



# First Impressions Community Exchange

City of Brockville visits the Town of Cobourg, September 2025

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Facilitated by the Ontario Ministry of Rural Affairs

# Table of Contents:

Introduction:.....	3
Executive Summary:.....	3
Visting Team Information: .....	4
Before Our Visit:.....	4
Community Visit: .....	5
Community Entrances:.....	6
Housing and Residential areas:.....	8
Local Government Services .....	9
Education, Health, and Community Services .....	11
Education .....	12
Health Services .....	12
Community Services .....	13
Downtown .....	16
Business and Industry .....	21
Retail and Services .....	21
Food and Dining .....	22
Industry.....	24
Tourism, Recreation, and Culture .....	25
Tourism and Entertainment .....	26
Recreation, Culture and Heritage.....	30
Culture and Heritage.....	32
Using Our Senses:.....	34
Information from Residents: .....	36
Reflecting Back:.....	37
Obstacles or Challenges: .....	37
Quick Wins and Recommendations: .....	38
Opportunities: .....	39
Ideas we would like to implement:.....	39
Conclusion:.....	40
Appendix A: Photos of a few identified issues .....	41
Appendix B: Photos of a few more features we enjoyed .....	42

## Introduction:

Between the period of September 5 to 15, 2025, the waterfront communities of Brockville and Cobourg participated in the Ontario Ministry of Rural Affairs “First Impressions Community Exchange” Program. The program pairs two rural Ontario communities that have similar population sizes and features together to complete an assessment of the other’s assets and challenges from an outsider’s perspective.

People who visit your community for the first time can offer a fresh perspective and unique insight into your services, transportation, accommodations and tourist attractions. Through the First Impressions Community Exchange program, our two communities were able to tap into these insights.

Each community sent a delegation of volunteers to assess the other using questions and prompts provided by the Ministry of Rural Affairs. Where specific criteria were assessed, the survey used the ranking system of:

1. Needs Urgent Attention
2. Needs Improvement
3. Satisfactory
4. Good
5. Excellent

## Executive Summary:

All of our participants commented on the friendliness of Cobourg’s residents, whether impromptu interactions with people on the street, business owners, or municipal staff, everyone was very friendly and willing to offer up assistance and point us toward their favourite places to check out.

The stars of the visit were the downtown as a whole, Victoria Hall, and the beautiful, sandy beach. The downtown and waterfront area felt fresh and vibrant, showcased its charming heritage assets, and was full of residents who were proud of their community. Another stand out is the community centre, which is a well-utilized, active hub that offers a range of activities and services.

Some easy improvements would go a long way to improving our First Impressions, such as Area Profile signs on the 401 to better highlight the town’s key attractions, “Visitor Information” signage at Victoria Hall and the Marina building and beautifying the beach entrance between the waterfront parking area and boardwalk along the beach.

Longer term projects, such as investing in an Active Transportation plan and bike lane network, increasing recreational opportunities for teens and younger adults, and building out winter activities would have a lasting impact on the community and ensure it is positioned to thrive well into the future.

The care and effort that goes into beautifying and maintaining the town is evident and gives the impression of a well-loved and cared for community. Preserving heritage charm, alongside modern improvements, allows the character of the community to show through in all the large and small details.

Members of the community are well informed about the town, activities and events, services, and local businesses, and are proud ambassadors. They were approachable, friendly, and offered tons of tips and positive things to say about life in Cobourg.

## Visting Team Information:

We endeavored to build a team of volunteers from the community who would be able to assess different aspects of town from their own unique and varied perspective and professional and personal backgrounds. Our team and roles were represented by females between the ages of 21 and retirees, and males from early thirties to retirees and took on a variety of roles, including: property developer, active transportation, new resident, job seeker, entrepreneur, family, shopper, retiree, tourist, diversity, equity, inclusion, new immigrant, parent with young children, government service review, parent of teenagers, and accessibility. In most cases, our team took on multiple roles during their analysis to tackle as many viewpoints as possible

## Before Our Visit:

Despite being only about two hours away from each other, none of the team members visiting from Brockville had ever spent much, if any, time in Cobourg.

Depending on the role assigned to each individual, some preliminary research was done in advance that was relevant to their role.

Websites and social media accounts that our volunteers were able to easily find, and access included:

- [Cobourg.ca](http://Cobourg.ca)
- [Experiencecobourg.ca](http://Experiencecobourg.ca)
- [Downtowncobourg.ca](http://Downtowncobourg.ca)
- [Northumberlandtourism.com](http://Northumberlandtourism.com)

Overall, our group found the websites easy to navigate, had built in features to increase accessibility, and liked how integrated the town’s website was with its affiliated brands (experience Cobourg, library, venture13, etc.) which made for seamless searches and user experience.

Social media included relevant information for residents, and evidence of upcoming events, opportunities, and friendly faces. On the Town of Cobourg page, our group liked the feature of highlighting the department or topic (such as “Fire” or “Mayor”) at the start of the each post.

*Online presence ranking:*



Prior to our Community Visit, perceptions of Cobourg varied depending on the amount of preliminary research that had been done, limited experience, or word of mouth. This included:

- Hockey Town
- Not expecting much
- 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

## Community Visit:

All exchange participants visited Cobourg between September 10 to 15, 2025, during bright, sunny days with summer-like conditions. Being right at the start of the shoulder season, most summer amenities and attractions were available and exploring the downtown on foot was easy and desirable given the weather. While this made for a lovely day to explore and assess, we did miss out on providing an assessment of a “foul weather

day” and what effect that would have had on the visitor experience. We felt that the good weather allowed for a closer assessment of a typical summer day in downtown Cobourg.

### Five-minute drive through:

Our participants were instructed to take a five-minute drive through Cobourg without stopping and without talking to the others in their car and write down what they felt about the town based on only this quick look. Comments from multiple participants included Cobourg being welcoming, clean and well cared for, with historic charm and well-maintained homes. Similar to our community, there is a vast difference between the commercial areas closer to the 401 and the downtown core.

## Community Entrances:

### *Highlights:*

- Clean and well maintained
- Community is looked after and cared for

### *Opportunities:*

- 401 TODS Area Profile signs to highlight the community’s best features
- Stronger branding when you enter the town
- Strengthen alignment between town branding and downtown



Each group assessed both the entrances into Cobourg from each direction and the presence of signage, branding, community appeal, and cleanliness.

The community entrance signage impressions were mixed, with some participants indicating that the wayfinding signage was adequate at entrances, while others did not notice them. Signs were clean and well kept, though notably were typical of almost any Ontario community entrance and did not stand out in terms of branding and character. Signs along highway 2 entrances were small and easily missed. There was very little on the 401 itself to indicate the character of the town, and not much to direct the visitor to specific attractions once you were in town. Streets and the signage we did spot naturally drew us towards the downtown and beach, which was nice.

Once our participants made it downtown, impressions were very favourable as to the character, cleanliness, and overall presence of the downtown and waterfront.

### Community Entrances Ranking:



## Housing and Residential areas:

### Highlights:

- Beautifully maintained homes
- Evidence of new development and growth
- Condos downtown that can be seen from the boardwalk add to the beauty of downtown

### Opportunities:

- Increase trails and parkland
- Increase affordable housing options
- Improve bike lanes

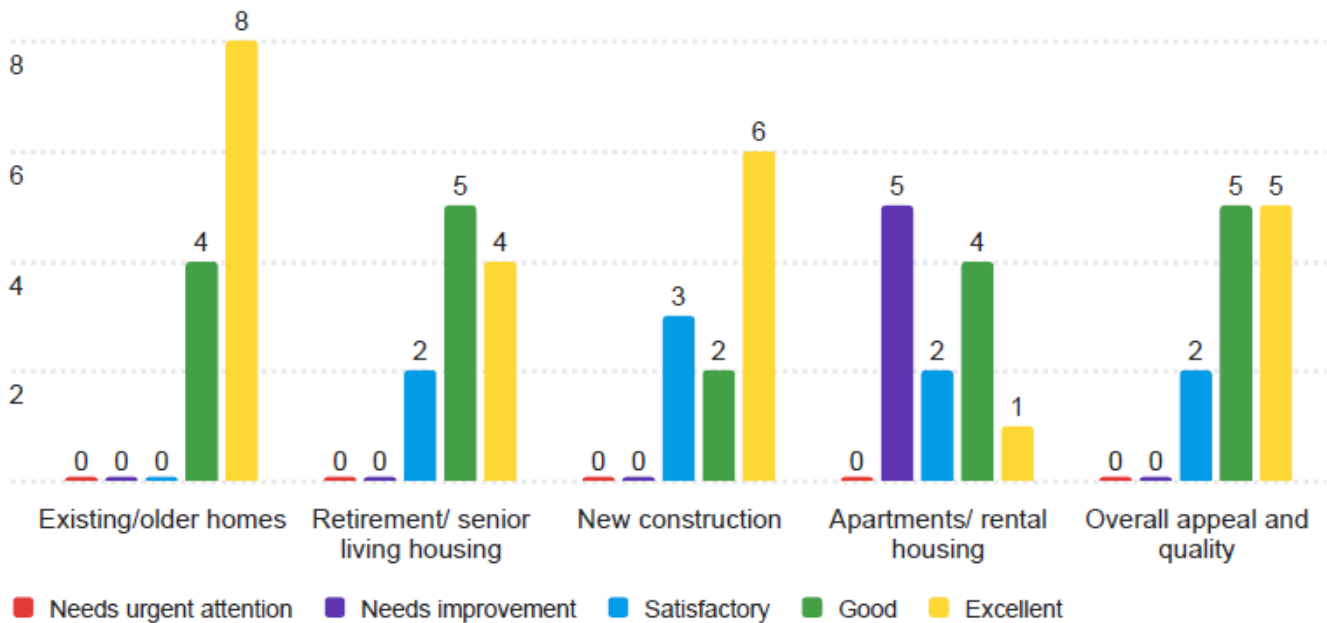
In assessing our first impressions of the residential areas, we drove through the community to see current developments and new housing, along with assessing more established areas. The tall townhomes near the 401 caught our eyes immediately as being new looking and quite tall to represent greater housing density, implying a local demand for housing. New developments in the northeast quadrant show that the town is actively increasing its housing stock. Retirement living options seemed plentiful, well established, and beautifully constructed and landscaped.

By driving through the community, we found that the older homes were well maintained, however most of the established housing and newer construction appeared to be targeted at a higher income level. We did not locate many neighbourhoods or apartment complexes for lower income levels or middle class, though it is possible that we simply did not know where to look. There appeared to be a good mix of homes for sale.

We also noted that in comparison to our home community, we did not see very many public parks, playgrounds, fields, to support these residential neighbourhoods. Active transportation and bike lanes could be better integrated throughout the town.

The waterfront condos stood out to us as very appealing, both to increase the visual appeal of the downtown viewed from the waterfront itself, and to increase density and provide residential units in the downtown, walkable area. The height of these buildings felt appropriate to maintain the character of the area. Walking along the boardwalk, views in either direction (whether towards the lake, or up towards King Street) were very aesthetically pleasing.

*Housing and Residential Area Rankings:*



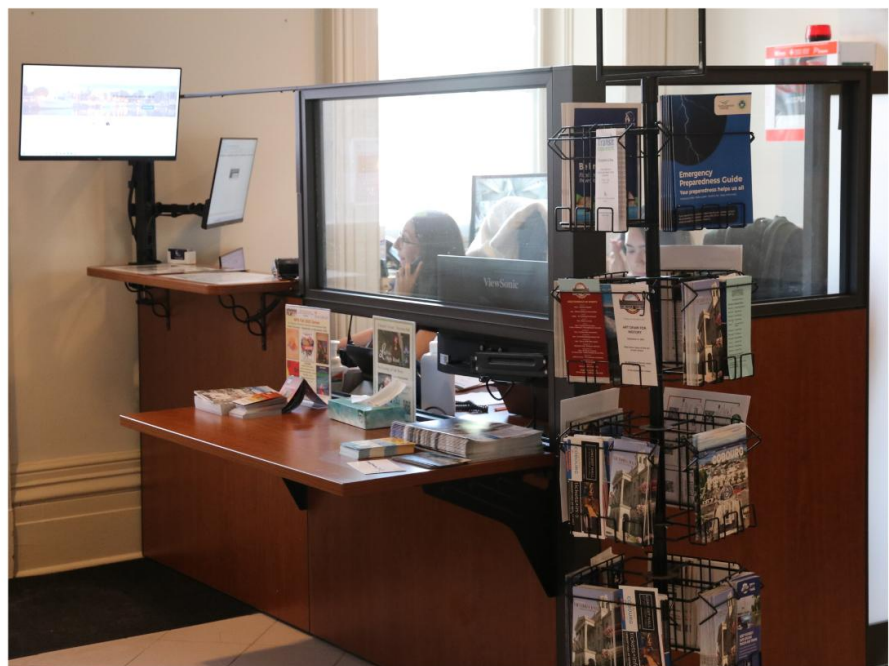
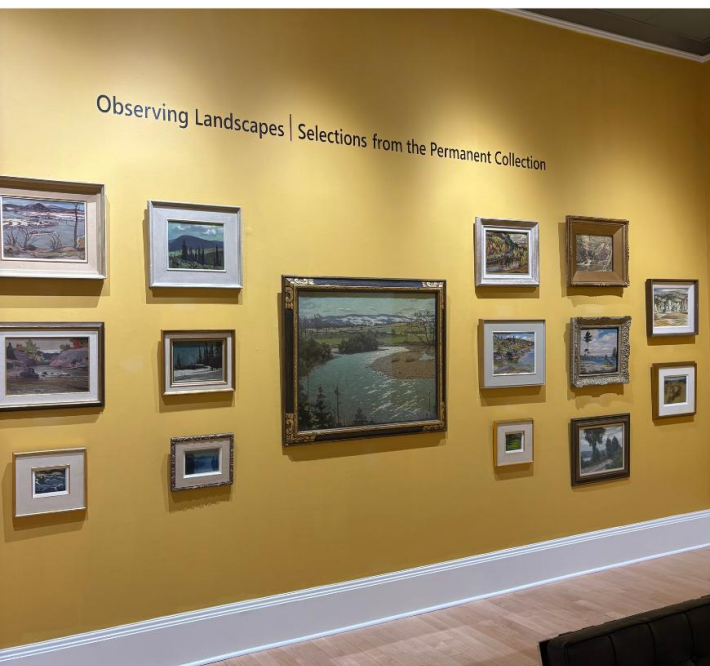
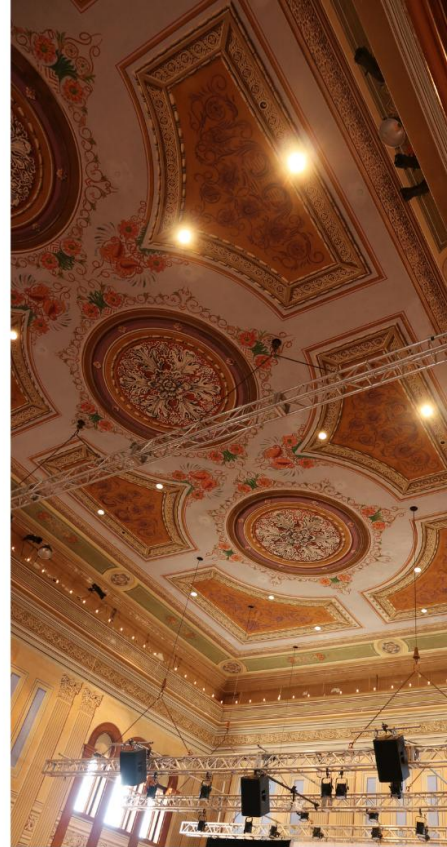
## Local Government Services

*Highlights:*

- Friendly and informed municipal staff

*Opportunities:*

- Signage to better orient the visitor to find staff and information
- Signage inviting you to enter Victoria Hall
- New resident welcome kit



Most of our participants visited Victoria Hall and talked with the staff there. They had brochures, maps, and other key information about the town, and the staff were friendly, helpful, and informed. The building was easy to find and very attractive (inside and out), although we were unsure if we could just walk right in. The front door is solid and doesn't have a window, so we were hesitant to open it until an employee came by and welcomed us into the building. She immediately told us about the old court room that is used for weddings and told us to check it out.

Friendly customer service staff at the front were eager to assist us further and answer any questions and told us about all of the great things that we could see and do inside the building, including an event that was about to start. We appreciated the computer screen that faced out towards us at the information desk so that we could see the employee navigating the website.

Plenty of brochures and maps were available at the info desk, and our participants appreciated being able to pick up print copies. We did note an absence of a newcomer welcome kit for new immigrant residents. If attracting newcomers to Cobourg was a town priority, an info package would be a good offering to have on hand. Other things like availability of ESL classes, feelings of inclusion, job opportunities for immigrants are also helpful, though we did not have enough time to evaluate whether these services were present in the community. We did not hear many different accents or see much visible diversity but that doesn't necessarily reflect an absence of inclusivity for immigrants.

Volunteers working the door upstairs in the event venue informed us that they love volunteering there and that activities are hosted on site almost daily.

Service Ontario and Service Canada were not immediately noticed by the majority of our participants if they were not assigned to that role. The ones who did visit those sites noted that it was not nearly the same favourable experience that they found with Municipal Staff.

We also noted the Cobourg Police Services building nearby on King Street (which also included another public washroom) as a positive, which shows community policing as both a support service, easily accessible by the public, and well placed to support the downtown core.

## Education, Health, and Community Services

### *Highlights:*

- Modern Community Centre that matches and serves the needs of the community
- Plentiful programming for retirees that are popular and well-utilized
- Retail health services cluster
- Schools are well placed to serve neighbourhoods throughout the town
- Large hospital that was easy to locate
- Victoria Hall programming

### *Opportunities:*

- Grocery store within walkable downtown area
- More health care

- Recreational programming for teens and young professionals

## Education

Through our drive around the town, we found schools for all ages that were clean and maintained. Some of our participants thought the schools felt a bit dated and did not see evidence of any new construction, while others noted the presence of new-looking schools, so perhaps we were not all looking in the same areas.

While our research ahead of time indicated proximity of college campuses and their benefit for workforce attraction, we could not locate the Fleming satellite office beyond a small indicator on google maps in the industrial area, which seemed more like administration rather than classrooms.

Residents' feedback shows that parents seemed happy with the schools overall, though a few mentioned that they would like to see more variety in programs like extracurricular activities and the arts. There was notably the presence of a homeschool network, and residents pointed out the proximity to the GTA for post-secondary education and the potential to commute.

Our group noted a large daycare centre near the commercial area.

The availability and selection of educational facilities matched our expectations for a community of this size.

## Health Services

The hospital was well signed and easy to find and appeared well used and looked after. Dental offices were spotted throughout the town, although physician offices were harder to locate however, we recognize that often these smaller offices are community-focused and do not require much in the way of signage. Physician shortages, including the lack of a walk-in clinic and long wait times are a concern for residents we spoke to, however that is common to the entire province and unfortunately not a challenge that can be easily overcome. Praise for the hospital and local physicians was noted, so those with care are happy with their health care.

We did spot one "hub" of services that included pharmacy, dental, chiropractic, physio and other health related services in one retail area in the north end of town which felt like a smart business cluster that could build off of each other's successes and foot traffic. We did locate a few medi-spas and other spa-like services, although again, family health teams and physician offices were harder to locate.

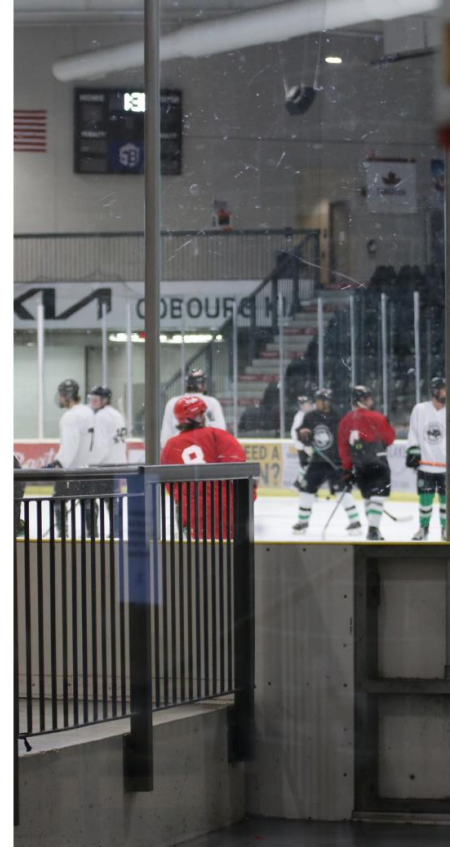
We did note a number of well-kept retirement residences, although they appeared to be more in the retirement community settings rather than long term care or nursing home facilities.

## Community Services

The community seems to be well served by various organizations offering activities, programming and other supports, although the most easily found options were targeted towards retirees and seniors. The downtown library branch was a beautiful space, conveniently located, staffed by friendly and helpful librarians and circulation clerks, and was well utilized during our visit for quiet research and study during our visit by a range of age groups. We noted that programming at the library was again targeted at retirees and seniors and did not seem to have much upcoming programming for teens or adults of working age.

One of our groups was fortunate enough to visit Victoria Hall just prior to one of the “Women Happy at the Movies” lunch events, which we were told about by the friendly municipal staff downstairs when we entered, and were able to talk with the volunteers who were taking tickets at the door upstairs. These volunteers raved about all the events that happened regularly in beautiful space, and the variety and adaptability of the space. We were told that something happened there most days, and for certain shows the bar in a nearby room could be utilized as well, and the volunteers loved being able to pick and choose the events that they volunteer for. During our chat, many people arrived for the movie and lunch, showing it was a well-attended program that is in demand.

The nearby art gallery on the third floor was a beautiful space featuring a well-curated contemporary gallery along with a permanent collection proudly displayed. In addition to the rotating exhibits, the opportunities for public participation and kids to try their hand at some art was a great touch and way to get all ages involved in art appreciation. While we had researched the gallery in advance, we could not find mention of admission prices anywhere beyond membership information. The municipal staff on the first floor promoted the gallery as a great free activity, and this information (whether free as mentioned or if it is intended to be admission-by-donation) should be added to the website to increase visitor traffic.

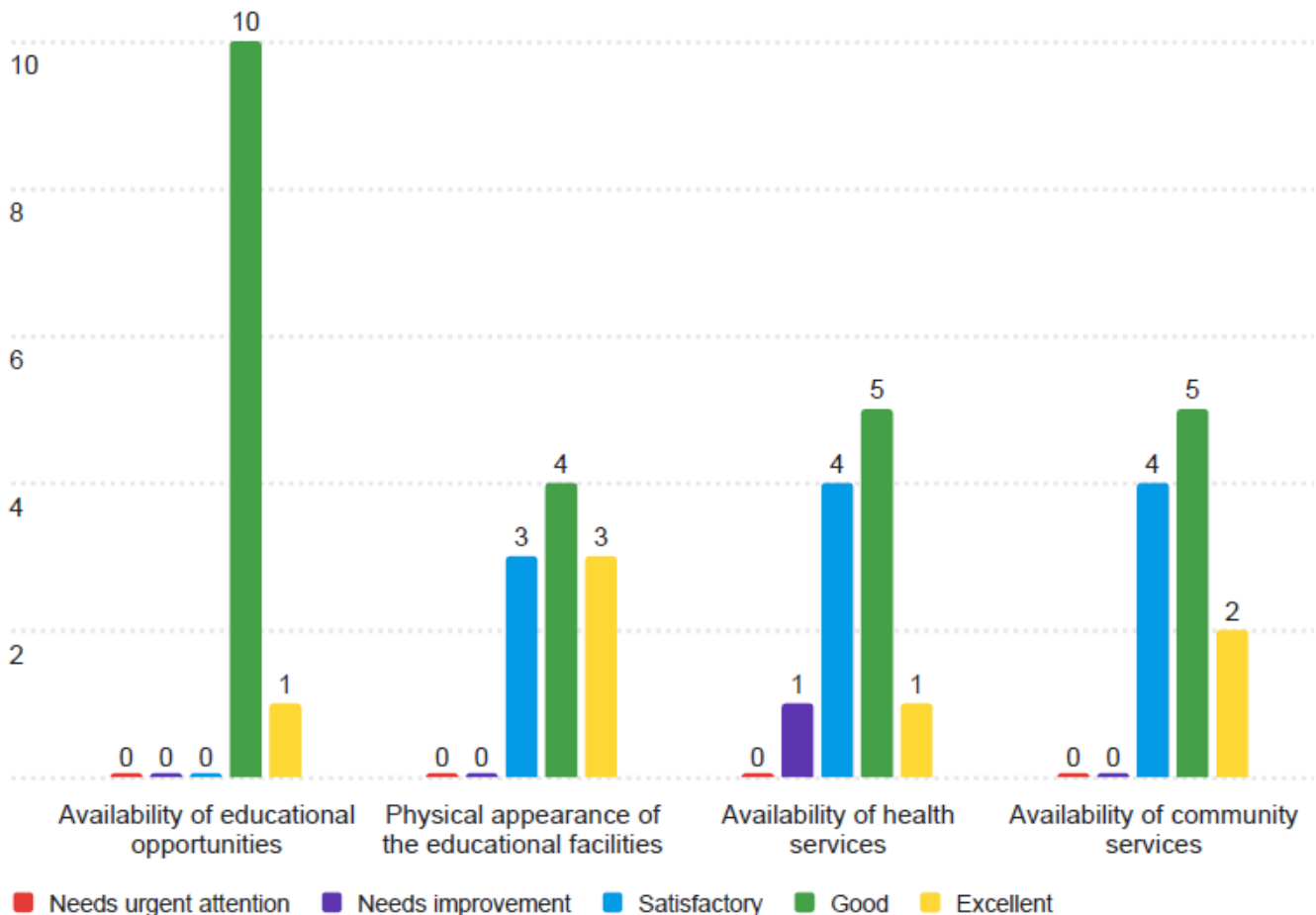


The Community Centre and arena was also a beautiful space that seemed well designed to suit the needs of the community. Little touches like public art, seating area where parents could watch hockey practice, and the “little library” outside serviced by the public library to offer a book to those who arrived having forgotten their reading material offer extra touches. This centre was busy and clearly an important hub for the community. During our visit, we noted a well-attended seniors program occurring in one of the meeting spaces. The space felt well-loved, utilized, and a reflection the spirit of the community itself.

The On-Demand Transit system looks like a great initiative to make getting around efficient and affordable.

Cobourg seems to do a good job with community services for a town its size, including other not for profit and charities that provide community services. Finding main community facilities is straightforward, and the beach area and waterfront events stood out as a big part of community life. Residents spoke positively, indicating that there is “always something going on”, though a few people mentioned they’d like to see more activities for teens and young adults, and that it can be hard to stay informed unless you utilize social media. The online events calendar is full of community events as well as tourist events, so it is easy to find out what is happening on any given day as a local resident.

*Education, Health, and Community Services Ranking:*



# Downtown

## *Highlights*

- Curb appeal and beautification efforts
- Charming downtown core
- Lush flower baskets and flower beds everywhere
- Beach and boardwalk
- Victoria Hall

## *Opportunities*

- Courtesy crosswalks
- Dedicated Accessible Parking Spaces
- Cycle route analysis and Active Transportation Plan
- Align Downtown Cobourg and Town of Cobourg brands

The downtown core is a beautifully maintained heritage downtown area which has a lot of appeal. Victoria Hall, centrally located and towering over the downtown, is a beautiful example of a heritage building that is maximizing its use as municipal services, information, arts centre, and core attractions.

Overall, the downtown stores and services contained a good mix of retail, restaurants and cafés, services, and practical services (notably the lock smith and barber shops). The downtown area, and all of the waterfront, was very clean with a noticeable lack of litter or cigarette butts, and with flowers stuffed into every available free space. The downtown area feels well-loved and looked after, and very attractive. Lamp posts with downtown Cobourg banner flags in clusters with hanging flower baskets and paired with sidewalk-level planters were very visually appealing and felt vibrant and lush. Posters promoting shop Canadian were present in many storefronts and had the downtown Cobourg branding which made it feel like a concerted effort to support local. Sidewalks were wide, and restaurant patios were inviting and added to the character and vibrancy of the downtown without blocking access.



Very few vacancies were apparent in the downtown area, which is great from a visitor and resident perspective, although it could be a challenge for a new business venture looking to find space in downtown Cobourg. Businesses were well maintained, had beautiful window displays and signage, and owners were friendly, helpful, and quick to recommend other things to do or nearby businesses to check out.

The mix of app-based (Honk app) and kiosks to pay for parking, with kiosks available at regular intervals, made finding and paying for parking easy for a variety of types of users. We found parking spaces to be plentiful, though as we were visiting in early September, this may not be indicative of peak summer season. Some participants noted parking regulations were confusing, while another group noted the price difference between parking on King Street vs. parking near the beach access point. The use of long parking spaces on King Street was something that our group commented on positively as ease of access, without necessarily needing to parallel park, made finding and getting into a free parking space easy. We were not able to locate any signage or indications of dedicated accessible parking spaces on King Street itself. We did see at least one spot that appeared to be suitable (ramped curve from the road to the sidewalk along this space) but there was not any matching signage to mark this space accordingly.

Dedicated crosswalks in the downtown core had a mix of accessible features, most commonly featuring the auditory beeps to indicate safe, directional crossing for pedestrians, along with the use of high-contrast visual cues at the curb and raised bumps or channels indicating the edge of the curb and direction of travel. However, we noted that

the use of these features varied and was inconsistent from crosswalk to crosswalk, although not being people who require the use of these features are perhaps not the best suited to evaluate. We spotted signage inside Victoria Hall as well as a survey on Engage Cobourg looking for feedback on a multi-year accessibility plan as a better indicator of how well those features are working. It seemed like Cobourg was making a concerted effort to integrate accessibility into their infrastructure.

Crossing King Street outside of the official crosswalks to access businesses on the other side of the street were not readily indicated. It appeared that at one time, courtesy crosswalks were available at certain intervals, as indicated by bollards to prevent parking, along with ramped sidewalks to allow for ease of crossing. However, the faux brick work on the roads has filled in over time and street lines painted down the middle of the street run straight through these crosswalks. Utilizing these courtesy crosswalks would provide safer crossings at dedicated areas and help discourage unsafe j-walking.



The Downtown Cobourg branding and logo, while bright and modern looking, we felt was too similar to the well-known logo for “The County” (Prince Edward County) and was therefore giving us impressions of agriculture which is not in line with the heritage and beach reality of the downtown. The downtown and town branding could be better aligned by complementing each other.

The downtown felt very walkable, and it was easy to get around and find a variety of stores and services. Side streets felt integrated into the downtown area beyond King Street itself, and most stores had street-level access that were not hindered by a “step up” from the sidewalk making them fairly accessible. We noted that often these heritage downtown buildings had narrow entryways and heavy doors, and perhaps there is an opportunity for businesses to increase their accessibility. Some benches were identified as areas to stop for a quick rest, although we wondered at the hot black metal and whether it would be an appealing stop on a hot, sunny day..

Plenty of public washrooms were identified in the downtown and waterfront area, including Victoria Hall, Police Station, Marina, Library, and dedicated washrooms near the park with the fountain located between the downtown and the waterfront were all easily located, although a few of our participants noted a lack of signage indicating the locations of public washrooms.

Residents and visiting tourists were cheerful and ready to answer any questions we had for them, often stopping us unprompted to provide a tip or information about something we were looking at. Their community pride was palpable, and everyone had tons of recommendations. The range of recommendations was also nice to hear, as it represents a variety of businesses and attractions, which shows the strength of the businesses and wide appeal.

Locals are proud of their downtown, though some would like more variety in shops and more evening activities.

*Downtown Overall Impression Ranking:*



## Business and Industry

### *Highlights:*

- Excellent customer service
- Business owners are proud of, and excited by, their community
- Variety of businesses to serve the community
- Strong café culture creates places for the community to connect and socialize
- Venture13

### *Opportunities:*

- Promotion of available commercial spaces for lease
- Promotion and clarity of the leading industries in Cobourg
- Waterfront restaurant potential
- Rainbow Registered program
- Promotion of Cobourg's largest employers and industries

## Retail and Services

Retail and Services were scattered throughout the town in commercial nodes that seemed to be well placed to serve the community. Box stores, chain restaurants and familiar names were clustered closer to the 401 entrances, which is typical of a community located along the highway, with independently run shops and services closer to the downtown core. Grocery stores were well placed around the town, although we noted that there did not seem to be a grocery store downtown to increase the walkability of living downtown. We also noted a number of barbers shops but did not see many hair salons.

The range of businesses and services was abundant, and most plazas had very few, if any, vacancies. As noted earlier, this is great from a tourist or resident perspective, however, it may present a challenge for a new business looking for a commercial location.

The customer service we received was excellent, with owners and staff having only positive things to say about the town. They were eager to have a chat and share their top tips. Participants that were not assigned the “shopper” role expressed remorse that they could not linger in the stores longer to explore but have plans to return when they can take their time.

Buy Canadian/Buy Local efforts were noted in the downtown storefronts through the use of consistent posters produced by Downtown Cobourg, though we did not see similar efforts in other areas of town. The “Autumn Perks” coupon booklet we picked up from Victoria Hall

included a range of businesses from all over town, which also helped us identify services and businesses that we did not otherwise have a chance to see from the road.

While Cobourg is ahead of our home community in terms of visible Pride and inclusion (rainbow sidewalk, Pride flags visible in store windows well past Pride Week, queer-run businesses, municipal staff wearing a rainbow pin) this area could be further strengthened. Currently, no businesses in Cobourg appear in the “[Rainbow Registered](#)” directory, and this program could be executed across the town in order to ensure spaces are truly rainbow friendly.



## Food and Dining

There appeared to be a variety of food and dining opportunities, including diners, cafés, bistros, and familiar chain restaurants. The quality and atmosphere of the restaurants felt appealing, with a nice mix of casual and slightly upscale with lots of options. They all seemed to have found their own unique niche. Sidewalk patios and outdoor seating was plentiful, which makes for a vibrant area, particularly downtown, though we did not see any waterfront restaurants overlooking the lake, which is an opportunity to explore.



The café culture in Cobourg is strong, which we enjoyed, and included a roastery, downtown café walking tour pamphlet to help us get our caffeine fix, and locations attracting “Instagram tourists”. We did note that unfortunately, a couple of the cafés we were excited about from our pre-visit research were no longer in business, which likely indicates that this market is saturated.

One of the first recommendations we received for dining options downtown was the “Prep Food Co.” which was highlighted for having fresh ingredients, grab and go options, dine in,

as well as prepared meals to cook at home. After stopping in, we were thrilled with the options, especially as a convenient place to get hearty and healthy meals if we were residents in the downtown area. We received many further recommendations from people we passed by, and they were all varied and positive, indicating lots of well-loved dining options.

## Industry

While there appeared to be many homes under construction, and expensive looking properties with a view, it was not immediately apparent to our group what industries are prevalent in Cobourg. The industrial area is relatively small, and shares space with the community centre and a school. A large project for the Northumberland Archives is in development, leading us to the conclusion that County services must make their home base in Cobourg and are likely a large employer for the town. Based on the people we ran into and the programming and services we identified, we also have the impression that a large portion of the community's residents are retirees, as well as people who are commuting to other areas.

In talking with staff at City Hall and the Employment Office, they indicated that there are entry level opportunities locally, but that professional roles would most likely be found outside of the community. Major employers aren't immediately obvious, but there's potential for development.

Promotion and clarity of Cobourg's largest employers and industries would help with business and workforce attraction.

## Business and Industry Ranking:



## Tourism, Recreation, and Culture

### Highlights

- Beach and boardwalk
- Victoria Hall
- “Instagrammable” downtown and waterfront
- Public washroom availability
- Community Centre
- Fountain/outdoor skating rink
- Public Art
- Recreational programs for seniors
- “Move here for...” call outs in the visitor guide

### Opportunities:

- Kayak and Stand-Up Paddleboard rental potential
- Beautification of the beach access point
- Capitalize on Instagram potential of the lifeguard huts: eliminate advertising and relocate safety signage and garbage cans away from the lifeguard huts

- More indicators of where to locate visitor information
- Streamline the visitor guide
- Waterfront hotel potential
- Develop additional tourism assets to increase length of stay
- Improve bike lanes
- Cobourg-branded merchandise
- Increase recreational programming for adults and teens
- Historical walking tours
- Market to communities to the east of Cobourg

## Tourism and Entertainment

We could tell from our drive through the downtown and to the waterfront that summer tourism really shines. The expansive, white sand beach with adorable candy-coloured lifeguard huts really popped against the bright blue sky during our visit, prompting us to park as close as we could get and hop out of the car to explore further. The aptly themed “sandcastle building festival” sounds like the perfect event to celebrate this beautiful asset. Even on a Wednesday in September, the beach was well utilized, and many people were out for a stroll along the boardwalk. Still having staff working at the marina in September, past when typical summer jobs end, show that this outdoor asset is supported and visitors are still able to explore and learn about attractions into the shoulder season.

While the beach caught our eye immediately, the southeast corner where the parking area leads to the beach itself could use an update. The signage and map there is getting cracked and faded from the sun and given the flower beds we saw everywhere else downtown this area has been overlooked by comparison. This was the first area that we visited because the drive from the highway led us straight here and we hopped out of the car as soon as we saw the waterfront and ran towards the beach, so there is an opportunity to leverage this space both with beautification efforts and with key visitor information. The lifeguard huts are unique to the region, and could be really leveraged for their Instagrammable potential. Unfortunately, we were unable to get a cute pic for Instagram that was clear of “visual clutter” (garbage cans, advertising, and safety signage) that would really let these structures shine.



In addition to the beach, Victoria Hall stands out (literally and figuratively) as the main attraction, and after visiting, we could see why. The stunning courtroom, friendly staff, contemporary art gallery, convertible theatre and meeting space, and historically maintained rooms provide something for every visitor to explore. While residents told us about some of the other nearby museums, we did not have a chance to explore them in detail. We made an effort to drive around to see them, and we noted that without people directing us to them, we likely would not have come across them on our own. There is an opportunity for improved signage to get people to them, and to identify them once you have arrived as they could be difficult to spot.

While we saw a few signs near the 401 indicating hotels nearby, we did not actually see any of the hotels themselves. We found the signs for an upcoming Holiday Inn development and passed the small inn downtown.

Visitor Information can be found at the info desk inside Victoria Hall, though we did not know this until we went inside the building. For an asset of this scale, with so much available inside, there is an opportunity to increase awareness of everything happening inside with signage outside that adheres to the heritage theme of the building and downtown. There is very little outside of the building that indicates that it is open to the public, and the dark, solid doors can be intimidating, with only a small plaque on the door to indicate the hours of operation visible once you approach.

After inquiring, we discovered that the Victoria Hall information desk, along with the Marina, serves as Cobourg's visitor information services. This is a great use of resources as

many people came and went from the building while we were there, and having proximity at the waterfront is also well placed to interact with visitors. Similarly, at the Marina, we did not see any signage or information to let us know that it functioned as a visitor information centre, and only discovered the bikes that could be rented there after we went in. Without having already known that we could visit, we would not have known to enter.



We could not find any kayak rentals or water-related rentals, which seems like a great opportunity for this community. There is also an opportunity to sell branded Cobourg merchandise and souvenirs at the marina as an easy way to promote the community.

We suggest adding visitor information signage at Victoria Hall and the marina as these were not clearly identified from the street. Friendly staff at all locations were helpful.

We picked up lots of great pamphlets, guides, maps and information suited to tourists and residents. We found the Victoria Hall pamphlet helpful and informative and really like the waste collection calendar for its ease of use. The Experiencing Cobourg Guide, while packed full of great information, is overwhelming. Even as self-proclaimed “visitor guide paper copy people” it was difficult to get through the information, especially if you pick it up on the fly in the middle of a visit. More photos and white space to draw the eye, and fewer

blocks of text would help attract the reader to key information. Smaller blocks of text and key highlights could be supported by corresponding digital content and blogs where people could go to read further. A highlight of the guide is the “Move here for…” call outs which are a great way to blend the visitor experience with residential attraction efforts.

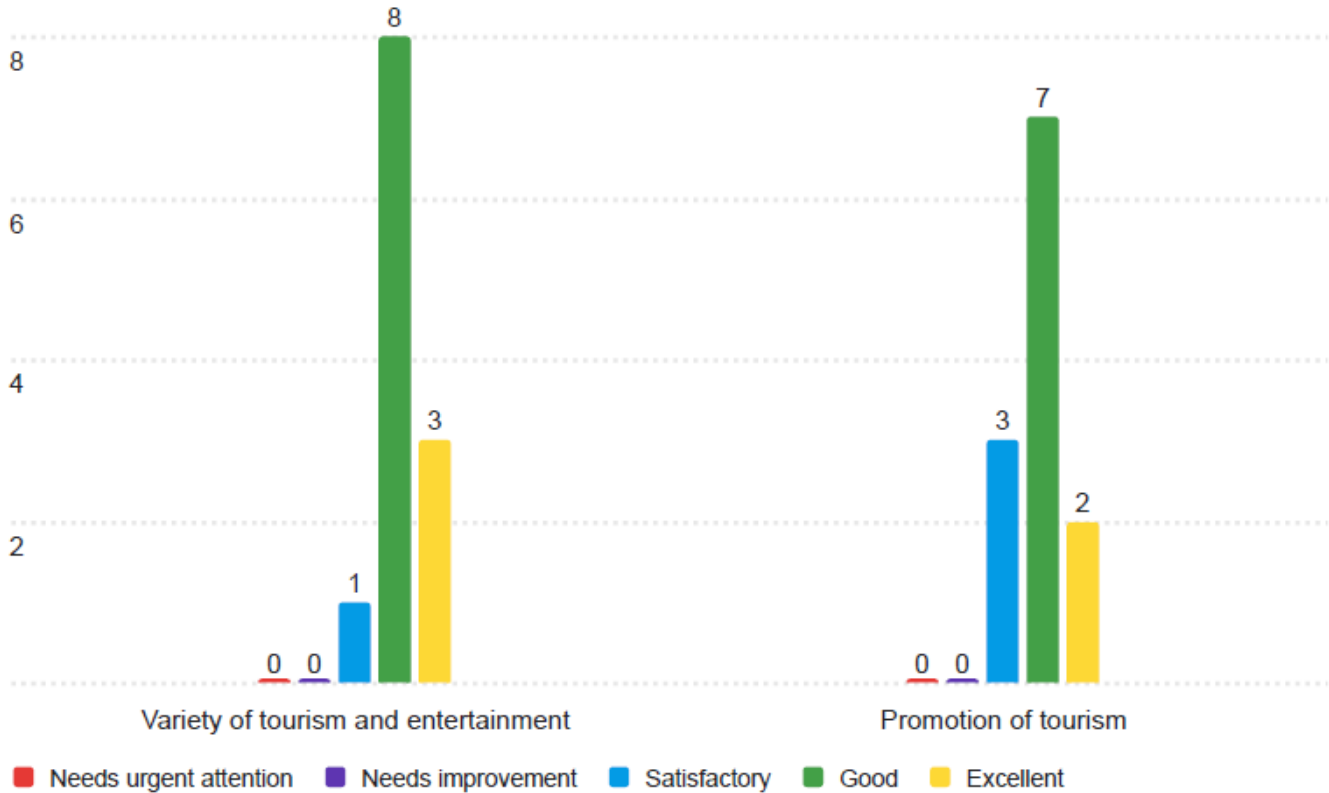
The “Ginny and Georgia” walking tour that highlights the filming locations is a fabulous idea that we would like to adopt for ourselves, although an actual copy of the tour brochure proved elusive, and it is difficult to read on your phone and does not print well at home.

While we did not visit on a rainy day or in the winter, we can assume that the beach is less attractive when the weather is not cooperating, and that it is not much of an attraction in the winter. Victoria Hall and the smaller museums are available year-round, though we did note that there is an opportunity beyond the beach for a main tourist attraction, particularly for families. There is a lot to do to fill a beautiful summer day, but there is an opportunity to expand into a multi-day destination.

Our participants had not previously spent any great amount of time in Cobourg and were not aware of all that the town has to offer. Passing by on the 401 does not do the community justice. While proximity to Toronto likely makes that a key target market, marketing to communities to the east would be worthwhile as none of our participants could recall having seen any tourism marketing for Cobourg and were surprised at all they could see and do within a two hour drive from home.

Overall, Cobourg feels like a well-organized tourist destination with lots of charm and a strong community spirit that makes visitors feel welcome.

### Tourism Appeal Ranking:



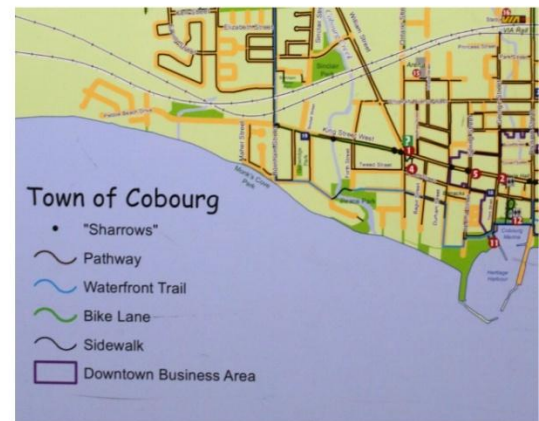
## Recreation, Culture and Heritage

In addition to the beach, we spotted a couple of gyms during our drive around town and visited the Community Centre and arena. We did note the presence of an outdoor pool in the summer, and indoor pool at the YMCA, though we did not visit these in person to assess.

As stated earlier, the community centre felt like a true community centre that was built to match the needs of the community, and was being well utilized, even mid-week during the day. We also liked the outdoor fitness station near the parking lot. Staff at the arena were very friendly and helpful, and we were approached with offers of assistance as we were studying the map on the wall inside.

Waterfront access was greatly appreciated and well utilized. We noted the new boardwalk on the west end, which was enjoyed by visitors using a mobility device that extended the use of the shoreline, along with the botanical garden trail which was an enjoyable addition. Some of the areas joining the sections, notably beside the yacht club, were a bit confusing, but ultimately most people can assume that they are to follow the waterfront.

There is an opportunity to improve trail access for cycle tourism and active transportation for residents to get around. The mix of bike lanes, sharrows, boardwalk trails, and dedicated pathways is confusing and hazardous for cyclists and drivers alike. Bike lanes ended abruptly, with no alternative route options presented, and similarly trail and boardwalk sections ended abruptly, forcing the cyclist into traffic and roadways. There is an opportunity to complete an Active Transportation Plan and assessment of bike trails and lanes in the town to improve upon this asset. On a related note, we spotted a few places downtown where cyclists could lock up their bike, but these were not plentiful. A note on the doors of the library advised people not to leave their bicycles inside the doors, however there was not a bike rack outside or an alternative place to leave a bicycle nearby.



The large” butterfly wing” flags on large posts drew our eye up towards the downtown core as we walked along the boardwalk. Venturing closer, we found the public washrooms and fountain, along with people enjoying the park. Local residents informed us that it is a well-used space that also transforms into a skating rink in the colder months. The washroom building can be used as a warm place to tie up your skates, and the nearby trees are wrapped with Christmas lights. We liked the transformative nature of this park and feel it is

a great example of a public space that is utilized year-round and is clearly appreciated by locals.

Cobourg offers an impressive range of recreational options for a community its size. The sports fields, arenas, playgrounds, and waterfront trails are well-maintained and clearly well-used, which shows how valued they are by residents. The comments from residents were that some programs fill up quickly, which can make it hard to participate if you don't register early. There may be an opportunity to expand programming, especially for teens and seniors, to make activities more inclusive.

## Culture and Heritage

Victoria Hall is an obvious example of the historical character of the town, emphasized by the heritage district downtown and character and appeal of the buildings. It felt welcoming that we were invited to freely wander through the building, and to see so many recreational and historical opportunities in one place.

While we did not see any obvious "You're entering Historic Downtown Cobourg" or any indicators that we were in a heritage area, the buildings and signage on the businesses presented themselves as historical in nature, with what we assume to be a heritage signage bylaw for businesses that is adhered to and enforced.

Research online showed us that there are four heritage districts in Cobourg, though other than the downtown core we did not notice any indication of these zones.

Public art, whether a mural, street sculpture, public gallery, or installation was visible and well maintained throughout the town and in the community centre. Chances to interact with the art were notable and appreciated, and multiple residents pointed us in the direction of the new exhibit at the art gallery in Victoria Hall.

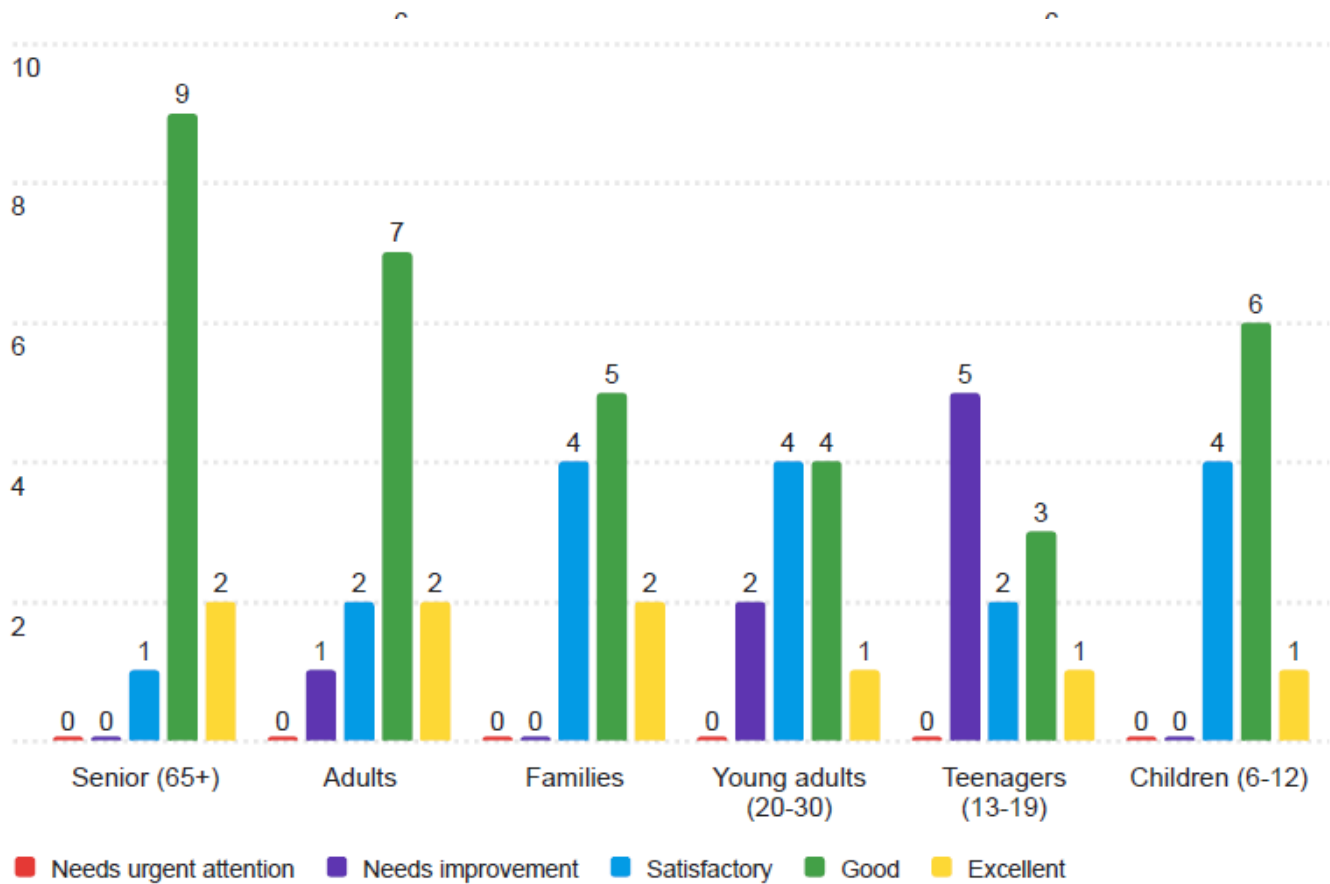


There seems to be a variety of churches and religious options. The library was a beautiful building that was being well used by residents.

People we spoke to felt that there is lots to do and business owners thought it was a “cool place to live”.

Cobourg’s culture and heritage are a big part of its charm. The town has beautiful historic architecture, especially in the downtown core, which gives it a lot of character. An in-person heritage walking tour, or a robust self-guided heritage walking tour of local sights, history, and architecture, would be appealing to tourists.

*Recreation, Culture, and Heritage appeal rankings:*



## Using Our Senses:

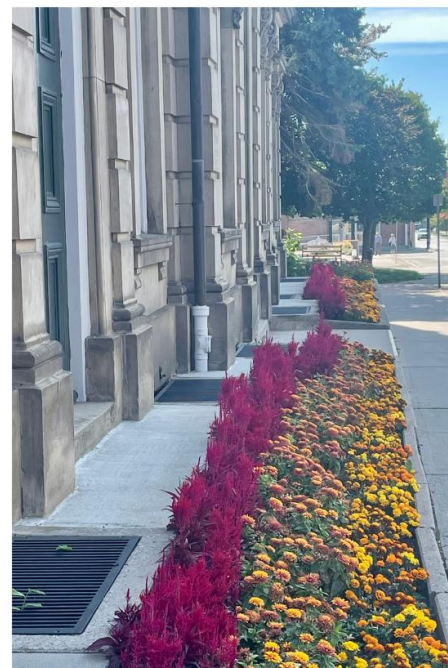
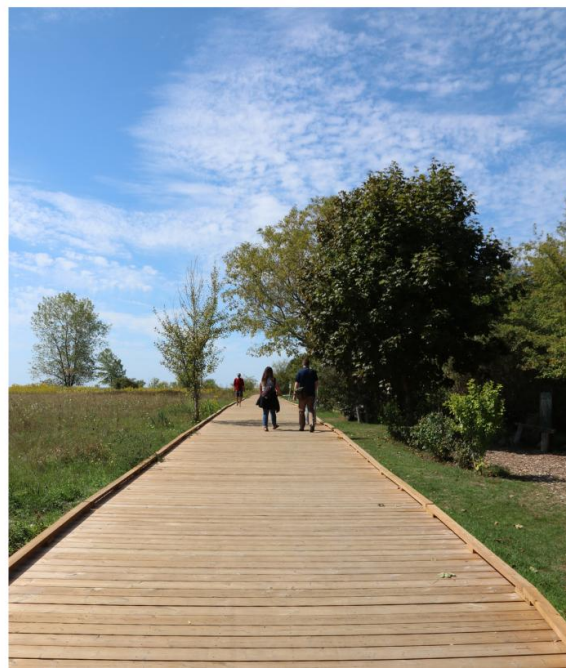
When exploring the community, all our senses were engaged – not just visually, but taste, smell, sound, and overall feel of the environment. We were tasked with describing what we experienced through each sense.

- What did the community **taste** like? A specialty food item, bakery or local food.
- What did the community **smell** like? A scent that characterizes the community.
- What sounds did we **hear**? What was the level of noise like in the community?
- What did the community **feel** like?

Below is a summary of how our team described their experiences:

- **Taste:** fresh, coffee, baked goods, flavourful brussels sprouts at “The EL”, blueberry scones and tea in a shop by the bookstore, fine dining, freshly prepared local food, Italian, brownie and pink latte from “The Pink Café”, “a gourmand’s playground”.

- **Smell:** flowers, fresh, some minimal stale water smell, good food, water, coffee, fresh lake air, fresh seafood, lake-marina smell, neutral but clean.
- **Sounds:** quiet, peaceful, surprising amount of vehicle traffic downtown, reasonable for a thriving community, fairly quiet even with most patios full, birds, lovely walkable downtown, friendly, hustle and bustle, waves from the lake, wind, conversation and chatter, low level background noise, some seagulls on the beach.
- **Feel:** felt like “coming home”, friendly, happy, well-kept and lovely, charming, I could live there, vibrant, prideful, safe, peaceful, homey, a cup of tea, relaxing, close by, comfortable, inviting, warm, bright.



## Information from Residents:

### *Highlights:*

- Friendly and welcoming community
- Residents feel safe living in the community
- Most people love where they live!

### *Residents' Concerns:*

- Lack of professional employment opportunities – directed to surrounding areas
- Seasonal town - Significant increase in people traffic in the summer, retailers and restaurants face challenges if they do not have an established loyal client base. (survival in the quieter seasons)
- Not as many activities in the winter/off months
- Cost of living, homelessness, aging population
- Not enough amenities for younger people and families
- Some people weren't happy with summer congestion from visitors

Overall, residents were very knowledgeable about the community. Comments were generally very positive and there was an evident sense of pride in the town.

Our visitor teams spoke with a range of people who have lived in Cobourg their whole lives, some who had left and returned and some new to the town. Residents were happy to stop and talk with us and offered information freely. Most people that we spoke with noted that Cobourg feels like a supportive community with friendly people, knew a lot about local events and attractions and enthusiastically directed us to their favourite restaurants and shops.

Parents liked the amenities offered by the town while still having the benefits of living in a small community. We talked with people who currently have children and teens in school, children who are home-schooled and some who have children who have graduated. All parents agreed that there are and were a lot of activities for their kids to be involved with, especially sports. The home-schooling parents said that there are several “mom” groups to get involved with. All parents that we interacted with concluded that they feel Cobourg is a great place to raise kids and that they feel safe in the town.

From a visual perspective, we could feel a sense of community pride based on the cleanliness and well-maintained businesses in the downtown area. Another notable item was the sight of many Canadian flags flown with care from the beautiful buildings on King Street.

In terms of inclusiveness, after speaking with a queer community member they noted that downtown hosts an annual Pride event, but efforts seem to stop there. There was evidence of allyship as there were visible rainbow stickers, flags and items in shops which were nice to see, along with the painted sidewalk near Victoria Hall and pin worn by municipal staff that are positive signs.

While comments were mainly positive, there were a few issues expressed such as perceived lack of employment opportunities and amenities for younger families, the unhoused population, struggles with less to do and less business sales in the off-season as well as similar issues many small towns in Ontario face such as an aging population and cost of living.

## Reflecting Back:

All of our participants had positive things to say about their visits to Cobourg. Some had preconceived notions from experiences far in the past, while others had no awareness of what the town offered. For those participants, they were blown away by the vibrancy and beauty of the downtown and waterfront. For those that had done some preliminary research, they felt that the town matched or exceeded their expectations.

Six months from now, our participants will remember how beautiful, clean, and welcoming the town was, along with thinking about the amazing selection of restaurants and shops that we didn't have enough time to fully explore.

Despite being quite close to us, none of our participants had previously spent more than a brief time in Cobourg, and none had previously ventured downtown. After this visit, all of our participants expressed interest in returning to explore further.

## Obstacles or Challenges:

Similar to what we experience in our home community, proximity to the 401 means that people from outside of the community may have "passed through" briefly to stop for gas or a bite to eat without really getting to know the town. The convenience of being located on the 401 can be contrasted by commercial areas that are easy to find and access, but that don't set the town apart as somewhere to return to. Getting people downtown and to the waterfront where the town really shines is a challenge that is hard to overcome, but one that could be concentrated on.

The TODS Area Profile signs on the 401 could be better utilized to showcase Cobourg's waterfront assets. While the standard blue and white signs on the highway indicating the upcoming exit for Cobourg, along with the town logo and population count, were present,

we only spotted them after circling back to look for them, whereas nearby places like Prince Edward County leverage this opportunity to showcase their white sand beaches at Sandbanks to draw people off of the highway.

Additionally, the challenge exists of increasing year-round activities to extend the tourism season and community well-being year-round. This could be combatted over time with targeted product development to build out year-round attractions and recreational programming for all ages.

Recreational programming and activities were most prevalent for the retired and senior population, and new housing developments appear to be affordable only by those well-established in their careers or moving out of a larger city centre to retire. While the town and its partners are doing an excellent job servicing this population, as the town continues to age, the community needs to attract younger workers and residents to ensure this community is positioned to thrive long into the future.

The challenge of attracting a younger, working-age population could be supported with an increase in recreational programming, activities, and events that are targeted to a younger demographic, and housing developments that are focused on attracting the same.

## Quick Wins and Recommendations:

From our perspective, there are a few quick wins that Cobourg could complete that would have an immediate impact on the visitor and resident experience:

- Add a customized TODS Area Profile sign on the 401 with a hero photo to sell your community
- Use of information question mark “?” signs (or a heritage version equivalent) to indicate visitor information can be found at Victoria Hall and the Marina
- Eliminate advertising on the lifeguard huts to maximize their Instagrammable and promotional potential
- Freshen up entry point from the waterfront parking lot to the beach
- Indicate to passersby at the marina that cruiser bicycles are available for rent by the hour inside
- Refresh “courtesy crosswalks” along King Street
- Dedicated Accessible Parking spaces on King Street, and improved information about parking

## Opportunities:

As longer-term goals and opportunities for Cobourg, there are some projects that we have identified that would have a meaningful impact on the community:

- Invest in an Active Transportation Analysis and Strategy, particularly around bike lanes and trails
- Update wayfinding signage plan and design
- Kayak and Stand-Up Paddleboard rentals at the waterfront
- Waterfront dining at a restaurant overlooking the lake
- Encourage businesses through a targeted campaign to become “Rainbow Registered” <https://cglcc.ca/programs/rainbow-registered/>
- Marketing to communities east of Cobourg
- Create a welcome kit for new residents, especially for new Canadians
- Enhance winter activities

## Ideas we would like to implement:

When engaged in this program or comparing and contrasting communities, we couldn't help but have services and ideas jump out at us that we don't currently offer, but now we would like to. Notably, these included:

- Flowers everywhere
- App-based pay for parking
- Longer parking spaces on King Street
- On-demand transit
- “Move here for...” call outs in the experience guide
- Film location walking tour (“Ginny and Georgia”)



## Conclusion:

Our day trip to Cobourg was an enjoyable and enlightening experience for our participants. The town has implemented several initiatives that we have learned a lot from and hope to adapt for our own city. All of our participants plan to return soon on their own time to explore further.

Several quick wins will allow Cobourg to further leverage its many assets, and investing in a few longer term, targeted goals will allow the town to build out from a day-trip destination to a base from which to explore for a longer period of time. Cobourg's beautiful waterfront and downtown, along with its proximity to the 401 and Toronto make it an appealing destination to attract tourists, new residents, and new businesses.

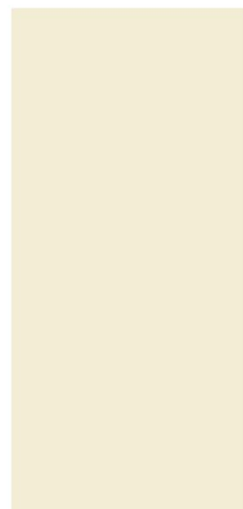
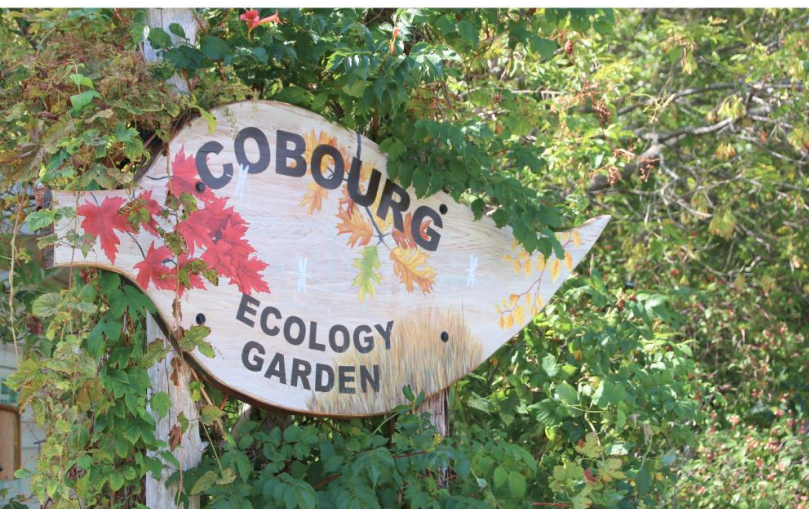
Getting people to visit for the first time is the ultimate challenge: once you visit, you will want to return.



## Appendix A: Photos of a few identified issues

Clockwise from top left:

1. Benches downtown (and at the arena) are painted black, which could be quite hot in the summer
2. King Street parking space that might be suitable as an Accessible space, but no signage to match
3. Confusing linkages between the west beach and walking path along the lake
4. Outdated map and more path confusion at the lake
5. Doors of the public library with signage indicating not to leave bicycles inside the doors (however, nowhere obvious outside where bikes could be locked up)



## Appendix B: Photos of a few more features we enjoyed

Clockwise from top left:

1. A display inside “The Look Out” creative space inside the Art Gallery at Victoria Hall
2. Information display outside of Victoria Hall that could be utilized more (some of the sides were blank)
3. Wheel barrows at the marina beside a bike stand. A sample of a bicycle for rent could be locked up here with a “rent me” sign
4. Sample heritage district street sign that we liked
5. Sign for the Cobourg Ecology Garden, an area we really enjoyed exploring