



**Economic Development
Strategic Review & Action Plan**

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Background

The Village of Merrickville-Wolford is called the Jewel of the Rideau with a population of 2,913-1/3 - Village and 2/3's - Rural. The largest centre of the community is Merrickville which is known for its boutiques and local craft people and artists. It is considered to be one of the best preserved 19th century villages in Ontario with more than 100 historic buildings designated. Adding to this unique setting is the presence of Rideau Canal, a 202 km waterway and UNESCO World Heritage Site.

While the Merrickville is a commercial hub attracting thousands of visitors yearly, the surrounding communities of Carleys Corners, Eastons Corners, Hemlock Corners, Jasper, Snowdons Corners, Wolford Centre and Wolford Chapel have a strong agriculture focus with emphasis on dairy. This combination is appealing to both professional and construction services.

The Village of Merrickville-Wolford has completed a series of economic development related reports since 1997. These include:

- First Impression Community Exchange, January 2012
- Merrickville-Wolford Economic Development Strategy, June 2010 completed by the Industry, Economic Development Tourism Advisory Committee
- Village of Merrickville-Wolford Economic Development Analysis & Plan, February 2008 completed by Blais & Association Economic Development Consulting
- Merrickville Vision 2020, April 1997

Literature Review

Vision 2020 is a broad scope document. The economic development priorities focus on tourism, commercial, clean industrial and home base businesses with recognition on the importance of agriculture with a concern to sustain lands. It also notes the desire for continuing education courses. The Blais Report is a detailed document with three strategic objectives; economic development structure and policies, tourism, and economic diversification. Each objective has a series of action oriented goals. The Industry Economic Development and Tourism Advisory Committee Report identified key priorities around economic development framework, infrastructure and service facilities, tourism development and sectorial diversification. Within these priorities are a series of recommendations.

One of the recommendations from both the Blais Report and Industry Economic Development and Tourism Advisory Report was to complete the First Impressions Community Exchange which has now occurred. The final report was presented in January 2012. The First Impressions Report provided 12 opportunities for consideration around Chamber communication, visitor services, signage, tourism product development, agriculture, artisans, housing, accessibility and local recreation. Throughout these documents there are recommendations consistent with the other documents.

Current Programming

The Village Merrickville-Wolford has a commercial core that is viewed by many external communities and visitors as a model of success. It should be recognized that this success is attributed to many activities that have not previously been highlighted and communicated. In a review of the activities, the following categories provide some structure to the creation of a

tourism village destination along with a community that is rich through animation and programming. This programming is provided through various departments of the municipality and overseen by the Chief Administrative Officer.

1. Community Animation - 2013 Funding – \$16,000
 (\$7,500 Community / \$8,500 Canada Day)

The municipality encourages community members and groups into action with support funding towards festivals and events that animate its natural and built assets. Businesses and citizens are extremely active in breathing life into activities that shape the character of the community and drives their individual passions. These activities encourage more active citizens, fosters community spirit within the municipality, while creating place-based tourism and a dynamic year-round tourist destination.

Events	Organizer	Date
Canal Fest	Lions Club	August
Canada Day	Municipality	July
Car Show	Merrickville Car Show “Cruise & Shop”	July
Jazz Festival		October
Agriculture Fair	Agriculture Society	August
Christmas Eve in Merrickville	Chamber of Commerce	December
Road to Bethlehem		December

2. Heritage Streetscape and Beautification – 2013 Budget - \$8,800
 (exclusive of heritage grants)

The municipality is pro-active in creating an attractive streetscape for its Village core. Annual funding supports flags, seasonal banners and flowers. New investments have also been made for the purchase of; benches to create resting areas of pedestrians, recycling containers that reflects the community’s desire to be eco-friendly and directional signage. In addition the municipality ensures the village core is maintained through regular street and sidewalk cleaning that presents an attractive pedestrian-friendly destination.

Many commercial buildings in the village core are of a heritage nature. The municipalities Official Plan recognizes the important to protect, conserve, restore, maintain and enhance these cultural heritage resources. As recommended in the Industry, Economic Development and Tourism Advisory Report and Blais Report, Designated Heritage Conservation Districts have been established in two areas. These districts assist in creating Merrickville’s sense of place. Property owners of designated heritage buildings are encouraged to consider the heritage design in their improvement plans. There are small grants of \$750 per project for commercial properties and \$500 per project for residential are available.

3. Marketing and Communications – 2013 Funding - *Administration budget*

Marketing and Communication for Merrickville-Wolford occurs at various levels utilizing various mediums. In 2010, the municipality adopted a new brand that is now being utilized in all marketing and communication pieces and completes a recommendation from the Industry, Economic Development and Tourism Advisory Committee. Communication with residents occurs four times per year with Council Notes newsletter. The Downtown message board is maintained for citizens and visitors to keep updated on municipal items of interest.

Advertising / Signage - \$4,000

Events that are overseen by the municipality are promoted through various mediums. The municipality oversees the contract for the Merrickville tourism profile signs located on Highway 401 through the Tourism Oriented Directional Signs (TODS) program.

Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association - \$2,000

This investment provides the community with the opportunity to be a member of the Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association (RHRTA) which is a Destination Marketing Organization recognized by the province. This association highlights the community as one of the villages along the waterway. Communities are provided with a presence on their website including local business listing, they attend local and national tradeshow, facilitate media familiarization tours, and develop promotional materials such as guides and maps. Last year, the organization generated \$1.8 million in editorial value – “free ink”.

Trade Mission / Foreign Relations – value-added

With the Rideau Canal being a UNESCO world heritage site, additional opportunities have been made available to the community. The Mayor has been proactive in securing opportunities to speak about the Canal while highlighting Merrickville-Wolford on foreign trade missions and World Canal Conferences. The investment has supported global awareness thereby attracting additional media opportunities and visiting delegations with a limited investment.

Website / Social Media – administrative budget

The municipal website provides general information related to governance, community initiatives and resident areas of interest. A Twitter account is maintained by the CAO.

Chamber of Commerce – value-added

The municipality benefits from community organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and its membership in promoting events and co-op business advertisements. Strong results have occurred in bringing the citizens from Ottawa and Northern US market into the Village. The Chamber also maintains a website with event information.

4. Visitor Services – Funding 2013 \$2,000

The Village municipal office provides a location for brochures to be displayed. Portable washrooms now have been located in the Village core to assist with visitor needs (\$2,000).

Visitor information is also provided by Friends of the Rideau at The Depot from mid-June to end of September located adjacent to the historic Blockhouse. This service is provided through their volunteer base with varied hours of operation. In-kind infrastructures services are provided by the municipality.

5. Innovative Partnerships – 2013 Funding *Value added – administration budget*

Various innovative partnerships have been developed with the municipality, Parks Canada and community organizations. An example is the municipality leases The Depot from Parks Canada for the utilization by the Friends of the Rideau. The municipality also has a similar partnership with the Historical Society who oversees the Blockhouse Museum and interruptive program. In the addition to the leasing arrangement,

assistance is provided by the municipality for payroll and financial management of grant funds for student salaries and daily transaction deposits.

In addition, the municipality leases land from Parks Canada (\$500/year), who subleases the land to the Lions Club to provide management for a 20-site campground abutting the Rideau Canal. Funds raised by the Club are returned to the community with initiatives such as the donation of the library building back to the municipality.

The United Counties of Leeds and Grenville Economic Development Office works on regional initiatives while acting as an advisor for local community development. Their focus is on key industry sector business retention and investment attraction through the development of new marketing initiatives. These activities are funded through the Counties budget.

The Valley Heartland Community Futures Development Corporation (VHCFDC) provides the municipality with funding to support initiatives identified by the municipality as a priority. These funds have been allocated to items such as recycling containers, downtown beautification, Community Centre washrooms, etc.

1. Community Lifestyle – Funding 2013 - \$31,000

Merrickville-Wolford residents enjoy a lifestyle that offers a unique historic setting with strong rural community roots. The municipality recognizes the importance of recreation programming offered through the maintenance of the beach and toboggan hill along with the Summer Fund Program for children ages 6-12. Additional funds are utilized to maintain the two Community Centres in Merrickville and Easton's Corners as well as ball and soccer fields and outdoor rinks in both wards.

Strategic Focus in Moving Forward

The Village of Merrickville-Wolford should be proud of its downtown vibrancy through its events and unique sense of place. For many visitors and locals within the region, it is a destination of choice to enjoy. Opportunities to diversify the local economy require focus and vigilance. While recreation is an important element to community lifestyle, it will be handled separately to facilitate economic development priorities being clearly communicated.

Currently underway is a collaborative project – The Living and Visiting the Rideau UNESCO World Heritage Site. Results of this project will be brought forward and consideration will be given to opportunities that would be beneficial to the municipality.

In review of the previous reports and current activity, the Village of Merrickville-Wolford staff currently plays a significant role in economic development, albeit in a diversified approach through the utilization of various departments and staff.

Moving forward it is recommended that the following priorities be undertaken over the next three years under the direction of the CAO. Many of these areas of focus have been identified in previous reports along with actions from the First Impressions Task Group.

2013 – 2016 Priorities

1. Community Animation

Sustain and build upon activities that generate increased visitor spending. Lead communications with local event organizers on opportunities for event development, grants, volunteer training and marketing. Develop stronger relationships with Eastern Ontario Events Centre.

2. Heritage Streetscape and Beautification Programs

Continue to maintain funding towards seasonal banners and flowers. Promote awareness of Façade Improvements funding municipally and through the Valley Heartland Community Development Corporation.

3. Marketing and Communications

Continue to integrate the new municipal brand on all marketing and communication pieces. Ensure brand extension to partner organizations is updated.

Advertising / Signage

Update gateway signage and maintain TODS / Highway 401 signs. Create directional signage for visitor information centre

Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association (RHRTA)

Maintain and consider marketing opportunities to further leverage the investment. Bring forward new co-operative initiatives that are presented as part of the RHRTA annual plans.

Trade Mission / Foreign Relations

Continue to integrate opportunities for enhance exposure of Merrickville-Wolford utilizing UNESCO world heritage site and existing businesses foreign connections.

Website / Social Media

Update and increase website content – specifically economic development and visitor section. Integrate online website content between Chamber of Commerce, Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association and the municipality ensuring increased exposure of water experiences and events. Invest in the Counties business directory initiative to ensure Merrickville-Wolford businesses are displayed on the municipal website. Start to build social media presence.

4. Innovation Partnerships and Enhanced Collaboration

Continue to maintain existing partnerships and explore new opportunities for collaboration, efficiencies and enhancements. Explore new innovative partnership with other organizations such as the newly opened Fulford Preparatory College.

Leadership should be taken by the municipality towards having a stronger relationship with the Merrickville Chamber of Commerce. As a small community Council and staff should have a clear understanding of their priorities and capacity to deliver. Consideration may be given to have a joint meeting discuss issues, challenges and opportunities of mutual interest such as an accessibility initiative for individual businesses.

5. Tourism

Marketing

Ensure linkages are being made between festival organizers, businesses, chamber of commerce, Counties, Rideau Heritage Route Tourism Association and the Regional Tourism Organization – The Great Waterway to maximize and coordinate communication and marketing opportunities.

Visitor Services

Facilitate research on visitor services that are provided by other municipalities. Assess current services provided and discuss opportunities for enhancement or change with the Friends of the Rideau and Historical Society. Provide training opportunities on customer service and sales for increase visitor expenditures. Strong consideration be given to providing consistent hours and increased length of season

Product Development

Build upon the foundation and utilize existing resources for the development of culinary tourism strategy. Mrs. McGarrigles Fine Food shop is a strong anchor for the municipality.

Develop a strategy to sustain, attract and grow the artists / artisan hub. Strong emphasis should be dedicated towards providing experiences for demonstration and learning. This builds the creative economy sector for the municipality.

Upon the conclusion of - The Living and Visiting the Rideau UNESCO World Heritage Site Project consider some of the opportunities presented in the report.

6. Business Retention, Expansion and Attraction

Complete a business gap analysis and identify areas of leakage of investment attraction. Undertake a vacant commercial buildings inventory to determine vacancy rate in the Village core. Initiate a business visitation program to identify business issues and opportunities. Work in partnership with the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville Economic Development on key businesses in the municipality.

Entrepreneurship Attraction

Work with the Leeds Grenville Economic Development Office on attraction of entrepreneurs from the Ottawa marketplace and within the creative economy occupations. Review Home Occupation Zoning by-law to ensure consistency with attraction efforts.

Agriculture to Commercialization

Collaborate to gain inventory of local food producers, products, quantities and on-farm markets. Have research completed on opportunities for product commercialization that could result in investment attraction.

Residential Attraction

Encourage and promote the attraction of new residents and developers by highlighting the creative community and the active lifestyle offered by both the rural and urban areas through the website and continued interaction with realtors and developers.

7. Leverage Funding New Opportunities

The municipality will continue to work with the Valley Heartland Community Futures Development Corporate (VHCFDC) on projects that stimulate job creation and economic

growth through business and community development. Initiatives to support the economic development priorities will be submitted VHCFDC.

Additional funding opportunities will be explored through various ministries. The Rural Economic Development (RED) Program from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Ministry of Rural Affairs is a current funding program that is being reviewed.

Measurements

As part of our strategic focus we will look to completion of priorities and series of indicators as tracking metrics. These include:

- Community Animation – number of events and estimated attendance (event organizers)
- Investment in Facade Improvements (building permits)
- Information Centre Traffic (guest book)
- Commercial Vacancy Rate in Village Commercial Core
- Number of business visits and consultations conducted
- Influence in new funding to the community

Operations

The CAO will explore options for the reallocation of duties within the Administration department to allow for a more concentrated focus on economic development priorities.

Additional expertise will be resourced on as need basis. When funding opportunities for economic development priorities are submitted, an allocation towards human resource requirements will be included. Consideration will be given to shared resources with other municipalities in coordination with the Counties.

The CAO will develop an internal structure and communication strategy to make sure the Economic Development priorities are communicated, executed and reported. This structure will ensure the municipality takes a leadership role, becomes investment friendly and provides a welcoming environment to do business. The CAO will work collaboratively with key economic development partners – Counties, Smiths Falls and Valley Heartland CFDC.