

# The Regional Municipality of York

Regional Council  
Planning and Economic Development  
March 18, 2021

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Chief Planner

## 2020 Annual Tourism Update

### 1. Recommendation

Council receive the 2020 Annual Tourism Update report for information.

### 2. Summary

This report provides Council with an update on 2020 tourism, arts and culture programs. It also advises Council of a renewed funding agreement with the York Region Arts Council to undertake tourism promotion and related activities across the Region in 2021.

Key Points:

- With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 brought significant challenges for the tourism, arts and culture sector in York Region
- Collaborations between York Region Arts Council, York Region, and the Tourism, Arts and Culture Recovery Sub-Group led to an economic recovery marketing campaign called “Ready When You Are”
- Tourism, arts and culture programs in 2021 will continue to focus on economic recovery and supporting local businesses

### 3. Background

#### **The York Region Arts Council is a Regional partner for delivering place-making activities**

York Region continues to be one of the fastest growing municipalities in Canada. Over 16,000 new residents have been attracted to the Region annually over the last five years.

York Region Arts Council provides community connection to York Region’s arts and culture assets and tourism operators. The organization’s mandate is to foster arts and culture as York Region’s primary partner in promoting tourism, arts and culture to consumers.

York Region established a funding partnership with York Region Arts Council as a delivery agent in 2011. The partnership is renewed annually and covers three primary areas:

1. Development and implementation of a marketing plan to promote York Region as a place to live, work and play
2. Industry/local business engagement
3. Management of a tourism, arts and culture website for consumer engagement

The organization facilitates collaboration among local municipal arts councils, promoting activities across all nine local cities and towns. It also holds a seat on the Central Counties Tourism Board representing York Region. Central Counties Tourism is the Regional Tourism organization appointed by the Province to oversee tourism activities in York Region, Durham Region and the Headwaters area; which includes the Town of Caledon in Peel Region, the entirety of Dufferin County and the Town of Erin in Wellington County.

## 4. Analysis

### **The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to the tourism, arts and culture sector in 2020**

Throughout 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created wide-reaching economic impacts on York Region's tourism, arts and culture sector. This included lockdown orders and other limitations such as a ban on indoor events and restrictions for outdoor events.

In a written submission filed by the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario (TIAO) to the Provincial Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs in June, it is estimated that in 2020 Ontario would lose \$18.3 billion in tourism revenue compared to 2019. A survey conducted by TIAO also revealed that the majority of business owners in the sector are experiencing average revenue losses of 70% compared to 2019.

Due to the ongoing challenges and disruptions, many of the York Region Arts Council's key tourism, arts and culture-related activities were cancelled or postponed. Postings of events and other experiences by industry operators were also down by more than half compared to the previous year. In a survey conducted by Festivals and Events Ontario, festival organizers indicated that more than half of community events in Ontario were canceled or postponed in 2020.

Based on a study by the Conference Board of Canada on the projected Economic Impact of COVID-19 in York Region delivered in June, the Accommodations & Food Services sector and the Arts, Entertainment & Recreation sector were projected to be amongst the hardest hit by the pandemic with GDP losses of 36% and 22.3% respectively. The Accommodations and Food Services sector is also projected to experience losses of over 10,000 jobs. These are expected to slowly recover by the end of 2021 as a vaccine is released and consumer confidence gradually returns.

## **Despite the challenges, the “Experience York Region” website had significant reach**

The [ExperienceYorkRegion.com](https://www.experienceyorkregion.com) website is the one-stop resource for things to do in York Region. Multiple public health orders that limited gatherings caused many events to be cancelled resulting in a decrease in event postings on the website and overall activity. In 2020, tourism, arts and culture operators posted 313 events from across York Region compared to over 600 in 2019.

Despite the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Experience York Region website maintained strong online visibility. It appeared in over 3.25 million searches on Google and other search engines and the website also recorded more than 107,000 page views by nearly 84,000 unique visitors. Of those who visited the website in 2020, 92% were new visitors, which indicates new audiences are constantly discovering [ExperienceYorkRegion.com](https://www.experienceyorkregion.com).

## **York Region established the Tourism, Arts and Culture Sub-Group as part of the Business Recovery Support Partnership to support the sector**

The York Region Business Recovery Support Partnership was created in April 2020 to bring together economic development stakeholders and industry leaders from across York Region. As part of this initiative, an industry-led Tourism, Arts and Culture Sub-group was created to identify and address issues related to the sector.

Facilitated by York Region Economic Strategy staff, this group included membership from the York Region Arts Council, Central Counties Tourism, local municipalities and various businesses and associations located within York Region. Since its launch in April 2020, this group held 17 meetings to identify and address immediate and ongoing industry challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, to share best practices and to provide support to the industry. Key activities included:

- Capturing ongoing issues and challenges and prioritizing items for action
- Sharing industry resources, information and guidance on COVID-19 pandemic procedures
- Hosting a presentation by York Region Public Health to provide information on COVID-19 pandemic health and safety measures
- Launching of a tourism marketing campaign called “Ready When You Are”

## **The Tourism, Arts and Culture Sub-Group launched an economic recovery marketing campaign called “Ready When You Are”**

A key outcome of the sub-group was the development and launch of an economic recovery marketing campaign called “Ready When You Are”, jointly led by York Region and the York Region Arts Council. The primary objectives of the campaign were to generate awareness of York Region’s tourism, arts, hospitality and culture offerings and experiences, and to

encourage residents to safely explore York Region, in line with York Region Public Health recommendations.

The campaign was developed collaboratively based on input from:

- Industry stakeholders in the Region including business owners and industry groups
- Industry reports and publications by organizations such as the Conference Board of Canada and Tourism Industry Association of Ontario, which indicated that the accommodations and tourism industry was projected to be one of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic
- The outcome of a survey of the York Region business community conducted in May 2020, where more than 40% of respondents suggested that increased promotion of local businesses would be highly important to their success. Of that group, the majority recommended online and social media promotion as the best delivery method for those messages

A campaign website ([readywhenyr.com](https://readywhenyr.com)) was developed to share information for safely exploring York Region and its many destinations and attractions. The website also featured a social media board that captured posts using the #ReadyWhenYR hashtag and links to a five-part promotional video campaign developed to highlight various attractions and experiences available throughout York Region.

The “Ready When You Are” campaign was launched in August 2020 in line with the Province moving York Region into Stage 3 and lifting restrictions. It featured individual businesses from across York Region while broadly promoting sector operators. It also promoted shop local campaigns led by local municipalities and directed traffic to the Experience York Region website.

By the end of 2020, the campaign:

- Generated more than 1.5 million impressions, or views, across social media
- Reached over 375,000 individuals
- Had over 14,000 likes, comments and shares
- Received local media coverage
- Attracted the participation of over 50 businesses from across the Region, including the Hilton Toronto/Markham Suites Conference Centre (Markham), Upper Canada Mall (Newmarket), Legoland Discovery Centre (Vaughan), and several others

The campaign has continued in 2021 to provide ongoing promotional support for the tourism, arts and culture sector and help drive economic recovery.

## **York Region is renewing its partnership with the Arts Council for 2021**

The Region will renew its one-year funding agreement ending December 31, 2021 with York Region Arts Council to undertake tourism promotion and related activities across York Region, subject to Council approval of the proposed Planning and Economic Development 2021 budget. The funding for this tourism partnership is captured as a line-item in the annual Planning and Economic Development budget. The agreement includes:

- Development and delivery of a marketing plan focused on economic recovery
- Maintenance of the ExperienceYorkRegion.com website
- Community and tourism industry stakeholder engagement

## **5. Financial**

Included as part of the 2021 Planning and Economic Development branch budget, \$77,500 is proposed to assist York Region Arts Council with delivery of the marketing plan. This funding is subject to Council approval of the 2021 budget. This initiative will support ongoing local tourism promotion to support economic recovery, arts and culture programs and industry engagement. The partnership is a cost-effective opportunity for the Region given York Region Arts Council's well-established relationships throughout the local arts and culture community and with key stakeholders.

## **6. Local Impact**

The Region continues to support local tourism marketing initiatives through the York Region Arts Council and Central Counties Tourism. This collaboration through the Arts Council will extend to local municipalities including Destination Markham Corporation and Tourism Vaughan Corporation. Tourism marketing programs are developed based on alignment with municipal, regional and provincial priorities through regular meetings and in collaboration with municipal economic development partners.

## **7. Conclusion**

The Region continues to play an important role supporting and promoting tourism and place-making programs through a formal relationship with the York Region Arts Council and collaboration with various tourism stakeholders. COVID-19 has greatly impacted the tourism, arts and culture sector, and these partnerships are important in promoting economic recovery.

Staff will continue the relationship with the York Region Arts Council and leverage other opportunities to further support tourism related place-making activities to audiences within York Region and beyond. This will further enhance the Region's appeal as a great place to work, play and live in support of broader economic development goals and in promoting economic recovery.

For more information on this report, please contact Jonathan Wheatle, Director, Economic Strategy at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 71503. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



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