

DUFFERIN BUILDS TOGETHER

Dufferin County Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan

2025-2030



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A MESSAGE

FROM THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER
SONYA PRITCHARD



We are excited to share the Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan for Dufferin County. This plan, which is born out of Dufferin County's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan represents a collaborative effort involving local municipalities, businesses, and community stakeholders, aiming to shape a prosperous future for our region.

This strategy addresses key opportunities and challenges that impact the well-being and economic growth of our community. It emphasizes fostering innovation, building on our strengths, and leveraging partnerships to achieve sustainable, inclusive economic development. The plan is built around enhancing local business growth, attracting new investment, supporting a diverse workforce, and positioning Dufferin as a leading arts and culture hub.

Our Economic Development Strategy provides a framework for making informed decisions that align with the County's overall vision of resilience, inclusivity, and prosperity. It is grounded in the values of collaboration, innovation, and equity—principles that reflect our commitment to ensuring all residents benefit from economic opportunities. This approach also involves supporting local talent and creating conditions for our skilled workforce to flourish close to home.

The strategy is an evolving document, adaptable to emerging needs and opportunities. We will continuously monitor progress, evaluate outcomes, and update our approach where needed. Engaging the community, celebrating successes, and learning from challenges will be fundamental to ensuring that our economic development efforts have a meaningful, positive impact.

We are committed to working alongside our local municipalities and community organizations to realize a vibrant and economically dynamic future for Dufferin County. Together, we can BUILD in Dufferin a thriving community that grows, prospers, and stands resilient in the face of change.

Nestled just 45 minutes north of Toronto, Dufferin County is home to approximately 71,000 people and boasts of picturesque landscapes, vibrant local economy, and charming small towns. Dufferin County is also a growing community. Dufferin’s population increased from 61,735 in 2016 to 66,257 in 2021¹, and is expected to reach 95,000 by 2051².



Considering this reality, Dufferin County designed its 2023-2026 Strategic Plan with a forward-looking focus to guide the organization in its efforts to manage and direct this growth. The 2023-2026 Strategic Plan lays out two main goals for an economy that will support a growing and thriving community:

- 1. Advance County-wide economic and workforce development**
- 2. Improve broadband and cellular connectivity.**

To advance these goals, the County hosted an economic development workshop in November 2023 which was attended by County Councilors, County and local municipal staff, and community stakeholders. This workshop marked the first phase of the development process for the County’s Economic Development Strategy. Through this workshop, it was identified that there is a gap in the availability of comprehensive data about Dufferin’s unique economic opportunities. The workshop also revealed a lack of consensus on the appropriate direction for the County’s economic development efforts. **These two identified challenges helped define the objective behind this economic development strategy:**

To create a dynamic and inclusive economic development strategy for Dufferin County that harnesses comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data to unlock our unique direction for sustainable growth and prosperity across the County.

With this objective, the County’s Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan will serve as an integral extension of the County’s broader Strategic Plan, which emphasizes sustainable growth, enhanced quality of life, and fostering community resilience. As the County continues to grow and evolve, this Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan seeks to harness Dufferin’s unique assets while addressing key challenges such as workforce commuting patterns, regional wage disparities, and the need for more localized job opportunities.

¹ Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). Census Profile. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E> (accessed June 6, 2024)

² Estimated in the County of Dufferin Official Plan (2024)

DEVELOPING THE STRATEGY

Inclusivity is a fundamental principle that underpinned the roadmap to developing this Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan. This bottom-up approach brought together diverse perspectives, fostered community engagement, and ensured the incorporation of comprehensive data and analysis.

This Strategy was developed over three main phases:

1. Education and planning
2. Public engagement and data analysis
3. Plan approval



Phase 1 – Education and Planning

It was important to start this collaborative strategy development process by first establishing a general understanding of the importance of an economic ecosystem. This would be done through an intensive economic development learning process led by some of the leading minds in modern economic development. In November 2023, the County hosted a two-day economic development workshop to kickstart this learning process. The workshop was attended by County Councilors, County and local municipal staff, and community stakeholders.

Brock Dickinson, adjunct professor at the University of Waterloo, was joined by Paul Knafelc of Community Benchmarks and Erik Lockhart of Lockhart Facilitation Inc. to lead and facilitate this workshop. Through this workshop, it was identified that there is a gap in the availability of comprehensive municipal-level data that defines Dufferin’s unique economic opportunities. The workshop also revealed a lack of consensus on the appropriate direction for the County’s economic development efforts. These revelations informed the direction of the next phase of the strategy development process.

Phase 2 – Public Engagement and Data Analysis

By April 2024, the roadmap was set for soliciting community sentiments through a myriad of avenues. These included municipal workshops, guided discussions at local Council meetings, and brainstorming sessions by local economic development committees. In addition to these, the County partnered with the Dufferin Board of Trade (DBOT), and Headwaters Communities In Action (HCIA) to facilitate a series of workshops that targeted specific municipalities, key industries, businesses and community groups. The series, which was dubbed the Community Insights Workshop Series, ran from April through July 2024 and anchored the public engagement phase of the strategy development process.

The Community Insights Workshop Series was highlighted by the data insights that were presented. Through consultation with Community Benchmarks, a premier data consulting company based in Pelham, Ontario, relevant quantitative data was unearthed and presented at the workshops. The data informed the discussions and priorities that were generated. This approach helped decentralize the economic development learning process from Phase 1, and facilitated a collective understanding of modern economic development practice, leading to the identification of local challenges and opportunities.

Phase 3 – Plan Approval

The third phase involved creating and presenting the draft Municipal Economic Development Action Plans and the Dufferin County Economic Development Action Plans to the Community Development and Tourism Committee, the respective local municipal Councils, and the general public for comments and feedback. Each body was given appropriate time to review, provide feedback, and endorse the Strategy and Action Plans. By involving a diverse range of stakeholders through each phase, including upper and lower-tier municipalities, local industry, not-for-profit organizations, and residents, a broader and more representative perspective was achieved. This phase was completed in November 2024.

From PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The various statements and community sentiments gathered from different sectors and municipalities within Dufferin County reflect a diverse but interconnected set of priorities and aspirations. Across the various communities and industry sectors, several key themes emerge regarding economic development, infrastructure needs, and the preservation of unique local characteristics.



Economic Resilience and Diversity

Across different communities and sectors, there is a strong emphasis on economic diversity as a path to long-term resilience. By diversifying their economic bases, communities aim to better withstand external shocks and avoid overreliance on one sector. This aligns with a forward-thinking approach to economic development that balances tradition with innovation.



Support for Small Businesses and Home-Based Enterprises

Small businesses are viewed as the backbone of local economies, providing jobs, community investment, and local pride. There is widespread recognition that creating a nurturing environment for small and home-based businesses is critical for community stability. Providing resources like accessible guidance, financial support, and technological infrastructure is viewed as a priority to ensure these businesses thrive.



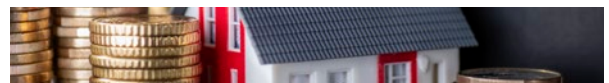
Tourism and Asset Development

Tourism is a critical component of the economic development vision in many communities, with the intent to capitalize on Dufferin's tourism assets such as its natural landscape, trails, parks, and growing arts communities. Arts and culture are seen as valuable tools for not only economic growth but also for enhancing community pride. Theatre Orangeville, Grace Tipling Hall, and the vibrant arts community across Dufferin County are recognized for their potential to draw both local residents and tourists, strengthening the community's cultural fabric.



Agriculture and Agri-Tourism as Economic Drivers

Agriculture remains a cornerstone for many communities in Dufferin, with sentiments reflecting a strong desire to protect farmland, support farming innovation, and promote unique agribusinesses. Moreover, agri-tourism is seen as a growing opportunity to leverage natural assets and rural culture to generate economic benefits. This includes promoting farm tours, supporting local food producers, and establishing culinary collectives that connect farmers with restaurants and tourism-related businesses. By capitalizing on the County's natural beauty, culinary culture, and agricultural heritage, there is an opportunity to draw more visitors, support local businesses, and foster community pride.



Sustainable Growth, Attainable Housing and Infrastructure Development

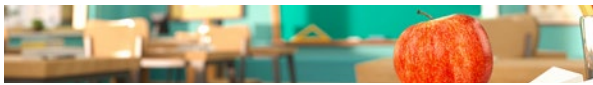
Population growth must be managed carefully to balance economic development with environmental protection and community well-being. Growth is viewed not as an end in itself, but as a means to enhance community well-being while preserving the unique natural and rural characteristics of the area. A significant concern across communities in Dufferin is infrastructure capacity, particularly related to wastewater treatment and land servicing for future growth. Another prevalent theme is the need for attainable housing as a key focus in this ongoing growth. Sustainable growth strategies are therefore crucial to maintaining the quality of life that makes the County attractive to residents and visitors alike.

From PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



Collaboration and Regional Approaches

Working together regionally is seen as the most effective way to maximize resources and achieve shared goals. Collaboration across municipalities, businesses, and sectors is recognized as necessary to achieve economic and environmental sustainability. By adopting a County-wide mindset, communities can address issues such as infrastructure, housing, and economic development more efficiently and cohesively.



Education, Workforce Development, and Innovation

Developing the local workforce and fostering innovation are critical for long-term economic sustainability. Education, particularly in the trades and agriculture, is seen as a key driver for the future workforce. Communities recognize that they must cultivate homegrown talent and provide the infrastructure necessary to retain these workers. Innovation, particularly in agriculture and green energy, is seen as a way to stay competitive and sustainable.



Quality of Life and Community Pride

Maintaining a high quality of life and fostering a strong sense of community pride is central to many of the community's goals. Maintaining and enhancing the small-town vibe, community engagement, and overall quality of life are seen as vital to retaining residents and attracting new ones. Residents want to feel a sense of pride in their community, and this is closely tied to the County's economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability.

The overall vision that emerges from the collected statements is one of balanced, sustainable growth that prioritizes economic diversity, small business support, regional collaboration, and environmental protection. There is a strong emphasis on community pride, preserving rural charm, and fostering innovation, particularly in agriculture and green energy. Tourism, driven by the County's natural beauty, creative culture, and agricultural heritage, is seen as a key economic driver. The desire for collaborative regional approaches to development and a focus on creating attainable housing and workforce development are central to addressing long-term challenges such as housing affordability and economic resilience.

QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Commuting data revealed that 51.4% of Dufferin residents with a regular place of work commute to areas outside of Dufferin for work. This ranks Dufferin as second highest in this category in the entire province of Ontario. The ensuing data and analysis of commuting patterns and employment incomes within Dufferin's local municipalities revealed several important trends:

Employees commuting outside of Dufferin to work

51.4%



Significant Outbound Commuting

- A large portion of residents in Dufferin County's municipalities commute outside of their communities for work. For example, 87% of East Garafraxa residents, 88% of Amaranth residents, and 85% of Grand Valley residents travel to neighboring municipalities.
- Peel Region serves as the leading place of work for Dufferin's commuting residents. Many of these residents are believed to have moved into Dufferin from Peel over the last decade, but maintained their Peel jobs.

Income Disparities

- There is a clear median employment income gap between those who work locally and those who commute outside. In municipalities like Grand Valley, live-work residents earn significantly less (\$28,600) than those commuting out (\$50,800), indicating that high-paying jobs are located outside the community.
- Mulmur is an outlier, with residents who work locally earning a comparable median employment income with those who commute out, reflecting a stronger local economy or higher-paying sectors within the community.

Top Occupations

- Across municipalities, technical trades, transportation officers, and general trades dominate as the top occupations for outbound commuters, with high-income ranges up to \$68,000. This suggests that Dufferin County is home to a significant number of skilled tradespeople and workers in transportation, logistics, and construction sectors.
- Inbound workers often fill positions in general trades, administrative, and manufacturing roles, which tend to have lower median incomes.

Net Loss of Workers

- All of Dufferin's local municipalities are experiencing a net loss of workers, with more residents commuting out than non-residents commuting in. For example, Amaranth loses 880 workers, and Mono loses 1,160 workers. This indicates limited local employment opportunities, which pushes residents to seek jobs elsewhere.

Acquiring both qualitative and quantitative data was crucial for building the Strategy. Each type of data provided unique insights that complemented one another. The quantitative data, acquired through consultation with Community Benchmarks, offered measurable, objective metrics—such as employment rates, income levels, and commuting patterns—that revealed trends and opportunities at a macro level.

However, the qualitative data, derived from the Workshop Series and other municipally determined avenues, captured the subjective experiences, opinions, and needs of local industry and communities, adding pertinent local context to the numbers. Together, these data types ensured a well-rounded understanding of Dufferin's economic landscape, enabling an informed, nuanced analysis that addresses both statistical realities and community perspectives.

BUILD IN DUFFERIN

The qualitative and quantitative data analysis provided point to a clear set of actions needed to address Dufferin’s challenges and tap into existing and emerging opportunities.

These actions will be led by Dufferin County and involve potential partnerships with local municipal economic development offices, economic development committees, and relevant local and external organizations to implement specific actions. This collaborative approach aims to improve alignment and harmonization on economic development between all lower and upper-tier municipalities, avoiding unnecessary duplication and building capacity within local communities.

Currently, Dufferin County employs two staff persons within its economic development division. Achieving these actions within the scheduled timelines would require ample resources and additional economic developments staff to develop strategies and spearhead initiatives. The Action Plan therefore represents a comprehensive but measured approach to fostering sustainable economic growth and community well-being across the County’s diverse municipalities.

The Action Plan focuses on five core themes and objectives:



B

Business Retention and Expansion:

Support, retain, and foster the growth of local businesses, with a focus on medium-sized enterprises

U

Upskilling the Workforce:

Develop initiatives to enhance skills, training, and create pathways to high-quality employment

I

Investment Attraction:

Promote Dufferin as a prime location for new businesses and attract private investments

L

Local Innovation:

Encourage and support innovative practices across industries

D

Destination Development:

Position Dufferin as a visitor and economic destination, enhancing community connections and fostering a vibrant local economy

Each of these themes is designed to address the unique opportunities and challenges that exist within Dufferin, from supporting local businesses and retaining skilled talent to creating a vibrant cultural hub that attracts visitors and investors alike. Each action within the B.U.I.L.D. theme is crafted to address the specific dynamics and needs of Dufferin’s local municipalities and key economic sectors as revealed in the comprehensive data analysis provided in the Strategy. Together, the objectives and actions within the Action Plan aim to strengthen Dufferin’s economy by promoting sustainable growth, local innovation, affordable housing, and high-quality employment opportunities, ensuring a thriving and prosperous community for all residents.

BUILD IN DUFFERIN

Business Retention and Expansion

Support, retain, and foster the growth of local businesses, with a focus on medium-sized enterprises

This theme focuses on not only expanding local businesses but also retaining existing enterprises that form the backbone of Dufferin's economy. While small businesses remain critical for essential products and services, medium-sized enterprises are significant anchors for employment and innovation, particularly in sectors like manufacturing, wholesale trade, professional services, technology and construction.

These businesses tend to have more stable employment opportunities and are more likely to export products and services, drawing outside revenue into the local economy. By addressing encouraging mixed-use developments and other affordable housing options, Dufferin can maintain a healthy workforce base, reduce business closures, and foster long-term growth across its municipalities.

Upskill Workforce

Develop initiatives to enhance skills, training, and create pathways to high-quality employment and affordable housing options.

Dufferin County's workforce dynamics show a significant portion of residents commuting to neighboring regions like Peel for work, with wage disparities being a critical issue. This theme focuses on actions that support upskilling the workforce and providing locally relevant skills and training opportunities, fostering the growth of local economic eco-systems and enabling residents to

find and create quality work without needing to leave the County. With a focus on skilled trades and innovation in the construction sector, these actions can be aligned with the goals of the Master Housing Strategy to tackle housing affordability in Dufferin, a major barrier to talent attraction and retention in several key sectors.

Investment Attraction

Promote Dufferin as a prime location for new businesses and attract private investments

Attracting investment is essential for creating sustainable economic growth across Dufferin's municipalities. Investment can help revitalize underutilized employment areas and turn them into thriving hubs of economic activity. This theme emphasizes actions that position Dufferin as a prime location for new businesses in target

sectors. This will support the diversification of the local economy. By bringing new businesses to the region, Dufferin can also generate more high-quality local jobs, reducing the reliance on outbound commuting for employment opportunities.

Local Innovation

Encourage and support innovative practices across industries

Local innovation is a key driver of economic resilience and long-term competitiveness, particularly in the face of changing economic conditions. Innovation relies heavily on reliable digital infrastructure. This theme emphasizes actions that advance advocacy efforts for investments in digital infrastructure, encouraging entrepreneurship and

supporting innovative practices. These infrastructural investments are crucial for the growth of Dufferin's rural municipalities where agri-food businesses can benefit from adopting new technologies and processes to improve productivity and expand their markets.

Destination Development

Position Dufferin as a visitor and economic destination, enhancing community connections and fostering a vibrant local economy

This theme emphasizes a collaborative approach to improving experiences at Dufferin's natural, recreational, and cultural assets. By enhancing these offerings, Dufferin aims to create a distinct sense of place while maintaining and strengthening connections between communities. Expanding arts, culture, and recreational opportunities will not only attract visitors but also

support talent attraction and stimulate economic activity in key sectors such as retail, hospitality, food services, and creative industries. These efforts will generate economic and social benefits across both urban and rural municipalities, fostering a diversified local economy and building meaningful connections among residents, visitors, and businesses.

THE PATH FORWARD

The next phase of this Strategy and Action Plan will be a collaborative implementation process involving partnerships with local municipalities and stakeholder organizations. There will be annual status update reports to County Council identifying key performance metrics for each theme. The reports will cover the progress made on the identified actions, challenges encountered, and any adjustments made to the plan.

This annual check-in and reaffirming process will ensure that the Strategy remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving economic landscape and community needs. It also promotes transparency, accountability, and adaptability in the implementation of the action plan. This approach will ensure that the initiatives that are developed by the County from this Strategy and Action Plan are resilient, relevant, and in line with the unique aspirations and needs of the local communities and municipalities.

