

## **Niagara ERT's Economic Recovery Plan**

On March 18, 2020, Niagara's mayors and Regional Chair came together to launch the Niagara Economic Rapid Response Team (ERT). Upper levels of government mandated the closure of all businesses and the subsequent provincial and regional state of emergency due to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Local municipal leaders recognized the detrimental impact these closures would have on local businesses and the regional economy and took action to mitigate the effects as much as possible.

Through this team, Niagara's economic development professionals have been collaborating throughout the pandemic to connect Niagara businesses with the supports and resources they need to survive and recover.

Niagara is united in its support of the business community during this unprecedented crisis and will foster collaboration, innovation and resilience as we seek to safely re-open. The ERT is committed to offering long-term, ongoing support to help ensure Niagara's businesses remain supported and connected throughout this process and will re-emerge prosperous and sustainable.

The 13 municipalities across Niagara have each taken measures to relieve the burden on local businesses in their communities. These activities include deferrals of taxes and utility fees, increased online advisory services, access to personal protective equipment (PPE) waiving various penalties and interest on outstanding accounts, and launching shop local campaigns promoting businesses that are open and offering modified services.

Additional stakeholders like the Chambers of Commerce, Niagara Workforce Planning Board, and Employment Ontario providers have been, and will continue to be, critical partners in assuring that communications about new programs are widely shared and businesses' challenges are being brought to the forefront. They are part of a larger network of community enablers that will play an active role in the ERT recovery planning process and implementation.

The Niagara Economic Recovery Plan (the "Plan") and its identified actions are reflective of the responses and input received from businesses through the survey responses, input from further by industry and sector consultation, as well as the results from corporate calling efforts.

The Plan will focus on local initiatives to address the needs of our businesses and connect them with resources to provide further assistance. This will include both strategies to re-open safely and to build more resilient businesses by learning from changes realized as a result of the pandemic. The plan is centred on encouraging and supporting businesses, investment, and job creation in order to proactively recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Plan has been developed in a way that aligns with local economic recovery efforts, as well as broader, province-wide priorities. This alignment has been obtained by engaging the local area municipality (LAM) staff responsible for economic recovery planning and through participation in the GTA Economic Development Alliance.

The GTA Economic Development Alliance is recently formed group, composed of 20+ municipalities that have come together to support economic recovery across Ontario. Current members are Aurora, Brampton, Burlington, Durham Region, Georgina, Halton Hills, Halton Region, King, Markham, Milton, Mississauga, Niagara Region, Oakville, Richmond Hill, Toronto, Vaughan, Whitchurch-Stouffville, York Region, the Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO), as well as the regional investment attraction agency Toronto Global.

Based on the initial reporting through the first COVID-19 Business Impact survey, the impact of the pandemic was projected to be close to \$576.3 million within the first 3 months. It is recognized that for many Niagara businesses, the road to economic recovery will be long and difficult.

The Accommodation and Food Service and Tourism sectors were especially hard hit, being the first to be mandated closed and experiencing the highest reported staff lay-offs and revenue losses. Retail and Arts, Entertainment and Recreation were also hard-hit and experienced a significant loss in revenue and high lay-offs. An unprecedented number of people have left the workforce as a result of lay-offs due to COVID-19. There are significant workforce and labour market challenges that lie ahead to combat the negative effects of the pandemic.

The Niagara COVID-19 Business Impact Survey – Part 2 was distributed to approximately 10,000 businesses from May 15 until June 1, 2020, mainly through direct email.

This survey's questions centred on recovery, with questions that address the aid programs that businesses accessed, the areas where they require further assistance, the largest barriers to re-opening, and the like. The survey yielded responses from 1,382 business across all 12 municipalities in Niagara. The responses are representative of all industry sectors in Niagara's economy and respondents reported employing 47,456 staff.

The industry sectors where respondents reported the highest number of employees included accommodation and food services; arts, entertainment and recreation; manufacturing; retail trade; and, health care and social assistance. Respondents reported total layoffs of 17,950 staff across industry sectors, with 58% being full-time staff and 42% being part-time staff.

Through the survey, businesses reported a combined loss of \$425.11 million in revenue. It is apparent some industry sectors were affected disproportionately. Arts, entertainment and recreation and accommodation and food services reported the highest revenue losses.

Although many businesses reported accessing a number of aid programs, it is apparent that additional supports are required to assist them in re-opening and recovering. Respondents reported the highest needs as property tax deferrals, promotion and marketing assistance, deferrals on utilities, and advocacy to other levels of government.

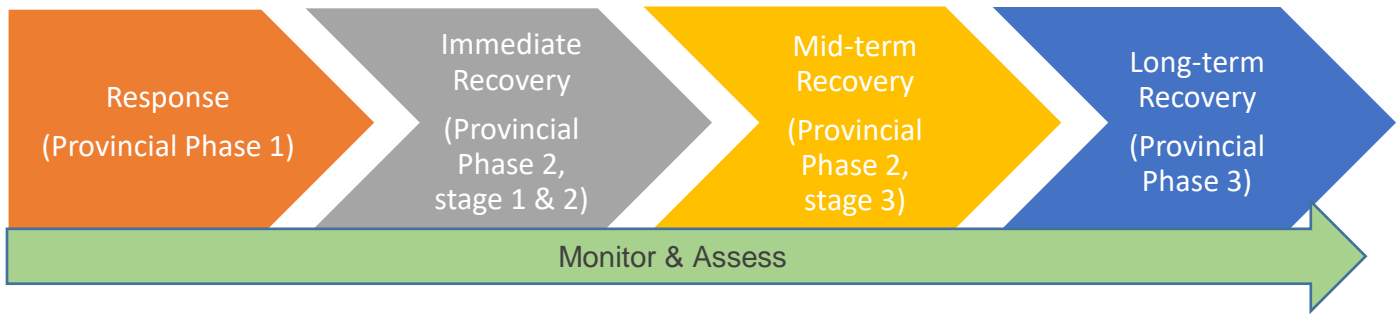
We acknowledge the overall responsiveness of policymakers that introduced support and relief measures for many businesses and employees impacted. As the Province looks to re-open parts of the economy through the [Re-Opening Ontario after COVID-19 framework](#), the ERRT has shifted its focus and efforts to recovery planning.

The proposed Plan is a series of actions that will create a positive investment climate in Niagara and help its local economy by supporting local businesses. Specifically, the plan is centered on the following 3 main themes: Research and Information, Advocacy, and Resilience.

In order to help move the economy forward, a series of actions will be taken immediately, while other measures will be actioned subsequently. The Plan uses a phased approach that will follow the Province's framework for re-opening. Guidance will be taken from the Province to guide how we move between phases. Input from the local Medical Officer of Health will be sought to help advise decisions locally on how to move between phases as well.

The Plan will be updated regularly and will likely change as the COVID-19 emergency evolves, as more information becomes available, and as the Province of Ontario updates its Emergency Orders. This will not be a linear progression through the framework, as any sharp increase in the number of cases would require movement back to previous phases.

The proposed progression of this Plan is as follows:



The actions in the plan are intended to progress in conjunction with the Province's framework. Any adjustment in the progression through that framework by the Province would require an assessment on the impact locally to this plan. As such, the plan will continue to assess, evolve, and adjust as necessary depending on the advice directed by the Province and in consultation with the local Medical Officer of Health.

Niagara's ERRT will work in consultation with Niagara Region's Strategic Communications and Public Affairs division to create a comprehensive communications strategy to support the Plan. This strategy will ensure local businesses remain engaged with the progression of the plan, and remain connected with the supports and initiatives outlined in the Plan.

As the region moves into Phase 3 and beyond, the efforts in the Recovery Plan will lead into the Long Term Economic Development Strategy that has been identified as a Regional Council strategic priority.

	Immediate	Mid-term	Long-term
<b>Research and Information Pillar</b>	<p>Conduct a second COVID-19 economic impact (Business Impact) survey</p> <p>Maintain a strong base of data on the local economy and businesses, available to stakeholders to inform decision making</p> <p>Promote and post new Federal and Provincial initiatives and announcements on the ERRT website page</p> <p>Promote Provincial and Federal aid programs, including the Resiliency Help Desk at 1-866-989-1080 where businesses can access accountants or financial advisors</p> <p>Monitor and assess the impact of remote (online) education at Brock/Niagara College on Niagara's economy and business's employment needs</p>	<p>Prepare a report on the second regional COVID-19 Business Impact survey results</p> <p>Identify vulnerable companies and sectors from the survey as a focus for municipal BR+E efforts</p> <p>Prepare and circulate sector- and municipal-specific reports from second COVID Business Impact survey</p> <p>Monitor development application activity upon re-opening of economy, including year over year analysis as indicator of economic growth post-pandemic</p> <p>Recognize and showcase businesses that are successfully pivoting through the ERRT website and other channels</p> <p>Add a COVID-19 business impact feedback form on the ERRT website for ongoing data collection</p> <p>Provide regular/on-going updates to Regional Council on COVID-19 impact related activities, issues and efforts</p> <p>Monitor activities and impacts in other comparable municipalities to benchmark Niagara and learn from best practices</p>	<p>On-going: Provide regular research updates to stakeholders on general market conditions, including local workforce changes, large expansion investments, business closures, etc. as available/released</p> <p>Conduct a third COVID-19 Business Impact Survey in phase 3 to determine the status of recovery of businesses</p>

		<p>Host online webinars on topics relevant to supporting business</p> <p>With Emergency Management and Public Health, support businesses in re-opening in a safe and responsible way by sharing guidelines and protocols through update calls, as needed</p> <p>Survey businesses for commonalities in supply demand locally. Identify essential supplies and support companies in sourcing Niagara/Canada suppliers</p>	
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ED 11-2020	Appendix 1 Immediate	Mid-term	Long-term
<b>Advocacy Pillar</b>	Continued alignment between Regional and LAMs' Government Relations strategies and advocacy efforts.	Strive for consistent application of bylaw enforcement across LAMs and the Region	Immediate and longer term: Advocate for changes to the Ontario Planning Act to allow existing CIP funding programs to support COVID-19 related relief efforts. For example: CIPs allowing for an enhancement of virtual a presence (e.g. website design)
	Advocate for alignment and longer-term repayment schedules for all deferral programs to allow businesses reopening to generate sufficient cash-flow	Advocate for COVID-19 relief programs to continue into 2021 for tourism and hospitality sectors, including but not limited to CERB, CEWS, and rent relief programs	
	Continue to provide research and anecdotal findings from Niagara businesses to the appropriate levels of government within relevant Ministries, as well as AMO, FCM, FedDev and the joint Ontario government committee	Support Planning departments in review of red-tape reduction efforts to increase speed for development to re-start	Immediate and longer term: Advocate for accelerated broadband infrastructure investment in areas with limited/no service, working with SWIFT and other available programs
	Continue participating in the GTA and provincial recovery planning efforts to identify best practices and synergies across communities in recovery efforts	Advocate for digitization of Region permits and applications, where possible, to assist business cost savings	Immediate and longer term: Continued advocacy for infrastructure investments for major/regionally significant projects and expediting those already in process
	Monitor Provincial direction and decisions on childcare services through communication with Niagara Region Children's Services department and communicate to ERRT for assessment on local impact	Advocate to keep COVID-19 relief programs in place for employees while they are in re-training or re-skilling process	
		Advocate for expedited planning approvals at the Provincial level including MTO, Greenbelt, Niagara Escarpment Commission, etc.	

	Immediate	Mid-term	Long-term
<b>Resilience Pillar</b>	<p>Conduct significant engagement with stakeholders representing tourism, manufacturing and agri-business and Task Force members (see below)</p> <p>Expedite approval and coordination of use of public realm spaces by businesses to allow for distancing while supporting business resiliency</p> <p>Execute targeted business retention efforts (BR&amp;E) led by the EDOs in the local area municipalities with specific strategies to assist businesses in distress</p> <p>Encourage “buy-local” promotion via Social Media, particularly Linked-In &amp; <a href="http://www.openinniagara.com">www.openinniagara.com</a>. and amplify existing or complementary buy-local initiatives across Niagara</p> <p>Strive for increased digitization of government services including but not limited to: digital business advisory/support services, consultations and webinars, pre-consultation meetings, online applications, virtual town hall meetings, etc.</p> <p>Assist businesses that need access to capital by partnering on the promotion of the Regional Recovery &amp; Relief fund at Venture Niagara</p> <p>Maintain a listing of Niagara PPE suppliers on the ERRT website.</p>	<p>Work with Public Health to provide clear guidance on public safety and appropriate PPE for businesses</p> <p>Assist businesses in procurement of PPE by maintaining database on ERRT website and other tools</p> <p>Work with partners in workforce development – helping displaced workers find employment and deploy talent attraction initiatives to fill gaps</p> <p>Identify programs/funds for workforce training/re-training/re-skilling for a more flexible and adaptive workforce and assist employers in accessing them</p> <p>Assist businesses in increasing their online presence – promotion of Digital Main Street and/or other resources to get gain virtual presence</p> <p>Review decision-making process to allow for expedited approvals on development initiatives to support business re-opening</p> <p>Monitor any future wave of business closures or bankruptcies that may occur when relief programs end</p>	<p>Monitor level of demand for office and retail space due to increased adoption of online technologies and work-from-home options by business. Creative thinking to repurpose use of any excess space made available.</p> <p>Supply chains have been strained. Seek opportunities for import replacement – sourcing new domestic suppliers, or supporting repatriation of manufacturing.</p> <p>Re-focus FDI strategies and messaging to opportunities post- COVID. Develop new tools to undertake investment attraction, including site selection virtually</p> <p>Retain and develop OpenInNiagara tool to be a comprehensive online, regional business directory tool with input from municipalities</p> <p>Include a portion in the Long Term Economic Strategy that addresses mitigation plans for future pandemic impact</p>

The ERRT cannot achieve these actions on their own. There is a large group of community enablers whose support and resources will be necessary to achieve these actions. This group will provide input to the plan and provide resources and feedback.

This group of supporters will be referred to as the Niagara Economic Recovery Task Force (“the Task Force”). This group will be used as a channel for communication to provide updates on the recovery plan actions, as well as solicit feedback and engage in assessment of relevancy of these actions as time progresses. Information will be shared by Niagara Economic Development at regular intervals, through email and virtual meetings.

The proposed Economic Recovery Task Force members would include, but not be limited to:

- Niagara Region Economic Development
- EDO representatives from each of the Local Area Municipalities
- Niagara Workforce Planning Board
- Chambers of Commerce
- Innovate Niagara
- Niagara Falls Small Business Enterprise Centre & St. Catharines Enterprise Centre
- Niagara Association of Realtors
- Employment Ontario service providers
- Niagara Region Social Assistance and Employment Opportunities
- Niagara Region Children’s Services
- Business Development Bank of Canada and Venture Niagara
- Brock University and Niagara College
- Private sector participation
- Tourism, manufacturing and agri-business stakeholders
- Niagara Industrial Association
- Niagara Home Builders Association
- Niagara Construction Association
- St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation
- Tourism Partnership of Niagara and local DMOs
- Any additional members will be added where applicable to deliver on pillar activities

Underscoring the work being done by the Economic Recovery Task Force, there will be extensive public-private sector consultation and participation from Tourism, Manufacturing and Agri-business sectors to guide the work being done by the group. Additional industry sector consultation will be pursued as needed.

The Niagara Region Economic Development department will act as a Project Manager on this recovery plan. Encouraging participating in the Pillar groups, liaising with the Pillar Leads (where applicable), coordinating the meet-ups of different advisory stakeholders, compiling the updates and sending communications to all Task Force members.