



Memo to Stratford City Council

March 2020

From: Lori DeGraw, Executive Director, Stratford Tourism Alliance

Re: Impact of COVID-19

I hope you are all keeping as well as can be expected in these unprecedented times. We can only hope our efforts help to normalize the situation with COVID-19 so we can start to plan with more certainty toward recovery. In the interim, here are some updates on recent activities at STA.

1. The STA remains closed to the public and in compliance with the province's direction for closure of all non-essential businesses, STA staff are working from home. There will still be occasional days that Karen or I need to be in the office briefly, but as a rule, work is completed from home.
2. Staff are staying very productive moving files forward on the on-going large-scale tech projects, media relations and itinerary generation (for numerous media that are committed to coming to Stratford as it is safe to do so), updating information about events and business hours and closures throughout the city, financial admin, 2019 audit, campaign ideation, communication regarding city updates and social media positivity campaign, search for a new webmaster, and deepening projects like the inbound marketing project. The only roles that cannot function at this time are those focused on visitor reception as visitor outreach is very minimal at this time. Staff in those capacities had been working on some visitor experience projects remotely, but these are wrapping up. As a result, I regret that I issued temporary lay-off notices to one full-time and two part-time staff, effective the first week of April. Hopefully once we get a sense of timelines to re-open the office, we will be able to hire them back immediately.
3. I have been staying abreast of financial implications for STA as a result of the crisis and shared some early potential impacts with Michael Humble and the STA Board last week. It is impossible to model scenarios with certainty at this point, as there is ambiguity regarding almost one-third of STA revenue (mostly annual revenue from membership fees, STS voluntary remittances, and advertising sales for products that are currently on hold), however expenses are also lower during this shutdown. At this time, I have frozen all invoicing (which has provided relief to most partners) and optional expenditures (on large projects such as the Culinary Guide). City funding creates stability to stay in a state of readiness to support eventual recovery when STA's external marketing efforts will be critical. STA involvement in the city leadership group spearheaded by Mayor Mathieson has been a helpful way to share information and map out priorities over the coming weeks and months.

4. STA is also completely aligned with the city's communication strategy as it navigates through the COVID-19 crisis. A centralized communications group aggregates information from official channels. The group includes all affiliated city organizations including InvestStratford, BIA, Chamber of Commerce, the Stratford Festival, STA, the Mayor, and the city communications department. It has been helpful to prioritize and share appropriate information for each organization's constituents, depending on area of expertise.
5. The current STA communications strategy is as follows:
  - a. Relevant resources from official channels shared with STA partners as available (without claiming subject matter expertise), up to a maximum of 1-2 comms per day
  - b. STA Twitter platform used to communicate more broadly to the whole city, especially to amplify official messages from the various organizations in the centralized comms group
  - c. Facebook and Instagram (which are normally broadcasting to external stakeholders only) have been redirected on a city-focused positivity feed. It has been sharing helpful actions, good deeds, beautiful images in Stratford, and supportive efforts within the community during this difficult time. It has an added benefit that it is very positive positioning for Stratford with the substantial external network that follows STA around the world. The response has been exceptional. As an example, one post on Facebook alone had a reach of over 10,000 with more than 500 shares and likes and was picked up by numerous media outlets across the country. Many other posts have achieved similar engagement levels. As a marketing organization, this is what STA does best, so we are pleased that the efforts are resonating with Stratford and the broader STA network, and will continue to expand on the positivity campaign.
6. Every day, there are tourism industry calls of every variety involving different stakeholders. I have participated in some as a Stratford DMO rep, and have shared others with STA and city partners so that others can participate if interested. Some of the stakeholders involved are: Destination Canada, Destination Think, Minister Joly, M.P. Nater, the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, OMAFRA, Minister McLeod, M.P.P. Pettapiece, RTO4, TIAC, and TIAO. There are many expressions of support for the tourism industry knowing it has been hit early and hard, but no firm mechanisms of support yet. We will keep lines of communication open to stay apprised of information as it is updated.

I hope this information is helpful. You can be sure the staff at STA is fully committed to preparing to support Stratford's recovery as it materializes. In the interim, we wish you, your colleagues, and your families the best in the strange and difficult times.

Take care,



Lori DeGraw