



STAFF REPORT

THE CORPORATION OF THE TOWN OF COBOURG

Community Services, Protection, and Economic Development Standing Committee

Report to: Mayor, Deputy Mayor, and Councillors

From: Melissa Graham – Economic Development Coordinator;
Daniel Van Kampen – Manager of Economic Development and Venture13; Jackie Chapman Davis – Manager of Culture, Events & Tourism

Standing Committee Date: October 8, 2025

Report Number: DS-2025-024

Council Meeting Date: October 29, 2025

Subject: **Economic Development and Tourism – First Impression Community Exchange Exercise**

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1. Recommendation:

THAT Council receive the First Impression Community Exchange report for information purposes.

2. Executive Summary:

Ten Brockville delegates visited Cobourg between September 10-15, 2025 as part of the Ontario Ministry of Rural Affairs' First Impressions Community Exchange (FICE) program. This initiative allows communities to assess each other's strengths and challenges from the perspective of first-time visitors.

Cobourg is seen by the ten Brockville delegates as a welcoming, vibrant community with a charming downtown, beautiful waterfront, and strong cultural and recreational

assets. These visitors highlighted the friendliness of residents, attractive neighborhoods, and a lively tourism experience. Opportunities exist to further enhance the visitor experience through improved signage, expanded waterfront and cycling amenities, and promotion of local industries and year-round attractions. These efforts will strengthen the local economy, enhance quality of life, and ensure Cobourg continues to thrive as a destination for residents and visitor.

3. Background

In the summer of 2025, a representative from the Ministry of Rural Affairs contacted Cobourg Economic Development inviting the town to participate in a First Impression Community Exchange (FICE) with Brockville, Ontario.

The FICE process allows communities to learn about their strengths and areas of improvement through the eyes of first-time visitors. Volunteers, acting as "incognito" visitors, travel to the exchange community, record their observations, and provide constructive feedback. This process helps communities identify opportunities for improvement in appearance, services and infrastructure.

Both the Economic Development and Tourism departments recognized the value of this initiative and agreed to participate with Brockville.

Between September 5th and September 15th, 2025 approximately ten (10) representatives from Brockville – comprising of municipal staff and members of their Economic Development Advisory Committee visited Cobourg. These volunteers came from diverse backgrounds, ages, and perspectives to offer a comprehensive first-time visitor experience.

Each representative completed a questionnaire, developed by the Ministry of Rural Affairs, to record their observations across the following areas.

- Community Entrances
- Housing and Residential Areas
- Local Government
- Education, Health, and Community Services
- Downtown
- Business and Industry
 - Retail and Services
- Tourism and Entertainment
 - Recreation, Culture and Heritage

Additionally, visitors were encouraged to engage with residents, business owners, and staff to gather insights about community pride, attitudes, and concerns. Some of these questions included but were not limited to.

- Were residents knowledgeable about their community?
- Did residents express positive or negative attitude towards the community?

- Did you sense pride in the community?
- Did residents identify any major concerns?

Prior to their arrival, Brockville’s representatives researched Cobourg through our social media platforms and websites. Some of their anecdotal initial views on Cobourg included:

- “Hockey town”
- “Not expecting anything great”
- “Pretty, cute town with a great beach area”
- “Proximity to Toronto implies it should be well-equipped with good services and shops”
- “Historic small town”

However, many of these initial views were reshaped during their visit. The visitors found Cobourg to be a picturesque waterfront town with rich historic characteristics. They praised the town’s cleanliness, the pride of its citizens, and its vibrant downtown, scenic waterfront, and welcoming atmosphere.

4. Discussion:

This report summarizes comments and perceptions of first-time visitors to Cobourg as part of the First Impressions Community Exchange (FICE) with Brockville. Their feedback provides valuable insight into how our town is experienced by newcomers and highlights both strengths and opportunities for improvement. As Cobourg continues to grow as a tourist destination, commercial hub and residential community, it is important to prioritize community development and beautification initiatives that enhance public spaces, strengthen wayfinding and branding, and foster local pride. These efforts will help ensure Cobourg remains welcoming, competitive, and attractive to residents, businesses, and visitors alike.

The following observations and recommendations from our Brockville Visitors are indicated below for discussion.

Community entrances: Each visiting group assessed Cobourg’s community entrances from all directions evaluating factors such as signage, branding, community appeal and cleanliness.

Several opportunities for improvement were highlighted.

- 401 TODS Area Profile signs to showcase the community’s best features
- Stronger branding at the town’s entrances
- Greater alignment between the town’s branding and downtown area.

The community entrances provided some mixed impressions by our visitors. Some visitors felt that the way-finding signage was adequate, while others reported not even

noticing it at all. Although the signs were clean and well-maintained, there was nothing notable about Cobourg's branding or character.

The signs along Highway 2 were small and easily missed by our guests. Visitors also noted that there was minimal indication of Cobourg's identity from Highway 401. However, once visitors made it downtown their impressions were much more favourable.

The historic downtown and waterfront left a strong and positive impression, with visitors appreciating the area's architecture, wide sidewalks, abundant greenery, and floral displays. The limited number of vacant storefronts also contributed to a welcoming atmosphere.

Overall average rating on the community entrances: Satisfactory/Good

Housing and residential areas: While the visitors were not housing experts, they noted that Cobourg's housing stock offers a good mix of heritage homes, new subdivisions, and senior living options. However, they observed that affordable and rental housing appeared less evident during their short visit. They highlighted that the homes were beautifully maintained and with downtown condominiums adding to the areas overall beauty.

The visitors identified two key opportunities for improvement in the housing and residential areas.

- Expand trails and parkland
- Increase affordable housing options

Based on their feedback, the overall ratings for housing and residential areas were as follows:

- Overall appeal and quality: Good/Excellent
- Existing/older homes: Excellent
- Retirement/senior living housing: Good
- New construction: Excellent
- Apartments/rental housing: Needs Improvement

Local government services: Many of the visitors specifically visited Victoria Hall to engage with staff. Our customer service team received high praise for being friendly, helpful, and well-informed, providing brochures, maps, and other key information about the town when asked. The municipal offices and staff were also praised for their accessibility and friendliness, reinforcing Cobourg's reputation as a welcoming community.

Victoria Hall itself was noted as easy to locate, and very attractive. However, the bold wood door raised some uncertainty among visitors about whether they were allowed to enter. Staff, however, greeted them outside, and indicated that they could enter, while providing some information on the court room.

Visitors also appreciated the proximity of Cobourg Police Services on King Street, which offers an additional public washroom. This was seen positively, as it reflected the community's commitment to accessible services and well-integrated community policing to support the downtown core and waterfront.

The opportunities they provided for local government services:

- Signage to better orient visitors to guide them to staff and information
- Signage inviting people to enter Victoria Hall

Education and health services: The town's education and healthcare facilities were deemed suitable for Cobourg's size. However, noted some concerns such as physician shortages and the lack of diverse school programs. It was also noted that there was no visible walk-in clinic.

Community services: Cobourg's community services, cultural amenities, and recreational facilities were recognized as significant assets, contributing to a high quality of life. There was emphasis on how the Community Centre and area were noted as a beautiful space and designed well to suit the needs of the community. library, was also commended for it being conveniently located, friendly staff, as well as being well-utilized during their visits.

The following opportunities for education, health and community services were provided.

- A full-service branded grocery store within the walkable downtown area
- Expanded health care options
- More recreational programming for teens and young professionals

It should be noted that the highlights from their visit outweigh the opportunities for community services, which have been shared below.

- A modern Community Centre that caters to the needs of the community (including the well-attended senior's programming)
- Plentiful programming for retirees that are popular and well-utilized
- A health services cluster within retail areas
- Schools well-placed to serve neighbourhoods throughout the town
- A large hospital that was easy to locate

Victoria Hall programming, with special recognition for the Art Gallery of Northumberland for its well-curated exhibits.

The average rating of the availability, overall appeal, and quality of community services:
Availability of community services: Good

Downtown: The Brockville visitors highlighted the strong connection between Cobourg's downtown and its waterfront. They emphasized Cobourg strong heritage downtown and Victoria Hall being centrally located, while maximizing its use as municipal services, information, arts centre and core attraction (Art Gallery, Concert Hall etc.) Visitors also appreciated Cobourg's diverse mix of retail, dining, and cultural

offerings. Dining options were plentiful, with residents enthusiastically recommending their favourite establishments, though there was some desire for greater variety in international cuisine and extended operating hours.

The waterfront was recognized as a major tourism draw, supported by events, walking trails, and the recreational amenities

The opportunities they provided for the downtown include:

- Installation of courtesy crosswalks
- Addition of dedicated accessible parking spaces
- Cycle route analysis and development of an Active Transportation Plan
- Greater alignment of branding between Downtown Cobourg and the Town of Cobourg

The overall impression of the downtown: Excellent

Retail and services: Retail and services in Cobourg are noted to be strategically distributed across commercial nodes, with big-box stores and chains near Highway 401 and the independent shops concentrated downtown. Grocery stores are available throughout town, but none are located downtown, limiting walkability for residents in that area. Businesses appear successful overall, with few vacancies, which may pose challenges for new businesses to find space. The town offers a variety of services, including many barber shops but fewer salons. Customer service was consistently excellent, with staff eager to share community knowledge.

While downtown promotes “Buy Canadian/Buy Local” campaigns, similar efforts are less visible in other parts of town. The Experience Cobourg “Autumn Perks” coupon booklet highlights a range of businesses across the town and helped identify offerings not immediately visible from the street.

The overall impression of retail sector: Good

Food and dining: Brockville visitors indicated that Cobourg offers a wide range of dining options, from diners and cafés to bistros and chain restaurants, each with its own unique appeal.

Sidewalk patios and outdoor seating add vibrancy downtown. Although the lack of waterfront restaurants represents an untapped opportunity. The town has a strong café culture, supported by a coffee walking tour pamphlet, and “Instagram tourists” spots though recent closures suggest the market may be saturated.

Dining recommendations like Prep Food Co. offer fresh, healthy, and convenient options for both residents and visitors. Locals enthusiastically shared varied and positive dining recommendations, reinforcing Cobourg’s vibrant food scene.

The overall impression of the quality and appeal of the restaurants: Excellent

The overall impression of the number and variety of dining options: Excellent

Industry: While visitors noticed new housing developments and upscale properties, Cobourg's industrial sector was less apparent. Most businesses appeared small to medium in scale, though Cameco was recognized as a key employer. Opportunities exist to better showcase Cobourg's employment landscape to attract investors and residents.

The overall impression of the industrial base: Satisfactory

Tourism and Entertainment: Cobourg's downtown and waterfront clearly benefit from strong summer tourism. The expansive sand beach, colourful lifeguard huts, and events such as the Sandcastle Festival are major attractions.

Despite visiting in September, the Brockville team noted that the beach and boardwalk were busy, supported by extended marina staffing demonstrating the continued appeal beyond peak season.

However, the first impression of the beach entrance was diminished by faded signage, neglected landscaping, and visual signage clutter which limited photo opportunities of unique beach features like the lifeguard huts.

Victoria Hall was also recognized as a key cultural asset, home to historic spaces, the art gallery, theatre, and visitor services. That said, the building's public accessibility was unclear from the exterior.

Both Victoria Hall and the marina operate as visitor information centres, yet signage is limited, making them hard to identify. While staff were welcoming and printed materials were plentiful, the main visitor guide was noted as dense and difficult to navigate. A more visual, user-friendly format was recommended

Wayfinding throughout the community was a consistent concern. Museums, hotels, and other points of interest were not always easy to find. Visitors suggested improvements such as:

- Enhanced signage and consistent branding
- Branded Cobourg merchandise
- Expanded recreational rentals (e.g., kayaks, bikes)
- More year-round attractions to reduce seasonal reliance.

Initiatives like the *Ginny and Georgia* walking tour show strong potential but would benefit from more accessible materials.

Overall, Cobourg offers a vibrant summer destination with room to improve first impressions, strengthen visitor services, and expand off-season appeal to encourage longer, multi-day stays.

Average rating of the overall appeal and quality of the following:

- Variety of tourism and entertainment: Good
- Promotion of tourism: Good

Recreational services: The Brockville visitors noted that Cobourg offers an impressive range of recreational amenities for a community its size. These include gyms, arenas, sports fields, pools, playgrounds, and extensive waterfront trails. The Cobourg Community Centre stood out as a major asset - well used, thoughtfully designed, and staffed by friendly helpful personnel. One small area for improvement was noted around the soccer field bleachers, which appeared somewhat neglected.

The town's waterfront amenities, including the boardwalk and Ecology Garden were praised for their accessibility and popularity among both residents and visitors. However, trail and cycling infrastructure was described as fragmented and unclear with limited signage and connectivity. Visitors suggested that an Active Transportation Plan could address gaps in bike lanes, trail continuity, and bike parking.

Rotary Park in the downtown core surprised the visitors with its butterfly wing art installation, which initially drew them in. They were pleased to learn from residents that the park also includes public washrooms, a fountain, seasonal lighting, and a winter skating rink—demonstrating its year-round appeal and versatility.

Overall, the facilities were found to be well-maintained and actively used, though visitors heard that some recreational programs, especially for teens and seniors, fill quickly, making it difficult for locals to participate. Expanding programming and inclusive access across age groups was highlighted as a key opportunity.

Average rating of the overall appeal and quality of: Variety of recreation options: Good

Average rating on the suitability of recreation and entertainment opportunities for different age groups:

- Senior (aged 65+): Good
- Adults: Good
- Families: Satisfactory/Good
- Young adults (aged 20-30): Satisfactory/Good
- Teenagers (aged 13-19): Needs Improvement
- Children (aged 6-12): Good

Culture and heritage: Many of the observations related to culture were previously noted in the Community Services section. However, it was further emphasized by visitors that Cobourg's culture and historical assets are central to its overall charm and appeal. Notably, Victoria Hall and the downtown heritage district serve as key highlights, showcasing Cobourg's rich architectural history and preserved character.

Visitors appreciated the ability to freely explore Victoria Hall, which blends historical assets with cultural and civic uses, including the concert hall, art gallery, and courtroom. The character of the downtown core was praised not only for its preserved facades and streetscape but also in the consistent signage and design that align with the Town's branding and historic vision. However, there was limited signage or interpretation indicating the presence of Cobourg's four designated heritage districts, which represents an opportunity to increase visibility and awareness.

Public art, there the downtown was described as well-maintained and engaging, with installations from the Art Gallery of Northumberland adding further depth to the visitor experience.

In addition to formal heritage sites, the community institutions such as the library and local churches were recognized for contributing to the cultural fabric of the town.’. Although Cobourg does offer guided and self-guided heritage walking tours, visitors noted they were not easily found or promoted, suggesting a need to improve visibility and accessibility of these resources—particularly online and at key visitor entry points.

Average rating of the overall appeal and quality of: Cultural and heritage assets: Good

Opportunities for Tourism, Recreation and Culture:

- Expand kayak and stand-up paddleboard (SUP) rental options
- Enhance and beautify the beach access point
- Maximize the Instagram appeal of the lifeguard huts by removing advertising
- Add clearer indicators for locating visitor information.
- Simplify and streamline the visitor guide
- Explore potential for a waterfront hotel.
- Develop new tourism assets to encourage longer stays
- Strengthen bike lanes and cycling infrastructure.
- Introduce Cobourg-branded merchandise.
- Expand recreational programming for adults and youth
- Promote historical walking tours.

Overall Assessment: The FICE visit reaffirmed Cobourg’s reputation as an attractive, welcoming waterfront community with strong tourism, culture, and lifestyle assets. At the same time, it identified clear opportunities to enhance year-round economic development, expand housing and employment options, and strengthen our community brand.

Key Impressions of Cobourg, Ontario:

- **Friendliness** – Residents, business owners, and municipal staff were consistently welcoming and eager to help.
- **Downtown & Waterfront** – Beautiful and clean, with historic charm, lush greenery and flowers, Victoria Hall, vibrant shops and cafes, and a lively beach/boardwalk.
- **Residential Areas** – Well-maintained homes and attractive new developments, though affordability and diversity of housing stock need improvement.
- **Community Services** – Strong offerings for retirees and seniors with a modern community centre, active library, and accessible health services; however, limited, programming for teens and young adults.

- **Business & Industry** – Excellent customer service, strong café culture and varied retail. though Cobourg’s major employers and industries are not well promoted.
- **Tourism & Culture** – The beach, marina, Victoria Hall, and public art are standout assets. Visitor information signage and shoulder-season/winter tourism opportunities need improvement.

Challenges Identified by Brockville Visitors:

- Outdated or inconsistent signage and weak branding at Highway 401 entrances and throughout town. Limited affordable housing and youth-oriented recreational programming.
- Over-reliance on summer tourism, with few year-round attractions.
- Low visibility of healthcare providers, industry, and key employers

Quick Wins for Immediate Action:

- Add a customized 401 TODS Area Profile sign on the 401 Area Profile sign with strong community branding.
- Improve wayfinding and visitor information signage at Victoria Hall and the Marina.
- Enhance 401 signage and community wayfinding.
- Add visible “Visitor Information” signs at Victoria Hall and the Marina.
- Refresh downtown courtesy crosswalks and add accessible parking spaces.
- Maximize the “Instagrammable” appeal of lifeguard huts by removing signage clutter.
- Increase visibility of bike rentals.

Opportunities for Longer Term Initiatives:

- Develop waterfront dining and recreation (kayak/SUP rentals, hotel).
- Strengthen cycling infrastructure with an Active Transportation Strategy.
- Better promote Cobourg’s major industries and employers.
- Encourage businesses to adopt inclusivity programs like Rainbow Registered.
- Expand cultural and heritage tours and introduce branded Cobourg merchandise.

Conclusion of Brockville’s experience: Cobourg was seen as a friendly, well-kept, and appealing community with a strong downtown and beautiful waterfront. While the town already delivers a memorable day-trip experience, targeted quick wins and longer-term investments in housing, signage, inclusivity, and year-round attractions will help position Cobourg as a sustainable, multi-day destination and an attractive place for young families, workers, and investors.

We thank our Brockville guests for their thoughtful observations.

Recommended Next Steps:

- Incorporate FICE findings into Cobourg's 2026 Business Planning Cycle, economic development strategy update, and tourism initiatives.
- Prioritize implementation of quick wins to enhance wayfinding, accessibility, and visitor experience.
- Explore and plan longer-term projects that expand year-round tourism, cultural engagement, housing diversity, and recreational opportunities.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of implemented initiatives to ensure they strengthen community pride, support local businesses, and enhance Cobourg's reputation as a welcoming, vibrant community.

5. Financial Impact and Budget

Some of the recommendations have financial impact and may be further discussed through the budget process or presented at another time.

6. Relationship to Council's Strategic Plan Priorities 2023 to 2027 and beyond:

Thriving Community

This report largely showcases how Cobourg is a Thriving Community.

Service Excellence

It should be noted that the customer service strategy has been very successful for visitor engagement and communication

Sustainability

It was noted throughout the report from our peers in Brockville that preserving the heritage districts and buildings provides character to the community.

7. Public Engagement:

This report does not require public engagement. If there is a recommendation that does require public engagement, it will be brought back to Council and the public for further consideration at that time.

8. Attachments:

Attachment #1 – Report from Brockville, Ontario visiting Cobourg, Ontario

Report Approval Details

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Attachments:	First Impressions Community Exchange, Brockville visits Cobourg 2025.pdf
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This report and all of its attachments were approved and signed as outlined below:

Chris Challenger - Sep 26, 2025 - 11:29 AM

Tracey Vaughan, Chief Administrative Officer - Sep 30, 2025 - 9:38 AM