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YORK REGION TOURISM CUSTOMER SERVICE PROGRAM

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report dated January 2, 2008, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that this report be circulated by the Tourism Branch to the local municipalities, the chambers of commerce, board of trade, the Tourism Advisory Group, key tourism stakeholders and the public school boards for information and engagement.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide Regional Council an update on the development of a customer service training module program for tourism businesses based on the Character Community principals and philosophy.

3. BACKGROUND

Through the Premier Ranked Tourist Destination Project completed in 2006, it was identified by the tourism industry that:

- There is a significant gap in customer satisfaction research to evaluate guest experience in terms of hospitality and value for dollar spent in by visitors.
- There is an opportunity for York Region to improve the level of customer service provided by tourism operators.
- There is no York Region wide guest service training initiatives in place.
- The delivery of excellent hospitality and service is fundamental to the future success of York Region as a tourist destination.

Based on these findings, one of the recommendations from the Premier Ranked Tourist Destination Project report approved in September 2006 was that a service training program needed to be developed that provided tourism and related businesses guidance and direction on the selection and training of employees to deliver superior customer service. It was also recommended to partner with the Character Community Foundation of York Region to build upon the successful Character Movement given the York Region wide private and public sector support. And in June 2006, the Ontario legislature passed a resolution to have the Province of Ontario declared a “Province of Character”.

The development of a York Region Tourism Customer Service Program based Character Community principals was identified as a component of the 2007 York Region Tourism Program report approved by Regional Council in October 2006.

A request for funding submitted to the Ontario Ministry of Tourism resulted in \$10,000 in funding to retain the services of Kathleen Redmond of Centre for Character Leadership/Redmond & Associates to support development of the York Region Tourism Customer Service Program for the tourism industry.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The provision of superior hospitality contributes to the overall appeal and image of York Region as a tourist destination, enhances the consumer experience and encourages return visitation and increased tourism revenues.

The York Region Tourism Customer Service program is designed specifically for small to medium sized tourism businesses that currently may not have the resources to provide customer service training to their employees but is equally beneficial for larger corporations. This program supports the development of a “service focused workplace culture” through the implementation of Customer Service Program built upon the Character Community philosophy.

The York Region Tourism Customer Service training module would include a variety of tools to assist tourism operators train employees on how to deliver a high level of customer service based on the ten Character attributes of respect, responsibility, honest, integrity, compassion, courage, inclusiveness, fairness, optimism, perseverance and initiative.

4.1 The Definition of Customer Service using the Character Philosophy

By using the Character approach, the intent is that service behaviours, attitudes and actions change to ensure that every customer:

- Is treated in a manner that makes them feel valued as a patron of the organization.
- Has their service requests filled with enthusiasm, efficiency and accuracy.
- Leaves the establishment feeling welcomed and valued.
- Is aware that York Region is committed to offering exceptional customer service.
- Is provided with information about tourism venues and events in York Region, when appropriate.

The Customer Service training module assists tourism service providers to ensure that every customer is heard, is welcomed, feels valued, departs delighted and will return.

4.2 The Process – York Region Tourism Customer Service Program Development

On May 17, 2007, focus group sessions were held to solicit information from tourism stakeholders regarding the issues tourism employers are facing in creating a service oriented culture. From the focus group session, clear direction emerged to provide the foundation for the development of the Customer Service Program including:

- Leadership training – the program tools must be easily implemented.
- Measurement tools (provision of a marketable advantage in terms of recruiting, retention and client perspective; increased sales, decreased complaints, reduced staff turn over).
- Options for a variety of program delivery methods (facilitated by an external trainer, facilitated internally through training tools, on-line access, off hour options).
- Recognition and Accreditation for both the tourism business and employees who have taken the training.
- Commitment for a Regional approach and connection to Character Community Movement.

On November 14, 2007, a draft of the York Region Tourism Customer Service Program, tools and structure was presented to tourism industry stakeholders and representatives from two Georgina High Schools. Overall the program was well received and direction for next steps and tourism business engagement were discussed. Representatives from the Schools present expressed a strong interest for further discussion on possible curriculum inclusion to prepare youth for employment in the tourism industry, and possible potential for administering a certification program for youth who have completed the Customer Service Program training. Ontario Ministry of Tourism staff present were also supportive and considerations to obtain implementation funding for Phase Two will be pursued.

On November 23, an overview of the York Region Customer Service Program was presented at the York Region Tourism Annual General Meeting and several tourism businesses volunteered to be involved in the pilot of the program.

4.3 Elements of the Draft York Region Tourism Customer Service Program

The draft Customer Service Program is structured as three one hour training sessions that provide clear direction for the employer to train staff and provides employee aids that assist in behaviour and attitude changes. The tourism business may choose to facilitate the training in one three hour session or break the training into one hour sessions.

Elements to assist with the tourism business implement the Customer Service Program include:

- A Leadership Manual – which outlines the Customer Service Program and Character Community background, structure and implementation support tools including:
 - An Employee/Service Person Audit Sheet
 - Hiring Tips
 - Customer Comments/Complaint Process
 - The Service Intention Poster - *as per attachment 1*
 - Employee Job Aid Bookmark – *as per attachment 2*
 - Posters explaining the behaviours and intentions for all ten Character Attributes
 - Tourism Business Commitment Agreement and Implementation Status and Monitoring Requirements (mandatory reporting required on program success from an employer and employee perspective).
- Three Customer Service Program Training Modules
 - Module One
 - Module Two
 - Module Three

Each one hour module is designed to provide the employer all the necessary resources, summaries and customer service examples/best practices to incorporate a service focussed culture within the business and to train staff to deliver superior customer service.

4.4 Next Steps – Phase Two of the York Region Customer Service Program

Phase Two objective is to engage tourism businesses in a one year pilot launch of the York Region Tourism Customer Service Program. To accomplish this, invitations will be extended to tourism businesses including ones currently registered in the Character Community Business program to commit to the program and to participate in a formal training session. Two one day training sessions are tentatively proposed for March and May, allowing for a maximum participation of 12 tourism businesses.

Chambers of Commerce, the Board of Trade and local Municipalities will be consulted to assist with facilitation and monitoring of participating business successes and challenges. The York Region Tourism Advisory Group will play an integral role providing direction and advocacy to evolve the York Region Tourism Customer Service Program.

This pilot will be a one year trial period to obtain constructive feedback on the Customer Service Program process so that if necessary the program can be refined for an official launch to all tourism businesses. It will also provide a period to evaluate performance measures and monitor success from the employer, employee and customer perspective. During Phase Two further discussions will be initiated with School representatives to determine the steps required for possible curriculum inclusion and an youth accreditation program.

4.5 Relationship to Vision 2026

The York Region Tourism Customer Service Program supports the Vibrant Economy, Engaged Communities and a Responsive Region and Responding to the Needs of Our Residents goals identified in Vision 2026.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Funding for the development of the York Region Customer Service Program to date was included in the 2007 York Region Economic Development operating budget and supported by \$10,000 from the Ontario Ministry of Tourism. Funding for Phase Two has been allocated in the 2008 York Region Economic Development operating budget and discussions are underway with the Ontario Ministry of Tourism to secure another \$10,000 to support Phase Two implementation in 2008.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The delivery of superior customer service provides tourism businesses a competitive advantage and supports business sustainability and growth. Having the skills to deliver superior customer service builds recognition as a valued employee and enhances the opportunity for employment opportunities.

7. CONCLUSION

The York Region Tourism Customer Service Program is fundamental to the overall appeal and image of York Region as a viable tourist destination. The Customer Service program provides the tools to enhance the customer experience resulting in customer loyalty, increases in visitation and generates economic benefits throughout York Region.

For further information about this report, please contact Brenda McGowan, Program Manager, Tourism Development at (905) 830-4444 ext. 1553 or brenda.mcgowan@york.ca.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(The two attachments referred to in this clause were included in the agenda for the February 6, 2008 Committee meeting.)