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February 24, 2025

Dear Ms. LaValley and Mr. Martin,

We are writing to share ongoing concerns regarding the Township's approach to community engagement and consultation, particularly regarding the Tourism and Economic Development Master Plan.

Our summary list of concerns is as follows, with our full explanation below this summary and our general feedback.

- Engagement process was exclusionary, lacked transparency, and concluded with unreasonably short timelines for feedback
- No cost/feasibility considerations for implementing the plan

### **General Feedback on Strengths**

Before we explain our concerns, we would like to recognize that we do appreciate that the Tourism and Economic Development Master Plan process did appear to consider both established and emerging industries and described tourism as a valued economic sector in our community. We also appreciate that the Plan establishes that the Township



does carry some responsibility for economic development, including facilitating improvements to the unique conditions faced by the tourism industry. Finally, while we have significant concerns and reservations about the specific content and process undertaken for this plan, we are broadly supportive of the need to establish a Tourism and Economic Development Master Plan and applaud the Township for making initial steps in this direction. We are hopeful that this is the start of additional investments in supporting the long-term sustainability and vitality of South Algonquin

In the following sections, we will explain our core areas of concern with how the Tourism and Economic Development Plan was developed and the content it contains. Detailed feedback on a 'page by page' basis is also attached at the end of this letter. We end the letter with suggestions of opportunities for additional consideration by Township staff and Council.

### **Concerns with Process**

At the Tourism and Economic Development Workshop #2, Councilor Pigeon stated “the businesses and the ratepayers of South Algonquin will be fully advised of what the Economic Development and Tourism, or Tourism and Economic Development Committee is doing. So there’s going to be complete transparency.”

Unfortunately, our observations are that there has not been complete transparency in this process.

The plan’s approval and development process bypassed the Economic Development Committee, and as a result, SABA’s representative was not permitted to discuss or ask questions about the RFP, quotation or ultimately the accepted proposal. At the Economic Development Committee meeting where the Plan was presented, our representative was not part of the roll call and was seated in the gallery. While he was asked a trivial question at the end of the meeting, he was generally treated as an observing member of the public rather than a full participant of the Committee. This exclusionary approach seems counterproductive.

The Plan identifies “people” as a “Strategic Focus Area” - however, both the process and the Plan itself excluded tourism operators, small home-based businesses, local residents, and other stakeholders. Developing appropriate, supportive policies or programs for all



stakeholders in our community requires that **all** stakeholders be invited to participate and be considered; an open call to participate should have been issued and people supported to participate. Instead, who could participate in the development Tourism and Economic Development Master Plan initiative and in what way, appears to have been closely monitored, selective, exclusive, and biased from start to finish.

Further, despite there being an alternative, voluntary, collaborative community assessment option available through the Province of Ontario ([First Impressions Community Exchange](#)) - which has a starting cost of only \$500 – Council authorized a surprise and non-consensual surveillance of businesses for an unknown cost due to “an aggressive timeline” of unknown origin. Information gathered by consultants through this process was collected without the knowledge, consent, or full participation of the businesses they were reviewing.

In January 2025, the public was advised to engage at the Committee level regarding by-laws and other initiatives. The Plan process highlights how difficult this is in the allotted times. The draft Plan became available on or about February 10<sup>th</sup> and submissions for feedback for considerations by the Economic Development Committee were required to be submitted by February 13<sup>th</sup> in order to be included in the Committee Package. This left approximately 48 hours for the public to review the document and provide feedback – if they were even aware of the Plan being made available in the first place. On February 19<sup>th</sup>, the Economic Development Committee met to hear the presentation of the Plan and to discuss its content. The Committee elected that the Plan come to a vote at the regular March meeting of Council, on March 5<sup>th</sup> – leaving just 7 days for the public to provide feedback in time for release of the Council Package before Council votes on the Plan. The total time from tabling the Plan at Committee to tabling it for Council vote (and presumably passing) will be just 23 days. We question whether there was enough time to provide comments to the committee, and whether any comments received between the Committee meeting and Council vote would be given fair consideration.

Concerningly, Freedom of Information requests to learn more about the process than could be gleaned from the exceptionally short discussion of the Plan have been met with the charge of exorbitant fees, totaling thousands of dollars and necessitating lengthy appeals.



Further, we note that after having consulted our website during data collection, language used in the Plan comes very close to language SABA has adopted for our work, and which we have been using locally since 2018. We acknowledge that a thriving community where everyone can work, live and play is a shared goal and we would appreciate acknowledgement in the plan for this unattributed contribution.

The weight of these combined experiences and observations raises an important question: is this what South Algonquin Council and/or Township staff believe represents transparent governance?

### **Concerns with Implementation**

To date, not one question was asked about the cost or feasibility of implementing the Plan. We have concerns that achieving the short-term goals exceeds any amount Council could put toward it in the short term. A “Master Plan” with no budget seems to be of questionable utility to the community, as it will only be as good as its implementation – and implementation requires resources. If a budget has been proposed or pre-allocated by Council or Staff, or there are plans for how to mobilize funding or how much to mobilize, we would be pleased to have the opportunity to review it.

Further, given the lack of public engagement in the development of the Plan, we are unclear about how Council plans to develop the community enthusiasm and buy-in required to turn the Plan from a piece of paper into something that lives and works for community benefit. Alternatively, if Council feels that community buy-in is not required to deploy the plan, we would appreciate knowing that also so we can turn our attention elsewhere.

### **Opportunities for Additional Consideration**

- **Consider policy-supported opportunities**

We encourage the Township to consider tools not identified in the Plan, including for example,

- following, reviewing and engaging existing policies first where they support the Plan



- adopting people-centred and place-based approaches to future planning, policies and programs.
- considering other mechanisms that facilitate stakeholder conversations and build capacity. For example, an educational approach to teaching residents when, how and where to find communications from the township or to submit communications to the township would be helpful. Mechanisms that support meaningful, formal, and sustained opportunities for consultation of the business community by the Township are also welcome, for example exploring suitability of the BIA model.
- **Invite participation from diverse voices**
  - We encourage the Township to place an open call for the Economic Development Committee to fill **all** of its four open seats and to seek and prioritize diverse representation from community stakeholders as soon as possible. We encourage the Township to consider using this process to include voices and perspectives that may have been excluded from the development of the Tourism and Economic Development Master Plan.
  - We encourage the Township to create opportunities to engage and support residents who are the primary source of micro, budding, and home-based businesses in the community.
- **Accessibility**
  - Accessibility continues to be an important social goal and significant economic opportunity for our community. We encourage the Township to pay greater attention to accessibility in both the Tourism and Economic Development Plan and in its general operations and policies.
  - We encourage the Township to ensure equitable access to information, accessible communication practices, and accessible infrastructure, which are core components of all Township policies and programs.
- **Youth Engagement, Education and Retention**



Creating opportunities for youth to stay or return to our community should be a critical priority for the Township.

- We encourage the Township to explore opportunities for building capacity in the Tourism industry by supporting connections between local operators and formal highschool tourism credits, of which there were none at our feeder high schools in 2024.
  - Creating opportunities to connect local youth to hands-on training opportunities, experiential learning, co-operative education or other job-related training in the tourism and hospitality sector can create pathways for students to stay in our community.
- **Pet-Friendly Spaces**
    - We encourage the Township to consider the need for access to pet-friendly spaces in the community as part of the Plan.

### **Rethinking Community Engagement Processes**

As the Township continues its work towards supporting modern governance and meaningful collaboration across the communities, organizations, and individuals that call South Algonquin home, we believe that it is time for the Township to review its approach to community engagement and consultation in general, and to consider specifically how current practices may have contributed to gaps and missed opportunities in the current iteration of the Tourism and Economic Development Master Plan.

It is not too late to correct course on both the Tourism and Economic Development Master Plan specifically, and on its approach to community engagement generally. We are concerned that both Council and Staff have adopted a defensive position to engaging with legitimate and respectful questions from the public. We believe that public questions should be welcomed as a tangible act of civic engagement and a genuine effort by the public to support good outcomes from the decisions that affect their lives.

Part of this process should include sharing information about what the Township considers respectful engagement processes, and engaging with and integrating feedback from the community on how they would like to participate in Township decision-making.



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Hearing public experiences of challenges and concerns, and exploring opportunities to facilitate relationship building between the Township and the broader community also supports good public policy.

We believe that civic engagement goes beyond the ballot box. In pragmatic terms, when there are limited means for providing feedback or engaging with the actions of local government, community members may stop seeing the value of participating in any of the processes that remain, including participating in both voluntary and mandatory community consultation processes.

Reconsidering and improving the Township's approach to community engagement will not only support more productive and collegial relationships and greater democratic participation, but it will also, assuredly, lead to better decisions and better outcomes for everyone.

We would welcome any opportunity to work with and support the Township in its efforts to support meaningful engagement and collaboration across the entire South Algonquin Community.

Thank you, in advance, for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Angela Pollak". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Angela Pollak, PhD  
Chair, South Algonquin Business Alliance  
Attachment





### Detailed Feedback/Page-by-Page

	Reference	Consideration
1	Page 2, statistics regarding Recreational dwellings and STRS	Question: Do the Recreational Dwelling counts include only seasonal housing stock, or also residences that have become STRs? If this statistic is based solely on zoning, is it possible this is an under-representation?
2	Page 2, statistics regarding Recreational dwellings and STRS	Question: Some of our commercial operators use these platforms for marketing purposes. Can you confirm that commercial STRs are not double counted as residential STRs?
3	Page 4, “Non-Timber Forest Products	Edit Suggestion: Consider removing Tourism from the heading, and eliminate the sentence starting “The stunning landscapes...” (We are unsure why Tourism is covered under the Forestry section when it has its own complete category.)
4	Page 5, “The lack of restaurants and limited options on where to get groceries is the biggest gap in tourism-readiness in the township.”	Please consider revising this list to include more of the challenges. For example, we struggle deeply with capacity for tourism-product development (time, knowledge, interest of operators). Contributing factors here are housing, age of our operators, and the length of time we have been operating in extremely difficult markets.
5	page 5-6, item 2.4.2.1 Economic Contribution, Jobs and Employment	It’s important to note the characteristics of the jobs in the tourism industry, which are largely occupied by women, work is part time, seasonal, precarious, and largely minimum wage. We need more jobs yes, but operators need economic stability to create high quality jobs with the ability to career path.
6	page 6 top – employment	We are unsure of what the jobs and employment implications are of discussing STRs under this heading. Can you clarify?
7	Page 6 – retail services (local)	This section could benefit from discussion of online retail options (for examples, locals rely a lot on Amazon and other online retail for supplies). Opportunities exist also for tourism operators with products to sell in online markets. Please consider adding commentary on these items.
8	Page 6, item 2.4.2.2	This section does not mention the impact of Employment Insurance benefits on tourism operators





		<p>which is significant. South Algonquin is no longer part of a “seasonal” district, which means tourism employees who are laid off in the fall run out of income in February, and their jobs aren’t recalled until spring. They go for several months each year without access to income. The Township could work with federal and provincial partners to advocate for our region to be included in the seasonal areas list again. Individual operators cannot do this on our own.</p>
9	<p>Page 6 - “Further, municipal recreation facilities intended for use by local residents are being used by non-paying visitors”</p>	<p>Can you clarify what the implication of this is? Are you suggesting a 2-tier system pay per use system for public parks or beaches or trails? Also, it is important to note, we only have one winter product, which is the trails. Diversification is important in order to shore up the shoulder and winter seasons.</p>
10	<p>Page 11, 4 strategic focus, bullet 3rd from end,</p>	<p>Consider adding references to protected classes under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, in addition to the list of considerations for UDL</p>
11	<p>Page 13, item 10, support for community organizations</p>	<p>A practical and easy way to action this in the short term would be to fund the existing Municipal Grant program which makes funds available to community organizations.</p>
12	<p>Page 16 , Retiree’s Labour Force Solution</p>	<p>We are unsure of what this section means. Can you define the terms? We are unclear if you are referring to retired persons looking to volunteer, or perhaps retired people who might be looking for paid work that’s part time, low impact, accessible etc.</p>
13	<p>Page 16, Home based businesses</p>	<p>Can you clarify if you’re talking about supporting home based operators, or recruiting home-based operators? We’re unsure how this fits with the housing solution?</p>
14	<p>Page 18 - Leadership is required to position South Algonquin for success</p>	<p>Actionable items toward this goal might include capacity building for leadership and nurturing community champions</p>
15	<p>Page 18 – 2 EcDev Committee</p>	<p>Can you specify or recommend how often this committee should meet</p>
16	<p>Page 20 – Accommodator’s network</p>	<p>Please consider adding language that supports a network that is both inclusive and optional.</p>



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17	Page 21, item 5	There may be a typo here – should “conversation” be “conversion”?
18	Page 22 item 10	The fundamental principal of a Tourism Pledge program is reciprocal respect. Please consider rewording “disrespectful tourists, or lack of partnership by operators” to “to create common awareness among tourists who come from many cultural backgrounds and to support operators to provide consistent customer service”