

MEMORANDUM

ED 17-2020

Subject: COVID-19 Response and Business Continuity in Economic Development

Date: December 9, 2020

To: Planning and Economic Development Committee

From: Valerie Kuhns, Acting Director, Economic Development

Economic Development

Current Status of Operations

This memo is the Economic Development Division's monthly update on our response to COVID-19 and business continuity. As previously reported, Economic Development's work is focused on leading planning for business recovery, through the Economic Rapid Response Team (ERRT) and the implementation of the Economic Recovery Plan. Actions in the Economic Recovery Plan are aimed at supporting our local businesses and are carried out in collaboration with the local Economic Development offices.

Regional Economic Development actively participates in the REOC and is collaborating with the Internal Organizational Recovery table as well as the Community Recovery Planning table to ensure that there is coordination and communication between the three recovery planning groups. We are providing input into the discussion about the economic indicators that will be used to monitor recovery.

Service/Operational Changes

We continue to monitor how best to respond to COVID-19 and maintain our business continuity throughout this time. There have been no operational changes in the last month, other than a realization that the team will be working from home in the longer term.

Significant Initiatives or Actions Taken

Campaign to support local business

At the time of writing this report, Economic Development is responding to the motion brought to Regional Council on November 18th and working with Communications to develop a campaign to support buying local. Feedback from the local Economic Development offices has been that we should compliment the existing buy local campaigns that are already running in their communities. A plan is being developed to support and amplify those campaigns. We are also working with the Chair's office and government relations staff on the advocacy ask in the motion.

Support to Businesses

An investment has been made in the expansion of the Small Business Enterprise Centres (SBECs) in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls to broaden their services across the entire region. They work directly with businesses to provide them with advisory services and information to assist in their recovery and help build resilience. Marketing support has also been provided to the SBECs in developing and managing the tools to host webinars including the Zoom webinar platform, Eventbrite for ticketing and the development of a calendar of events on the [Niagara Canada website](#)

The Niagara Canada website has received an overhaul on the [COVID-19 business support page](#) to capture all recovery information and sites. Sections include: COVID News; Recovery Support; Provincial and local resources; Resilient Niagara Stories; Financial support and Niagara PPE Provider directory. Website page views were 22,861 during the last 30 days, which is an increase of 2,790 over the same time last year. There were 256 returning visitors to the website and 3,971 visits in the last 30 days, up by 23.21% on last year.

Business Updates

The biweekly ERRT calls to our EDO colleagues, BIAs, Chambers and industry associations are being used as a communications channel, working with Public Health, to get information out to the business community. Most recently to solicit feedback on the Section 22 order and provide support to businesses by sourcing and sharing Section 22 information through telephone, email and website inquiries.

Open In Niagara Tool

Work is ongoing to transition the 'Open in Niagara' website to a permanent business directory to support buy local and domestic supply chain opportunities. This will include incorporating GIS information. In Phase one our existing database of 10,000+ businesses will be incorporated and it will be made easier to navigate. In Phase two a user experience will be built as well as a self-serve portal.

Resilient Company Profiles

We are developing profiles of 10+ Niagara companies that have successfully pivoted in these challenging times. To date almost all of the municipalities are represented with businesses from a range of sectors from manufacturing to agriculture to hospitality. These profiles will be featured on our website and will be shared by the EDOs.

Funding to Support Businesses

An application has been made by Niagara Region, on behalf of the ERRT and in partnership with Venture Niagara, to the Tourism Adaption and Recovery Fund. This fund is administered by Fed Dev Ontario. If approved, the fund would provide grants to tourism-dependent businesses to help them with the costs to adapt and stay in business during the shoulder and off season 2020/2021. At the time of writing this report we are waiting to hear if our application has been successful. In the meantime, the processes and documents are being developed to roll the funding out to businesses immediately. All of this is done in collaboration with our EDO colleagues.

Marketing support is being provided to Venture Niagara to promote the next round of RRRF (Regional Relief and Recovery Fund) which provides interest free loans to businesses.

Business and Economic Research and Analysis

As data becomes available for recent months, we are able to provide research and analysis updates to assist businesses and organizations in planning during these uncertain times. These reports include an Economic Update and the Impact of COVID-19 on investment and development in Niagara. These reports have also been provided, with presentations, to PEDC.

An investment is being made by Economic Development to purchase Equifax data which will provide an indication of the most financially vulnerable industry sectors, as a result of COVID-19. Once analysed, a report will be developed and will be shared with the EDOs and stakeholders.

Trade and Investment

FDi meetings are ongoing virtually, focused on the U.S. market and the U.K., working with a lead generation consultant who provides pre-qualified leads. In the U.S. 19 meetings have been completed to date, with follow up. There are 3 more meetings scheduled, with a target of 60 in 2020. The work was stalled due to COVID-19 in the spring so this campaign will run into 2021. In the U.K. 3 meetings have been completed with 6 more scheduled and a target of 15 meetings before the end of 2020.

Working with the Hamilton Niagara Partnership 15 meetings are anticipated to be held virtually in Florida. It is anticipated that this contract will be completed by the end of 2020. It was delayed for one month by the U.S. election.

The Foreign Trade Zone coordinator works to support the local export community. A webinar was developed to help businesses attend trade shows virtually. 'Building Meaningful Connections over Virtual Platforms' was held on November 5th, 65 people registered and 41 attended. The content of the webinar was directed at helping Niagara's trade community adapt to the travel restrictions and challenges due to the continued spread of COVID-19, with a specific focus on providing tools to help our trade community conduct business online and create sales through virtual platforms. This was very timely as two days before the webinar the Federal government announced a new investment into the CanExport Grant. This program offers SMEs up to \$75,000 in funding for specific types of expenses to explore new opportunities to sell their products and services outside of Canada.

Working with the region's EDO offices and our local trade commissioner, help is being provided to Niagara's PPE suppliers to join Global Affairs - Trade Commissioner Service: [Canadian COVID-19 Capabilities Directory](#). The Canadian COVID-19 Capabilities Directory shows what Canada has to offer in the fight against COVID-19 to potential buyers around the world. Two local businesses are currently preparing applications.

Operational Outlook

1 month

- Support municipal 'Buy Local' campaigns.
- Continue to provide information through website and social media to businesses.
- Resilient company profiles on website and promoted through ERRT.
- Funding from Tourism Adaptation and Recovery Fund promoted and grants distributed to businesses (dependant on approval by Fed Dev Ontario).

3 months

- Implementation of Economic Recovery Plan completed.
- 'Open in Niagara' website expanded into a permanent regional business directory.
- Review work practices depending on Niagara Region recommendations and Public Health advice.

6 months

- Longer term strategic economic development planning started (depending on COVID-19).
- Continue to monitor economic indicators to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on the local economy compared to previous years and determine where resources could best be utilized to maximize ongoing economic development programming.
- Review work practices depending on Niagara Region recommendations and Public Health advice.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Valerie Kuhns
Acting Director, Economic Development