INTRODUCTION

Strathcona County is blessed with a spectacular, unique environmental landscape known as the Beaver Hills Moraine that covers a large portion of rural Strathcona County. The Beaver Hills landscape is extensively treed, consisting of rolling terrain, rich in wetlands and boreal mixed wood forest habitat.

The area's biophysical features contribute to a unique sense of place that is valued by both area residents and visitors. The region includes an abundance of wildlife, and has a rich history and authentic traditional local culture which enables potential for agri-tourism, nature-based tourism and cultural tourism opportunities.

WHAT DOES THE 2007 MDP SAY?

Most of the MDP's policies are high-level and emphasize promotion, general support of tourism initiatives, marketing and partnership efforts. None of the current policies deal with strictly land use and development issues. The current MDP policies include:

- Encourage a variety of recreational opportunities in the County as a means of strengthening complementary tourism initiatives, attractions and services.

- Support the development of low impact recreational activities which have minimal disturbance on the environment.

- Encourage the development and growth of recreation and tourism areas that are:

    a. Complementary to our natural resources and incorporate the natural environment into the project;

    b. Adjacent to major transportation corridors to benefit from higher traffic volumes and where acceptable access is available, per County standards; and

    c. Strategically located within close proximity to other existing complementary commercial, recreation or other tourism enterprises.

- Promote cooperative private, non-government and public sector initiatives to develop recreation and tourism opportunities.

ISSUES RAISED DURING THE MDP ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Participants in the MDP engagement process commented on the County's considerable nature-based tourism assets, but noted that not everyone knows about them.

Participants noted the delicate balance of nature-based tourism, suggesting that we should build off what we have already and that any new tourist development should be small-scale and carefully designed so it does not detract from the natural beauty of the area. Questions arose on how to deal with nature-based developments that are medium to high impact in terms of their scale or scope.

Specific ideas raised during the process included working ranches, bed and breakfasts and small scale accommodations in rural areas, more camping areas (i.e., Blackfoot), more promotion of the Beaver Hills Moraine area, eco-resorts, horse trails/tours/facilities, community gardens, cultural/historical tours, and low impact adventure tourism such as snowshoeing, hiking and cycling.

BEAVER HILLS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY ASSESSMENT

In 2012, a consortium of partners from government, industry and environmental non-governmental organizations completed a Tourism Development Opportunity Assessment for the Beaver Hills Moraine area. This comprehensive study identified several opportunities for building the region as a sustainable nature-based tourism destination.

The Opportunity Assessment report defined three distinct sub-sets of sustainable tourism:

1. **Agri-tourism** provides direct involvement between the tourist or consumer and the agricultural community. There is the opportunity to engage in a direct exchange of values between the tourist and the farm community .

2. **Nature Based tourism** is any sustainable tourism activity or experience that is directly related to natural attractions or the natural environment, whether for relaxation, discovery, or adventure. Nature-based tourism involves connection and engagement with natural landscapes for people who are looking for authenticity, immersion and education as well as a sense of distance from settlements.

3. **Heritage/Culture tourism** involves places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present, including historic, cultural and natural attractions. It is a personal encounter with traditions, history and culture and is based upon the concept that each community has a story to tell.

POTENTIAL POLICY OPTIONS

This section introduces some potential new policy options and expands on others already included in the MDP. These policy options can help the Municipality (and partners) to deliver the type of sustainable tourism described above. These options are intended to promote discussion about the best options for Strathcona County and may eventually guide new or refined MDP policy and land use bylaw changes.

Some suggestions within the Tourism Development Opportunity Assessment may be addressed through the policy of the updated MDP.

1. **Land Use Districts for Tourism Zones**

   The idea to create a new land use district or districts for sustainable tourism activities was put forward in the Opportunity Assessment report. The new district or districts could provide for specialized clusters of tourism activities.

Policy Options

The policy options with respect to tourism districts may involve:

- Creating the policy framework and rationale in the MDP for a new and revised land use district(s) for Sustainable Tourism.

- Establishing design standards, guidelines and location criteria to ensure development respects such elements as the context of the site, scale of development, environmental fit, etc. The MDP could outline recommended changes to the Land Use Bylaw to accommodate the new policy.

- Different definitions of small, medium and large-scale sustainable tourism developments could be formulated, and the requirements for each scale of development spelled out, with the requirements depending upon the impact of a Sustainable Tourism development.

2. **Designated Areas for Agri-Tourism, Nature-Based Tourism and Heritage / Cultural Tourism**

The Opportunity Assessment report suggested the County identify special areas to accommodate specific sustainable tourism uses, including agri-tourism, nature based tourism, and heritage/culture tourism. The report identified and mapped several agri-tourism, nature based, and heritage/culture assets available in the County.

Policy Options

The policy options with respect to sustainable tourism may involve:

- Recommending a strategy and an implementation process to create a County-wide network of 'hospitality/ tourism zones', identifying strategic area clusters of agri-tourism, nature based tourism, and heritage/culture tourism activities, and linking the resources through a designated rural trail system. A map could be included in the MDP identifying the sustainable tourism zones and some of the key tourism facilities and amenities within the zones. While the sustainable tourism facilities, attractions and accommodations are spread widely across the County, this approach would highlight the benefits of further developing and supporting these tourism resources. It would be a beginning step in recognizing the potential of these components of the County's tourism industry, and could lead to the development of infrastructure (e.g. roadway improvements, trails, amenities) that would support the industry.

- The MDP implementation section could include rationale and recommendations regarding the most cost effective approaches for advancing the different tourism sectors. It could also outline an approach whereby the County, the province and other groups could work collaboratively to provide funding and other resources over a 5 year period to implement the best plan.