

Let's make tourism a main economic driver

Margaret Bird - February 2026

Sarnia Lambton has a Tourism Department but no visible tourism industry. Nothing is promoted to bring the tourists here. The Ontario Tourism Office at the Bluewater Bridge has been totally removed and replaced with a restaurant. Additionally, all the annual events that used to bring very high tax dollars into our community hotels, restaurants, theatres and local businesses (Ice Fest, BayFest, Highland Games, Art Fest, etc.,) have all disappeared, along with (apparently) all motivation. Most people who live here don't know about our Sarnia Chris Hadfield Airport and even Arkona's Rock Glen Falls, just to name a couple of long-time land marks in Sarnia Lambton. Not knowing, or even being aware of what is on our own doorsteps is a very sad and distressing situation. Something definitely has to change.

The mayor is always saying that he wants to increase the population but without new firms and jobs, why would anyone move here? And, for that matter, why would our youth even think of returning to Sarnia Lambton after university, if there are no jobs or any prospects of any appearing in the near future? If there's any hope of increasing our population, we have to first bring in new firms and hundreds more jobs. Then people will come to Sarnia to explore the area and see what else it has to offer, followed by applying for the jobs and then looking for housing.

It's no good building lots of houses if nothing else is here, and that also includes the fact that we are sadly lacking in all areas of entertainment, arts and culture and recreation. By building houses only, it will continue to encourage Sarnia to be the well-known retirement community that it is. As the saying goes, "It takes a village" but it also takes all age groups to make any community fully socially, culturally, economically, and vibrantly interactive and fulfilling.

Yes, tourism is a major, resilient economic driver, globally, and in many nations like Canada, acting as a significant source of (prices versus inflation), jobs (often 1 in 10), export revenue, and community revitalization, growing faster than overall economies, but whether it's the single greatest economic driver depends on the country, with other sectors like tech, energy, or manufacturing dominating elsewhere. Its strength lies in its widespread impact across regions, supporting countless businesses and diversifying economies, making it crucial in these uncertain times.

Tourism contributes to growth and generates millions in direct spending, supporting jobs and diverse roles, from hospitality to cultural heritage, tech or manufacturing, but tourism is increasingly vital for economic transformation.

It is also a vital source of foreign currency, with tourism exports ranking high in many cities and countries. Economic diversification shows that tourism reduces reliance on single industries, creating resilience. And community vitality really benefits from a great tourism industry -- it benefits small businesses, funds public services through taxes, and attracts investment.

Community vitality is so very important – if Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership (SLEP) and Tourism Sarnia Lambton (TSL) were to join forces, we could have a really competitive tourist industry and one of the most sought after communities on the Great Lakes. At one point, this suggestion was put to SLEP but, apparently, they refused this positive forward-thinking suggestion.

I understand that many people in Sarnia Lambton do not want to grow the population, that they are quite happy where it sits right now. However, in order to keep the tax coffers topped up enough to provide all public services and amenities for the residents, the money has to come from somewhere, i.e., property-tax increases, which we definitely do not want, or bring in more firms and jobs (which would be incredible after all the company and job losses of the last 10 years) or, bring back our local April to October tourist season, which brought thousands and thousands of international tourists to Sarnia and filled hotels, restaurants and local businesses and entertainment centres, without increasing our year-round population. Either way, we have to make a decision – not just to barely survive, but thrive.

In summary, tourism is known for its resilience, its ability to bounce back, and its broad reach, which makes it a stable force. Tourism is undeniably a powerhouse sector, especially in the current era of global uncertainty, driving significant economic activity and growth. So let's use this industry to its full potential. Let's make Sarnia Lambton the place to which all our youth want to return to after college and university days – a place where they want to grow and introduce their own families to the wonderful place where they were raised. Let's face it, we already have the beautiful scenery and water front, and an extremely enviable geographical position to the gateway of the Great Lakes, beckoning for tourism to build on them.