Ontario along Highway 401, halfway between the Greater Toronto Area and the Detroit-Windsor border.
- A large urban centre, St. Thomas, located in the centre of the County provides services to the LMPs. The County is a half hour drive to London (population of approximately 527,000) to draw from.
- Strong sense of community, with a unique rural/small-town culture and pride in the slower pace to life and connection to nature.
- A diverse population.
- Workforce is hard-working and industrious with a tradesman, craftsman heritage.
- Good transportation connections including 400 series highways and freight rail access, with a new intermodal access point.
- Many business support organizations and services available, including one of the largest Chambers of Commerce in Ontario (600-plus members).
- County Economic Development staff with a business-friendly attitude.
- Collaborative environment between LMPs, and business-to-business networks.
- Agricultural roots, with stable farm businesses, supports the community and the economy.
- More affordable housing compared to other areas in Ontario.
- Solid financial incentives in place (i.e., Community Improvement Plan Program - Elgincentives) to stimulate economic development.

#### Challenges

- Geographically large and long County covering 1881 square kilometres with a distance of approximately 100 km from east to west.
- Two tier system of government with seven LMPs that each have different goals, visions for growth, and infrastructure capacities.
- LMPs and the County have limited resources dedicated to economic development and tourism (i.e., financial and human).
- Infrastructure limitations affecting capacity to grow commercial and industrial investment (i.e., water, wastewater, internet, cell coverage, hydro).
- There can be competing interests between the rural, farmland and business sectors.
- Businesses can have difficulty navigating the municipal processes, especially where the processes vary between different LMPs.
- Roles and responsibilities are sometimes blurred between the County versus LMPs.

## Opportunities

- Supporting small urban centres to become vibrant commercial hubs.
- Creating a physical location for business development that houses all the start-up supports provided by LMPs, the County, Community Futures Development Corporation, Province of Ontario, Chamber of Commerce.
- Helping agricultural businesses consider value-added activities outside of traditional farming, as newer generations take over family farms.
- Investment-ready industrial sites to encourage economic growth.
- Growing local employment opportunities so that young adults can return from school and have an opportunity to work and live in the County.
- Embracing the growing population and finding ways to blend newcomers into the traditional lifestyle of the rural communities.
- Better public transportation to move people around (so there is less reliance on private vehicles).
- Greater support for small-scale manufacturers that would like to grow and stay in the County.
- Sell the County's uniqueness, "no one else can be us".

## Aspirations

- To have vibrant urban centres that support the local community.
- To continue to develop strong networks with the business community.
- To continue to connect with the new generation of farmers to ensure that they are aware of possible diversification opportunities.
- To have investment-ready lands available for new businesses.
- To have a plan in place to increase infrastructure capacity across the County, where feasible.

## Results

- Elgin County's vibrant urban centres, its strong economy and its unique quality of life will make it an excellent community to live and invest in.

## Tourism SCOAR®

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### Strengths

- Located on the shores of Lake Erie offering excellent access to public beaches and four port towns.
- Niche artisans, artists, theatre and live music can be found across the County.
- Destination agritourism attractions and agricultural fairs bring people to the County.
- Natural areas with trails that include conservation areas, provincial parks, wildlife areas and nature reserves.
- Museums and cultural attractions celebrating agricultural heritage, the railway boom and indigenous history.

### Challenges

- Seasonality of the tourism experiences outside of the summer and fall provide limited activities to draw visitors to the County.
- Agritourism and historical sites are underrepresented in terms of tourism related products, relative to their potential as tourism attractions.
- Navigating Elgin County can be challenging due to its geography, which can make it difficult for visitors to easily explore different areas across the County.
- Limited new tourism experiences due to fewer tourism operators starting businesses.
- Limited number of accommodations.
- Attractions are limited and the experiences are not concentrated enough, to be considered a tourism destination.
- The County's identity is somewhat unclear because of the diverse offerings and geographic size.

### Opportunities

- Could use a four-season anchor to draw people into the County all year.
- Growth in accommodations and restaurants for tourists.
- Support and grow tourism assets and products that are already in the County.
- Build off the momentum of Norfolk County's success with wineries and craft breweries.
- Support local agricultural businesses that want to produce wines (i.e., blueberry farm that wants to sell blueberry wine) or sell alcohol on their farms.
- Market specific areas within the County, instead of the whole County, emphasizing packages with multiple destinations that are located closer together.
- Build awareness of County as a whole, or the above "specific areas within the County" to grow visitor numbers.

### Aspirations

- To be a well-known tourism destination within Ontario.
- To have tourism activities and attractions that bring visitors into Elgin County over the entire year.
- To have attracted more accommodations to support longer stays.

### Results

- Elgin County, a well-known destination, provides day-trippers and overnight tourists with a wide range of year-round experiences unique to the County.

## Appendix B – Documents Reviewed

The following economic development and tourism documents were reviewed to provide background information on Elgin County.

- Aylmer-Elgin-St. Thomas Community Safety and Well-Being Plan (2020)
- Business Retention and Expansion Program Report (2024)
- Come and Explore Elgin County Visitor's Guide (2025)
- Connectivity Advocacy Plan (2022)
- Elgincentives – County-Wide Vision and Implementation Document
- Elgin County Economic Development and Tourism Strategy (2022-2024)
- Elgin County Economic Development Update (2025)
- Elgin County Official Plan (2015 & 2024)
- Elgin County Tourism Update (2025)
- Employer One Survey Results (2025)
- Elgin Wayfinding Strategy Policy
- Hemson Updated Growth Forecasts and Land Needs Assessment for the County of Elgin (2025)
- Internet Connectivity and Broadband Analysis, Assessment and Proposed Solutions (2022)
- Local Labour Market Plan (2026)
- Population, Housing and employment Forecasts and Associated Land Needs Analysis (2022)
- Port Stanley Visitor Summary (2025)
- Savour Elgin Culinary Guide (2024)
- Southwestern Ontario Business Intelligence Report (2025)
- St. Thomas – Elgin Local Immigration Partnership Moving Forward Report (2025)
- Tourism Oriented Directions Signage (TODS) Agreement (2025)
- Township of Southwold and Elgin County Investment Guide
- Transportation Master Plan Phases II and III: Multimodal Network Development (2025)
- Vacant Employment Land Inventory







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## **2026 Performance Plan**

### **Economic Development and Tourism**

#### **About Economic Development and Tourism:**

Elgin County's Economic Development & Tourism Department helps grow the local economy by supporting existing businesses, attracting new ones, and promoting tourism. Our goal is to create opportunities for business growth, job creation, and visitor attraction.

We also serve as the County's destination marketing organization, promoting Elgin's attractions to people across Ontario and beyond. Everything we do supports making Elgin County a great place to live, work, and play.

The Economic Development and Tourism Department is comprised of 4.95 FTEs. A Manager oversees a Business Enterprise Facilitator, Tourism Officer, Administrative Assistant and three summer students.

#### **Services the Department Provides:**

- Promote local businesses through marketing, events, and online platforms.
- Connect businesses to professional service providers.
- Link businesses with municipal, regional, and community organizations.
- Host events that bring businesses and partners together to share and connect.
- Guide businesses through planning, building, and licensing requirements.
- Act as a bridge to government programs, funding, and officials.
- Provide grants and incentives for building improvements and property revitalization.
- Promote Elgin as a destination and operate the Visitor Centre.
- Manage websites and digital campaigns to attract visitors and investment.

#### **Key Department Successes from 2025:**

- Engaged businesses, municipalities, partners, and the public to create a new five-year strategy, to be presented to Council in December 2025.
- Closed the Employment Lands and Investment Attraction Strategy RFP in September and launched the study in October, continuing into 2026.
- Completed a full review of Elgincentives with strong engagement; program updates to be implemented in 2026.
- Mapped planning and building processes, developed a Business Guide draft with partner input, and finished the design for a 2026 public launch.

- Launched new economic development and tourism websites with positive feedback and improved online reach.
- Installed new cluster signage and signed an agreement with TODS to provide Tourism-Oriented Directional Signing for tourism businesses on County roads.
- Promoted Elgin at major shows (St. Thomas, London, Toronto) and supported over 100 businesses and community events through the Summer Marketing Assistant.
- Launched the Fall for Elgin campaign, a backroad adventure map and online promotion that helped people discover local farms, cozy markets, and festive events. The campaign included print distribution and social media promotion across the County and digital marketing with OSW and CTA.
- Partnered with Railway City Tourism and Ontario's Southwest to host a familiarization (FAM) tour for 28 tourism professionals, replacing the annual tourism networking event and providing hands-on experiences, networking opportunities, and strong industry feedback.
- Held two rural networking events with the Economic Development Committees of Southwold, Dutton Dunwich, and West Elgin. The events helped connect local businesses, municipal staff, and community partners to support economic growth in the region.

## 2026 Initiatives That Advance the Strategic Plan:

### 1) Elgin County Business Guide

**Strategy 1:** Collaborative Engagement and Communications

**Goal 3:** Continue Conversations with Businesses to Drive Understanding

Sharing the Elgin County Business Guide will help make sure businesses across the County get clear and consistent information on local business supports. Monthly social media campaigns and workshops will promote the Guide and give businesses practical support based on each theme.

This project supports Goal 1 by helping the County and local municipalities provide consistent information and work together to support businesses. It also supports Strategy 1, Goal 3 by responding directly to feedback from the business community and helping them better understand local processes.

### 2) Online Planning Tool

**Strategy 1:** Collaborative Engagement and Communications

**Goal 3:** Continue Conversations with Businesses to Drive Understanding

Creating an online tool to guide applicants through the planning and development process will make it easier for businesses and residents to understand what steps they need to take.

This project supports Goal 1 by helping the County and local municipalities provide consistent information and work together to support businesses. It also supports Goal 3 by responding to feedback from the business community, who said they need clearer guidance on planning and development.

### 3) Business Visits

**Strategy 1:** Collaborative Engagement and Communications

### **Goal 3: Continue Conversations with Businesses to Drive Understanding**

Visiting local businesses on a regular basis helps the County stay connected to the business community. These visits give us a chance to listen, learn, and understand what businesses are experiencing. By hearing directly from owners and staff, we can better respond to their needs and improve the support we offer.

This project supports Goal 3 by continuing conversations with businesses and using their feedback to guide future programs, services, and communication efforts.

#### **4) Regional Networking Events**

**Strategy 1:** Collaborative Engagement and Communications

**Goal 1:** Strengthen Relationships with Local Municipal Partners (LMPs) and with Regional Partners, MPs, MPPs

**Goal 3:** Continue Conversations with Businesses to Drive Understanding

Hosting networking events with local economic development committees helps build stronger connections between businesses, municipalities, and community partners. These events create space for people to share ideas, learn from each other, and explore ways to work together. Two events will be held in 2026.

This project supports Goal 1 by encouraging collaboration between the County and local municipalities through joint planning and outreach. It also supports Goal 3 by giving businesses a chance to share their experiences, ask questions, and provide feedback in a supportive setting.

#### **5) Economic Development and Tourism Newsletter to Local Municipal Partners**

**Strategy 1:** Collaborative Engagement and Communications

**Goal 1:** Strengthen Relationships with Local Municipal Partners (LMPs) and with Regional Partners, MPs, MPPs

Sharing a regular newsletter with local municipal partners helps keep everyone informed about County programs, funding opportunities, and upcoming initiatives. It also makes sure front-line staff have the tools and information they need to support businesses effectively. By keeping communication open and consistent, we can better understand what businesses need and respond with helpful resources and support.

This project supports Goal 1 by improving collaboration between the County and local municipalities through regular updates and shared information.

#### **6) Employment Lands and Investment Attraction Strategy**

**Strategy 4:** Sustainable Community Growth

**Goal 1:** Promote Economic Development while Respecting Rural Heritage

Completing the Employment Lands Strategy will help guide how sites across Elgin County are developed and promoted. The strategy will identify priority areas for growth, outline infrastructure needs, and support planning decisions that balance economic development with



the County's rural character. It will also position Elgin to attract new investment by making it easier for businesses to find suitable locations and understand local opportunities.

This project supports Goal 1 by encouraging thoughtful development that respects the County's rural heritage while creating space for new businesses and industries to grow.

## **7) Agricultural Hall of Fame Celebration**

**Strategy 4:** Sustainable Community Growth

**Goal 1:** Promote Economic Development while Respecting Rural Heritage

Organizing an event for the Agricultural Hall of Fame is a way to celebrate leaders in Elgin's farming sector and recognize their contributions to the local economy. The event will highlight the County's strong agricultural heritage and show how farming continues to shape our communities and support economic growth.

This project supports Goal 1 by promoting economic development in agriculture while respecting and celebrating Elgin's rural roots.

## **8) Elgincentives Community Improvement Plan**

**Strategy 4:** Sustainable Community Growth

**Goal 1:** Promote Economic Development while Respecting Rural Heritage

Implementing and administering the updated Elgincentives Community Improvement Plan (CIP) will support a wide range of local development opportunities. The program offers grants for agri-business, downtown revitalization, and industrial growth, helping businesses and communities invest in improvements that align with Elgin's long-term goals.

This project supports Goal 1 by encouraging investment across sectors while respecting Elgin's rural character and supporting sustainable growth in both urban and rural areas.

## **9) Food and Drink Tours**

**Strategy 4:** Sustainable Community Growth

**Goal 1:** Promote Economic Development while Respecting Rural Heritage

Partnering with Ride the Bine and local tourism operators to offer food and drink tours will help promote Elgin's agri-tourism sector and showcase the County's unique culinary destinations. These tours will connect visitors with local farms, wineries, breweries, and restaurants. By reaching new audiences, the tours will support local businesses and encourage tourism spending across the region.

This project supports Goal 1 by promoting economic development rooted in Elgin's rural heritage and supporting tourism activities that celebrate local food, farming, and experiences.

## **10) Themed Tourism Itineraries**

**Strategy 4:** Sustainable Community Growth

**Goal 1:** Promote Economic Development while Respecting Rural Heritage

Creating themed itineraries—such as road trips and seasonal experiences—helps visitors explore Elgin County's unique attractions, from local farms and markets to small-town shops

and scenic routes. These itineraries will be featured in the Visitor Guide and on the tourism website, making it easier for people to plan multi-stop adventures and discover more of what Elgin has to offer. Promoting them through partner channels will help reach new audiences and encourage longer stays.

This project supports Goal 1 by promoting rural businesses and experiences in a way that respects Elgin's heritage and supporting tourism activities that highlight local culture, food, and events.

## **11) Exploring New Marketing Campaigns**

### **Strategy 4: Sustainable Community Growth**

#### **Goal 1: Promote Economic Development while Respecting Rural Heritage**

Exploring new marketing campaigns will help expand Elgin County's reach beyond the London area while continuing to include it as a key market. By promoting Elgin as a visitor destination through print, digital, and partner channels, we can attract more people to experience Elgin County. These efforts will highlight Elgin's strengths in agriculture, small-town experiences, and local industry.

This project supports Goal 1 by supporting tourism activities that showcase local events, destinations, and experiences and enhancing regional marketing to attract investment in agri-business.

### **Key Performance Indicators:**

#### **Platform Views/Visits**

**KPI:** Combined reach and engagement across all tourism and economic development channels, including:

- Website analytics (visits, downloads)
- Social media engagement (followers, likes, shares)
- Visitor Centre attendance
- Partner campaign results (reach and views)
- Tradeshow participation (leads and contacts)

#### **KPI Objective(s):**

Increase awareness of Elgin County as a tourism destination and place to do business by reaching new audiences and encouraging deeper engagement across digital, in-person, and partner platforms.

#### **Rationale:**

Tourism and economic development in Elgin rely on a mix of online and in-person engagement to reach visitors and investors. Website traffic, social media activity, Visitor Centre attendance, and campaign reach help measure how well Elgin is being promoted and how effectively staff are connecting with the public.

Tracking these metrics shows Elgin's visibility as a destination, guides future marketing, and supports strategic goals by promoting tourism, local businesses, events, and the County's rural charm.

## **Business Support**

**KPI:** Percentage of business interactions that result in a clear next step, such as a referral, resource, or follow-up action.

### **KPI Objective(s):**

Increase the effectiveness of business support by ensuring that most interactions lead to a meaningful outcome, showing that staff are providing practical help and building strong relationships.

### **Rationale:**

Tracking the percentage of business interactions that lead to a next step helps measure the value of County outreach efforts. It shows that staff are not only meeting with businesses but also solving problems, making connections, and offering useful support. This metric reflects the quality of engagement and helps guide improvements in service delivery.

## **Grants & Incentives Program Impact**

### **KPI:**

1. **Leverage of County Dollars** – Amount of private investment generated per \$1 of County grant funding.
2. **Project Completion Rate** – Percentage of approved grant-funded projects that are completed.
3. **Reach Across Communities** – Number of municipalities and business sectors participating in the grant program.

### **KPI Objective(s):**

- To demonstrate the effectiveness of County grants in stimulating private investment and community development.
- To ensure that funded projects are successfully completed and result in visible improvements.
- To promote equitable access to grant opportunities across Elgin County's diverse communities and sectors.

### **Rationale:**

Grants and incentives are key tools for encouraging economic development and revitalization across Elgin County. Measuring the **leverage of County dollars** highlights how public funds can encourage significant private investment. Tracking **project completion** ensures accountability and confirms that approved initiatives lead to tangible outcomes. Monitoring **reach across communities** helps assess the inclusivity and geographic distribution of support, ensuring that businesses and municipalities throughout Elgin benefit from available programs.