



Current State of Tourism in Okotoks

November 2024







Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks

Traditional Land Acknowledgement

The Town of Okotoks acknowledges the original stewards of this land that we know and call Treaty 7 Territory, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy First Nations the Kainai, Siksika and Piikani. The Stoney Nakoda First Nations, which includes the Bearspaw, Chiniki and Goodstoney, the Dene First Nation of Tsuut'ina and the Métis Nation of Alberta. We vow to continue honouring and respecting the Indigenous Peoples Sacred and Traditional ways of life and will carry on this special relationship with the land so that generations to come can enjoy, use, and live off the land as their ancestors did. We honour and respect this space, the water, the animals, and all the beings who have a spirit and have been here long before us.

Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks



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1

Introduction

Introduction

Okotoks is a prospering community. As it grows, the Town wants to ensure that future development is sustainable and provides a high quality of life for residents.¹ Okotoks has a unique charm and appeal because of its geography and landscape. With the town’s location along the Sheep River, along with a strong sports sector and historic downtown, it attracts regional visitors and is a service hub for residents in surrounding communities. The Town is interested in growing its tourist economy and intends to develop a comprehensive tourism strategy and action plan to guide its efforts.

Project Purpose

This current state analysis is the first phase in the development of a comprehensive tourism strategy and action plan. It provides an initial snapshot of the current state of the tourism sector and tourism development opportunities in Okotoks. As a precursor to a tourism strategy and action plan, it also includes direction to guide Phase 2 activities.

Okotoks Tourism Project

CURRENT PHASE: COVERED IN THIS REPORT



Phase 1
Current State of Tourism Report

FUTURE PHASE: OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF THIS REPORT



Phase 2
Tourism Strategy and Action Plan



Photo Credit: Okotoks Dawgs Baseball Club

Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks



What is Tourism?

Tourism is a dynamic and competitive industry. For the purposes of this report, tourism can be broadly defined as:²

“The activities of people travelling to places outside their usual environment for leisure, business or other purposes for not more than one consecutive year.”

Using the North American Industry Classification System, we can further define tourism as an economic sector made up of the following five industries: Accommodations, Food & Beverage, Recreation & Entertainment, Transportation, and Travel Services.



The Benefits of Tourism

There are many economic, community, and environmental benefits to be gained through investment in tourism.



Economic Benefits

- Increased visitor spending and economic activity.
- New jobs are created, and existing jobs are sustained.
- Enhanced business attraction and retention.
- Increased tax revenue for governments.



Community Benefits

- Celebrating local culture and sharing it with visitors can be a significant source of pride for communities, individuals, and cultures.
- Tourism can provide opportunities for individuals within the community to become engaged through business, volunteerism, event/activity execution and interpretation of local culture.
- Resident quality of life can be enhanced.
- New resident attraction.



Environmental Benefits

- Emotional connections provide enhanced value to built and natural environments.
- Can contribute to the preservation and revitalization of built and natural environments.



The Multiplier Effect of Visitor Spending

Visitor spending is “new” money that circulates throughout the local economy, multiplying its benefit. Here is an illustration:³

A family travels to Okotoks to take part in a sporting event. They purchase fuel, stay in a local accommodation, and purchase food from local restaurants and grocery stores. This is the “direct” impact of their spending: local businesses receive money from visitor spending.

As a result of this spending, the businesses offering these services are able to make a profit and hire more staff. This “indirect” impact of visitor spending produces a multiplying effect as an economic driver by increasing wages, salaries, and profits. Also, as more visitors come to the community, more work is generated in the supply chain, as wholesalers, food and beverage suppliers, tour planners, retailers, manufacturers, etc., are called upon to meet customers’ demands.

The new employees hired by the tourism industry now have money to spend on clothes, food, transportation, entertainment and to pay taxes. This is the “induced” impact of visitor spending. The ripple or spillover effects of this induced impact are felt as income, and taxes are spent throughout the province on housing, education, transportation, infrastructure, energy, communication, health care and other personal expenditures.

The end result is that visitor dollars circulate throughout the economy, amplifying their impact along the way, resulting in enhanced support for community building and economic well-being.

Strategic Alignment

The Town of Okotoks has several plans and strategies that emphasize tourism development as a key aspect of its economic and cultural growth. The following summarizes the main linkages.

Uniquely Okotoks: Municipal Development Plan (2023)

- The Municipal Development Plan recognizes the benefits of tourism for the community, highlighting its potential to support economic growth, enhance local culture, and foster community pride.
- Encourages flexible commercial spaces for niche businesses, including tourism-focused enterprises. Recommends developing an Okotoks Innovation Precinct or Campus to attract tourism-related businesses.

Okotoks 2022-2025 Strategic Plan

- Focuses on arts and culture as economic drivers that can bolster tourism.

2024-2027 Corporate Business Plan

- Prioritizes business investment and tourism by encouraging event-driven economic activity and gatherings.

2024-2029 Economic Development Strategic Plan

- Identifies tourism as a critical pillar for economic growth, focusing on culinary tourism, event-driven visitation, and developing unique experiences to increase visitor engagement.

Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Master Plan (2023)

- Highlights recreation and park services as essential for both residents and visitors.
- Mentions the newly created sport tourism grant to support large-scale sporting events with economic impacts.

Our Plan for Downtown (currently in development)

- Goals and guiding principles support the development of a more visitor friendly downtown. These include celebrating heritage, creating a multi-modal transportation network and animating downtown with a mix of businesses and contemporary infrastructure.



Photo Credit: Okotoks Dawgs Baseball Club

Overview of Research

The report was informed by targeted primary and secondary research. Primary research was gathered through a survey of businesses and community groups, digital input workshops with various individuals, an input workshop with the Foothills Region Tourism Development Zone (TDZ) Working Group, an in-person community tour, and one-on-one interviews. Secondary research was gathered from local, regional, and provincial data sources, information requests of the Client, and a review of relevant literature.

The community engagement approach for the Current State of Tourism in Okotoks Report (Phase 1) focused on gathering input from businesses and organizations currently involved in or benefiting from tourism. This targeted approach included stakeholders such as accommodations, restaurants, event organizers, and retail businesses serving visitors. The engagement process resulted in 51 touchpoints with stakeholders, providing valuable insights into the current tourism landscape. There are no formal Indigenous groups situated in Okotoks; however, the consultant team spoke with the Town's Indigenous Relations Advisor and reached out to Indigenous Tourism Alberta for input.

This first round of engagement sets the stage for broader engagement that will be undertaken during development of the Tourism Strategy & Action Plan (Phase 2). Engagement in Phase 2 will include a wider audience ensuring comprehensive input that contributes to the creation of a robust and inclusive Tourism Strategy for Okotoks.

1. Survey Administered

- a. Current State of Tourism Business Survey

2. Meetings Conducted

- | | |
|---|--|
| a. Project Steering Committee Meetings
Dates: July 31, August 21, and
November 21, 2024 | c. Digital Input Workshops
Dates: September 26 and October
8, 2024 |
| b. In-person Community Tour and
Discussions
Date: September 26, 2024 | d. Foothills Region TDZ Input Workshop
Date: October 4, 2024 |

3. Organizations Engaged (through workshops and/or interviews):

The following businesses and groups chose to participate in the engagement process.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Best Western Plus Okotoks Inn &
Suites | 8. Okotoks Museum and Archives |
| 2. Cavalry Fieldhouse | 9. Riverbend Campground |
| 3. Community Futures | 10. Town of Okotoks |
| 4. Finishing Touches | 11. Travel Alberta |
| 5. Ginger Laurier | 12. Foothills TDZ Working Group |
| 6. Hub Town Brewing Company | 13. 18 other business and organizations
from a variety of industries |
| 7. Okotoks Chamber of Commerce | |

4. Documents Reviewed

- a. Strategies, plans, and other documents from the Town of Okotoks.
- b. Reports, statistics, surveys, and planning documents.
- c. Research and plans from provincial and national sources.

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SWOT Analysis



Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks

This section provides an overview of the current state of tourism in Okotoks. It is a high level evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Current State Summary

Tourism is a contributor to Okotoks' economy. The community is well-positioned as a regional service hub as it attracts visitors from surrounding areas, including most notably Calgary. The community has distinctive assets that draw visitors in, including successful annual events, established sports clubs and sports tourism, a beautiful river valley, and an attractive downtown with successful local businesses and historic buildings. However, there are limited accommodation options, no single organization or Town department executing the role of a full service local destination management organization (DMO), and underdeveloped tourism experiences.

There are several strong opportunities to build on. These include enhancing downtown as an anchor destination and developing high-demand experiences such as culinary, sports, and Indigenous tourism. Travel Alberta provides support for operators and communities that could be leveraged to encourage this development. Risks that will need to be managed include ensuring buy-in from residents, maintaining the community's unique character in the midst of change, and competition from legacy destinations such as the Badlands and Mountain Parks.

The Town has identified tourism as a key sector for economic growth in its 2024-2029 Economic Development Strategy.⁴ Managing risks and responding to local opportunities and emerging tourism trends will help to ensure that tourism is a net benefit to the Town and its growing residents, businesses, and visitors.

SWOT Analysis

The following SWOT analysis is a high-level evaluation of the current tourism landscape in Okotoks, identifying its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This analysis highlights key factors to consider as the Town moves forward with developing a tourism strategy and action plan. By addressing these factors, Okotoks has the potential to capitalize on tourism growth opportunities and establish itself as a regional destination of choice.

Strengths

- Existing community events and culinary tourism attract locals and visitors.
- Established sports clubs, sports tourism and sport facilities.
- Safe, family-friendly community with an authentic small town feel.
- Natural and recreational attractions, including parks, pathways, and the Sheep River.
- Clean and compact downtown with successful local businesses, murals, and historic buildings.
- Multiple cultural and recreational facilities and programs.
- Strategic focus on tourism in Town plans and programs.
- Easy access and proximity to Calgary and its international airport.
- Okotoks serves as a hub for visitors and regional residents.
- Affordable destination.

Weaknesses

- Limited accommodation options for tourists.
- Need for anchor attractions and visitor/market-ready experiences.
- Limited tourism marketing.
- Limited interpretation of the community's long history of Indigenous history and culture.
- Limited public transportation options for visitors.
- No destination management organization or destination marketing fund.
- Regional tourism partners have limited capacity.
- Limited local tourism data.
- Limited Visitor Information Centre.

Opportunities

- Activating downtown Okotoks to become a focal point for tourism through redevelopment activities.
- Attracting funding and support from Travel Alberta as a high potential community for tourism growth.
- Developing niche markets, such as sport, creative industries, culinary, and agritourism.
- Leveraging established community events to attract more regional visitors.
- Attracting more day and overnight visitors from Calgary and the surrounding region.
- Further positioning Okotoks as a gateway to regional attractions.
- Developing high demand Indigenous tourism experiences.
- Supporting and attracting new entrepreneurs to develop tourism businesses.
- Ensuring that plans/policies for development foster businesses and public spaces that are visitor focused.

Threats

- Potential resident sentiment concerns relating to tourism growth.
- Competition with legacy destinations in Alberta (e.g. Mountain Parks and Badlands).
- Future economic downturns or fluctuations may impact tourism spending and investment.
- Competition for provincial tourism funding.
- Infrastructure limitations may restrict accommodation of large or more diverse visitor groups.
- Environmental threats including natural disasters (e.g. droughts, floods).

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Community Analysis

The following analysis provides a high-level overview of the community's demographics, linkages to Travel Alberta's Tourism Development Zone initiative, tourism assets, and strategic alignment. It offers insight into key factors shaping Okotoks as it seeks to strengthen its tourism sector and appeal to both residents and visitors.

Community Overview

Okotoks is located in Alberta's foothills region. The town is the 16th largest municipality in Alberta and was home to 32,563 residents in 2023. With a median age of 39, Okotoks has a young population.⁵ Alberta is experiencing significant growth across the province, and Okotoks' approach to managed growth not only supports local tourism but also ensures the town remains a desirable and welcoming destination for both visitors and residents.

The river valley is a key defining feature of the community, as are its spectacular views of the Rockies. The community is situated 15 kilometers south of Calgary, which is Alberta's largest urban centre with a population of 1.4 million.⁶ It is easily accessible from that city and from other communities in southern Alberta by various highways and secondary roads. It is within Treaty 7 territory, which

is home to the Blackfoot Confederacy First Nations, the Stoney Nakoda First Nations, the Dene First Nation of Tsuut'ina and the Métis Nation of Alberta. It is also within Travel Alberta's Foothills Tourism Development Zone.

The Town's 2022 Citizen Satisfaction Survey showed that 98% of respondents rate the quality of life in Okotoks as either good or very good. Services such as parks and pathways (96%), outdoor recreational spaces (96%), and community events (94%) received the highest satisfaction ratings. Additionally, 67% of households believe that increasing recreational opportunities would enhance social well-being and improve the town's livability. To enhance the local shopping experience, residents suggested better promotion of businesses and events, improved access to local stores, business incentives, and a more diverse range of businesses.⁷



Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks

Economic and Labour Trends

Okotoks is the largest municipality within the Foothills Tourism Development Zone. It provides shopping, healthcare, professional services and recreation opportunities. Several big box stores and major retailers including Costco are present. The service and retail sectors are the largest employer in the community, accounting for 82% of jobs and nearly 12,000 positions. Retail-based jobs have grown significantly since 2016 and are expected to continue expanding. These jobs span industries such as retail trade, arts and entertainment, accommodation, food services and more. Okotoks is situated within an agricultural region and the agribusiness sector represents 4.2% of Okotoks' workforce.⁸ 84% of local businesses are satisfied with Okotoks as a business location.⁹ The Town's 2024-2029 Economic Development Strategic Plan identifies tourism as a key pillar to diversify the economy and foster stable and diverse employment opportunities.



Travel Alberta's Foothills Tourism Development Zone

Travel Alberta's Tourism Development Zone initiative focuses on growing tourism in strategic and underdeveloped regions across the province. The Foothills Zone encompasses an area of mountain views, rolling hills, farms and ranches in southwest Alberta. It includes the communities of Okotoks, Bragg Creek, Diamond Valley, High River, Nanton and Longview.



Travel Alberta Foothills Tourism Development Zone

Travel Alberta's Tourism Development Zone (TDZ) initiative focuses on growing tourism in strategic and underdeveloped regions across the province. As part of Alberta's broader goal to double tourism revenue by 2035, regions like the Foothills offer opportunities to expand visitor itineraries and economic benefits while easing congestion in high-traffic areas like the Mountain Parks, Edmonton and Calgary. Currently, nearly 60% of visitation and 75% of tourism spending are concentrated in these legacy destinations.

In the Foothills TDZ, Okotoks is identified as a tourism cluster with the highest concentration of accommodation options in the zone. A recently completed Discovery Report outlines significant 10-year growth potential for the Foothills region. This includes the creation of over 3,000 jobs, a 4.5% annual increase in visitor spending, and an estimated \$468 million in total tourism revenue by 2035. Travel Alberta's engagement with regional residents found that 70% were open to welcoming more visitors, 60% believed that tourism improves quality of life, and 75% considered tourism valuable to the community.

Travel Alberta will undertake comprehensive regional destination development planning that focuses on aligning relevant organizations, addressing barriers, and identifying investment opportunities. To support tourism development in

the Foothills zone, Travel Alberta recommends a community-first approach, preserving authenticity and ensuring manageable growth. Eight strategic initiatives have been identified to support this approach:

1. Advance tourism leadership at a local level.
2. Support the creation of an enabling environment for tourism entrepreneurs.
3. Increase the overall accommodations offering, with a focus on upscale boutique hotels, guest ranches and other glamping accommodations.
4. Increase the overall product offering.
5. Address challenges around DMO governance and sustainability.
6. Improve inter-regional transportation connectivity.
7. Maintain and grow resident sentiment in support of tourism and its positive impact on quality of life for residents and economic diversification.
8. Position tourism as a driver of economic development with high-value tourism-related investments.¹⁰

The Foothills TDZ project presents a strategic opportunity for Okotoks to align its local tourism development efforts with broader regional goals in partnership with Travel Alberta.



Photo Credit: CBC News

Town of Okotoks Tourism Landscape

Tourism marketing and development activities are currently spread across multiple Town business centres, including economic development, arts and culture, and recreation. The economic development team manages the Town's tourism website and related marketing activities. The Town's events team plans and delivers Town-led events such as Light Up Okotoks, as well as supports the delivery of third-party events. Some of these attract more than 25,000 attendees, many of whom are visitors. The Town also provides information to visitors outside the Okotoks Art Gallery. The gallery is managed by Culture and Heritage staff. Okotoks does not have a full service destination management organization that would be responsible for taking the lead on tourism marketing and destination development initiatives.

Regionally, the Foothills Tourism Association serves seven communities including Okotoks. The Okotoks & District Chamber of Commerce represents around 250 members with the goal of strengthening the local business community. The Chamber has demonstrated an interest in tourism development through their 2021 MORE Okotoks Campaign.



Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks

Tourism Asset Overview

This section provides an overview of tourism assets within Okotoks and the surrounding area. It is focused on assets that are directly related to tourism or have the potential to support tourism development. It is recognized that there are many more services and businesses located in the region that support and contribute to the visitor economy.

Tourism Asset Strengths



Historic Walkable Downtown

Downtown is a hub of activity with strong potential to become an anchor destination. The Town's numerous initiatives to improve downtown will further strengthen it as a tourism asset.



Sport Tourism

Okotoks has begun to develop an impressive sport hosting resume. The 2023 Alberta Summer Games attracted nearly 6,000 visitors and generated \$1.6 million in visitor spending.¹¹ The Town is well-positioned to further explore sport hosting with venues like the Viking Rentals Centre, Seaman Stadium, and Cavalry Fieldhouse. The Town's sport tourism grant also supports new opportunities.¹²



Signature Annual Events

Okotoks has several well-established annual events, such as Light Up Okotoks, Downtown Show & Shine, and Taste of Okotoks. The Town is committed to supporting and growing third-party events through an Events Strategy.



Outdoor Recreation

Okotoks has dozens of public parks and over 100 kilometers of pathways and trails. The Sheep River runs through town offering opportunities for fishing, kayaking, and canoeing. The Lion's Campground provides easy access to these natural amenities, making it a hub for outdoor activities.



Culinary Offerings

The town has a vibrant culinary scene with a diverse range of restaurants, cafes, breweries, and a meadery. Many of these establishments are in Okotoks' downtown which creates opportunities for increased foot traffic during events.



Spotlight on Sport!

Okotoks is home to two successful amateur sport clubs that are strongly supported by residents and are a source of community pride. These clubs support ongoing sports tourism that fill hotel rooms and brings in visitor spending year round. The Okotoks Dawgs Baseball Club of the Western Canadian Baseball League play out of the premier baseball facility, Seaman Stadium, from May to August. The Dawgs represent the highest level of amateur baseball in the region and consistently draw large crowds. The Okotoks Oilers Junior A Hockey Club of the British Columbia Hockey League (BCHL) play at the Viking Rentals Centre from September to March. These offsetting seasons of play provide an influx of visitor spending throughout the year in the form of visiting teams and supporters. These benefits may be amplified by the Oilers move to the BCHL, where visiting teams from BC are now traveling further distances, which could result in extended stays in Okotoks compared to the previous regional draw of the Alberta Junior Hockey League.

Tourism Product Gaps



Fixed-Roof Accommodations

There are just over 200 hotel rooms and bed and breakfasts in Okotoks, with no export-ready boutique accommodations to appeal to international visitors. A 2021 hotel demand analysis found that the community could support an additional 130 to 156 hotel rooms.¹³



Anchor Attractions

Okotoks lacks well developed anchor attractions and is in a competitive regional tourism landscape. Nearby areas feature several established major attractions that are popular with domestic and international visitors.



Agritourism Experiences

Okotoks has a long history of farming and ranching that can be further leveraged for tourism development.



Indigenous Experiences

There are limited tourism products and experiences that honour Indigenous history in the town and celebrate local Indigenous culture.



Public Transportation

Okotoks has an innovative local public transit service that is well utilized by residents. Tourists and visitors must rely on personal vehicles to access the town due to a gap in regional transit options.



Town of Okotoks Sport Tourism Grant

The Town of Okotoks introduced a Sport Tourism Grant in 2023, recognizing the economic and social impacts event hosting brings to the community. The Sport Tourism Grant provides financial support for sporting events that drive local economic benefits beyond regular activities. Eligible events include provincial, national, and international competitions, as well as major multi-sport games, with funding ranging from \$2,500 to \$15,000. Events must span two or more days, with exceptions for one-day events that generate significant economic impact or participant numbers.



Photo Credit: Expedition Management Consulting Ltd.

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Visitor Analysis



The following analysis provides an overview of visitor trends in Okotoks. It draws on data from the Town's Visitor Information Centre, regional tourism reports, and insights from the Foothills Tourism Development Zone Discovery Report. This analysis highlights Okotoks' local and regional appeal, seasonal travel patterns, and short-term stays, providing a snapshot of current visitor demographics and behavior in Okotoks and the surrounding area.

Town of Okotoks

There is currently limited data to accurately assess visitor numbers in Okotoks. Reports from the Government of Alberta indicate that visitation to the Foothills region is primarily driven by short-term domestic travel, with most visitors coming from Alberta, particularly nearby Calgary. The main reason for traveling to the area is to visit friends and family.

A voluntary survey at the Visitor Information Centre from 2016 produced 193 entries, with most visitors coming from Okotoks (61) and Calgary (57). Other notable Alberta locations included High River (7) and Airdrie (6). Visitors also came

from British Columbia (4), Saskatchewan (2), and Ontario (2).

Data from the Alberta Travel and Information Service (ATIS) reflects qualified travelers, defined as web visitors who have shown interest in traveling to Alberta by engaging with Travel Alberta's online platforms. This includes interactions such as clicking on partner listings, events, or external marketing content. This data reflects online interest rather than actual visits. From April 1, 2019, to March 31, 2023, qualified travelers increased, peaking at 446 in 2022-2023.

OKOTOKS VIC DATA



CUSTOMER ORIGIN

- 1 Okotoks
- 2 Calgary
- 3 High River
- 4 Airdrie
- 5 Other Canada

*Based on visitors to the Okotoks
Visitor Information Centre*



**VISITING FRIENDS
& RELATIVES**
(Main Purpose of Visit)

Photo Credit (L-R): Expedition Management Consulting Ltd., Town of Okotoks, Town of Okotoks



Calgary and Area Tourism Region

The 2019 Domestic Tourism Report for Calgary and the surrounding areas recorded 7.6 million visits, with 81% from Alberta. Other provinces represented included British Columbia (8%), Saskatchewan (4%), and Ontario (3%). The busiest travel season was summer (30%), followed by spring (28%) and fall (22%), with winter (20%) being the slowest. Visitors primarily came for personal reasons, with 48% visiting friends/relatives and 29% for leisure.

The average length of overnight stays for domestic visitors from Alberta was 2.1 nights. The length of stays for visitors from the rest of Canada was 2.7. Average per person spending for overnight stays by Albertans was \$210. For people from outside of Alberta it was \$508. 64% of visitors stayed at the homes of friends/relatives, 29% stayed at hotels and other commercial roofed properties, and 2% stayed in campgrounds or RV parks.

The top activities for overnight visitors included shopping, visiting with friends/relatives, dining out, visiting nature parks and sightseeing. International visitors were excluded from the report due to limited data.¹⁴

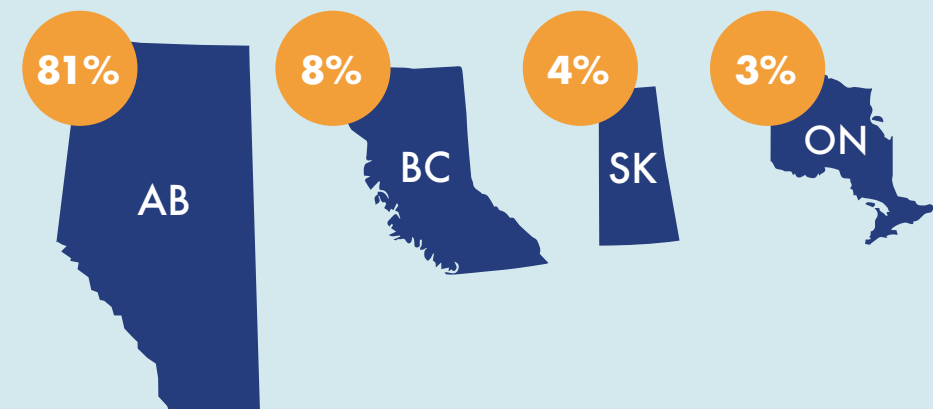
VISITATION TO CALGARY AND AREA TOURISM REGION



7.6 MILLION

Visits to Calgary and Area Tourism Region (2019)

VISITOR ORIGIN



BUSIEST TRAVEL SEASON



30%
Summer



28%
Spring



22%
Fall



20%
Winter

MAIN PURPOSE OF TRAVEL



48%
Visiting friends & relatives



29%
Leisure

OVERNIGHT STAYS



LENGTH OF STAY

2.1 Nights

2.7 Nights



AVG SPEND PER PERSON

\$210

\$508

TOP ACTIVITIES FOR OVERNIGHT VISITORS



Shopping



Visiting friends & relatives



Dining out



Visiting nature parks and sightseeing

PLACE OF STAY



64%
Homes of friends/relatives



29%
Hotels & other commercial buildings



2%
Campgrounds or RV parks

Foothills Tourism Development Zone

In 2019, the Foothills Tourism Development Zone attracted 96.8% domestic visitors, primarily from nearby regions, with 65.8% from Calgary. The average stay was two days and one night, and 50% of visitors returned multiple times per year.¹⁵

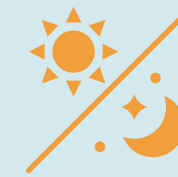
VISITATION TO THE FOOTHILLS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONE



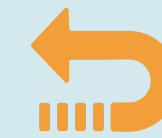
65.8%
Calgary



of 96.8% domestic visitation



2 DAYS & 1 NIGHT
Average length of stay



50%
of visitors return multiple times a year



Photo Credit: Expedition Management Consulting Ltd.

5

Engagement



Photo Credit: Expedition Management Consulting Ltd.

Input from organizations involved in the tourism industry was gathered from September 10 to October 8, 2024. The Town intended for engagement to be targeted during this first phase of its Tourism Project. It may choose to open engagement opportunities to a wider audience in Phase 2. In total, the engagement process for Phase 1 produced 51 touchpoints. Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the engagement touchpoints by activity.

Figure 2. Summary of Engagement Touchpoints

Engagement Activity	Total Engagement
Current State of Tourism Business Survey	18 responses
In-person Tour and Discussions	9 participants
Foothills Region Tourism Development Zone Input Workshop	5 participants
Interviews	11 completed
Total	51

Key Findings

The following provides a summary of the key findings from the engagement process. To view the expanded engagement results, please see Appendix A.

- To enhance the visitor experience in Okotoks, respondents identified improving visitor information, places to stay, things to do, and public facilities and places most often.
- Respondents identified activities that have the greatest potential to be developed to encourage visitation. They selected festivals and events, nature-based experiences, sport activities, and culinary experiences most often.
- The main focus areas to enhance tourism service delivery in the community included creating a shared vision for the future of tourism, promoting Okotoks as a tourism destination, enhancing quality of life for residents, and clarifying organizational roles to support tourism development.
- In terms of the best tourism assets in Okotoks, respondents identified events, the river valley, pathways, attractions like the Okotoks Erratic, downtown, and food and beverage options.
- Participants would like to see more winter and off-season events, increased collaboration, and a greater dispersion of visitors and tourism benefits throughout the community.
- Businesses who responded had a slightly more negative than positive outlook for the future of their business over the next 12 months.*

*It should be noted that only seven businesses provided a response to this particular question. Therefore, the results should not be considered representative of the broader business community in Okotoks. A Business Survey conducted in 2023 indicated that 84% of respondents are satisfied with the Town as a place to do business.



IMPROVEMENTS TO ENHANCE VISITOR EXPERIENCE



Visitor Information



Places to stay



Things to do



Public facilities and places



GREATEST DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL TO ENCOURAGE VISITATION



Festivals and events



Nature-based experiences



Sports activities



Culinary experiences



MAIN FOCUS AREAS FOR ENHANCED TOURISM SERVICE DELIVERY



Creating a shared vision for the future of tourism



Promoting Okotoks as a tourism destination



Enhancing quality of life for residents



Clarifying organizational roles to support tourism development



BEST TOURISM ASSETS



Events



Attractions like Okotoks Erratic



River valley



Downtown



Pathways



Food & beverage options



DESIRE TO SEE MORE



Winter and off-season events



Increased collaboration



Greater dispersion of visitors and tourism benefits throughout the community

6

Recommended Next Step





Photo Credit: Expedition Management Consulting Ltd.

1. Complete a Tourism Strategy and Action Plan and Fully Engage the Community During Development

Development of a tourism strategy and action plan should commence as soon as practical. This will allow the Town to leverage the momentum of this current state analysis, including maintaining the interest of organizations that have participated to date, and demonstrating progress towards the Town's goal of advancing tourism.

Providing opportunities for residents, businesses, organizations and Town Council to provide input will contribute to the successful development and then implementation of a tourism strategy and action plan.

Activities that should be included as part of a tourism strategy and action plan include:

- Determining an organizational framework to support tourism development.
- Further identifying strategic partnerships.
- Identifying priority initiatives related to product development, destination development, organizational development and marketing.
- Developing an implementation plan with timelines, costs, roles, and performance measures.

7

Conclusion



Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks



This report provides a snapshot of the current state of tourism in Okotoks. It identifies strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, tourism product strengths and gaps, strategic alignment, visitor markets, and key findings from targeted engagement with businesses and organizations. It also includes recommendations for undertaking Phase 2 of the Town's tourism project. It is anticipated that this report will be used by the Town as an input in the future development of a comprehensive tourism strategy and action plan.

Appendices

Appendix A – Expanded Engagement Results

Current State of Tourism Business Survey

An online survey collected input from respondents from September 10 to October 8, 2024. In total, 18 responses were received. 44% of respondents identified as a business, 44% identified as government, and 11% identified as a non-governmental organization.

Businesses

The online survey streamed respondents to different questions based on whether they identified themselves as a business, non-governmental organization, or government. The following information is applicable specifically to survey respondents who identified as a business.



What services does your business provide? Please select all applicable options.

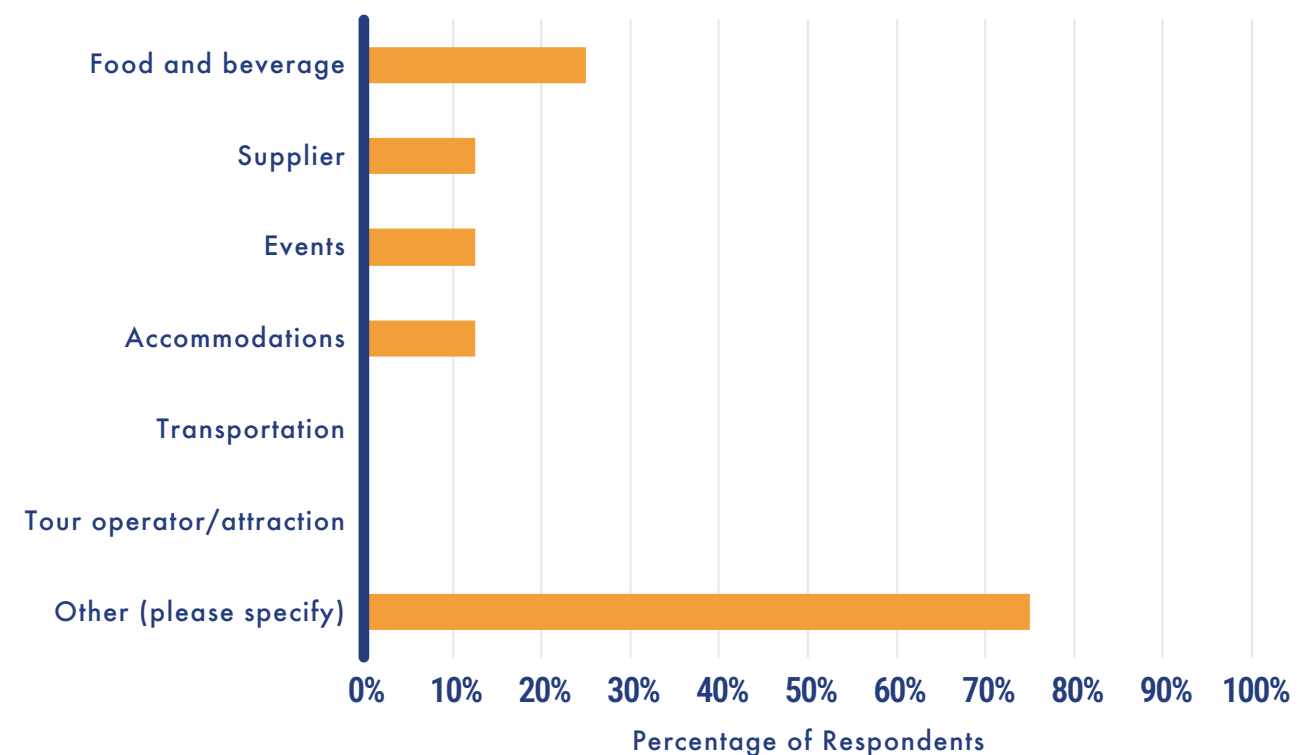


Photo Credit: Town of Okotoks



What are the main tourism-related challenges and/or issues facing your business?

Respondents identified the following:

- Lack of affordable leases.
- Events are getting smaller.
- Access to their business (e.g. parking challenges).
- Reaching visitors.
- Finding local staff.
- Costs including inflation, interest rates, supplies, taxes, and utilities.



What opportunities are there to grow visitation and visitor spending at your business?

Respondents identified the following:

- Easier access to businesses in Olde Towne.
- Awareness.
- More exposure and a plan to attract visitors downtown.
- Collaboration of local tourism agencies.
- Affording a storefront where they could host events, demonstrations, classes and sell local artists work.



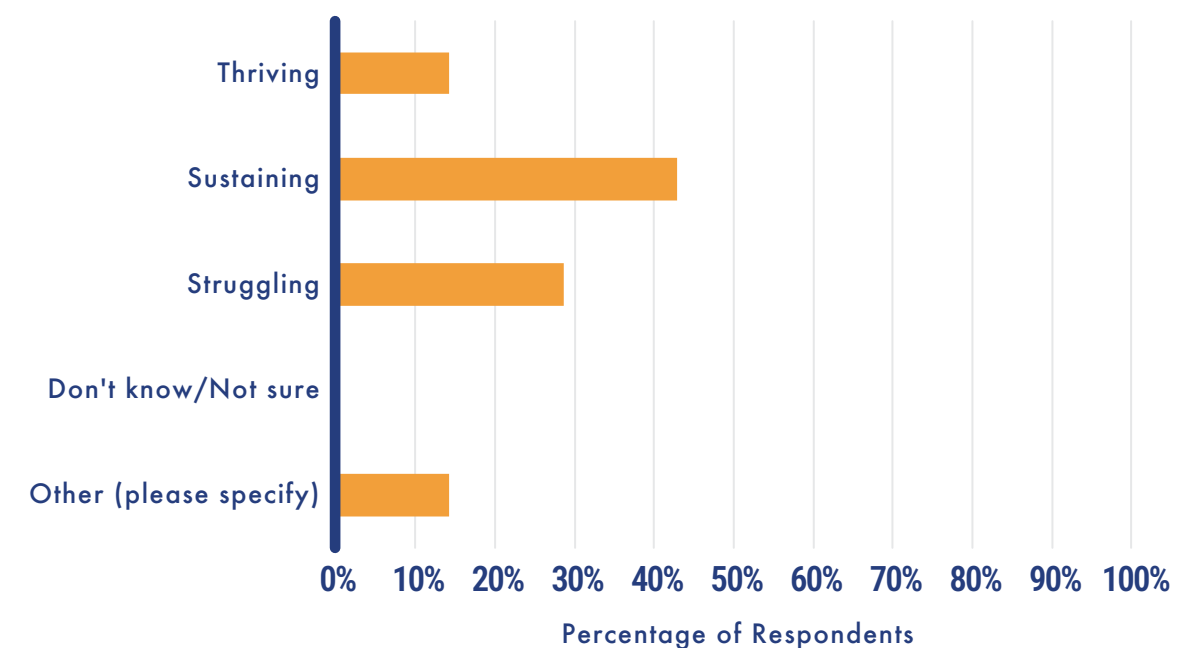
In 2023, what percentage (%) of your customers originated from the following locations. Please ensure responses total to 100%.

- Okotoks – 41%
- Calgary – 19%
- Other Alberta – 31%
- British Columbia – 3%
- Saskatchewan – 2%
- Other Canada – 2%
- USA – 1%

These figures are the averages of what was reported.

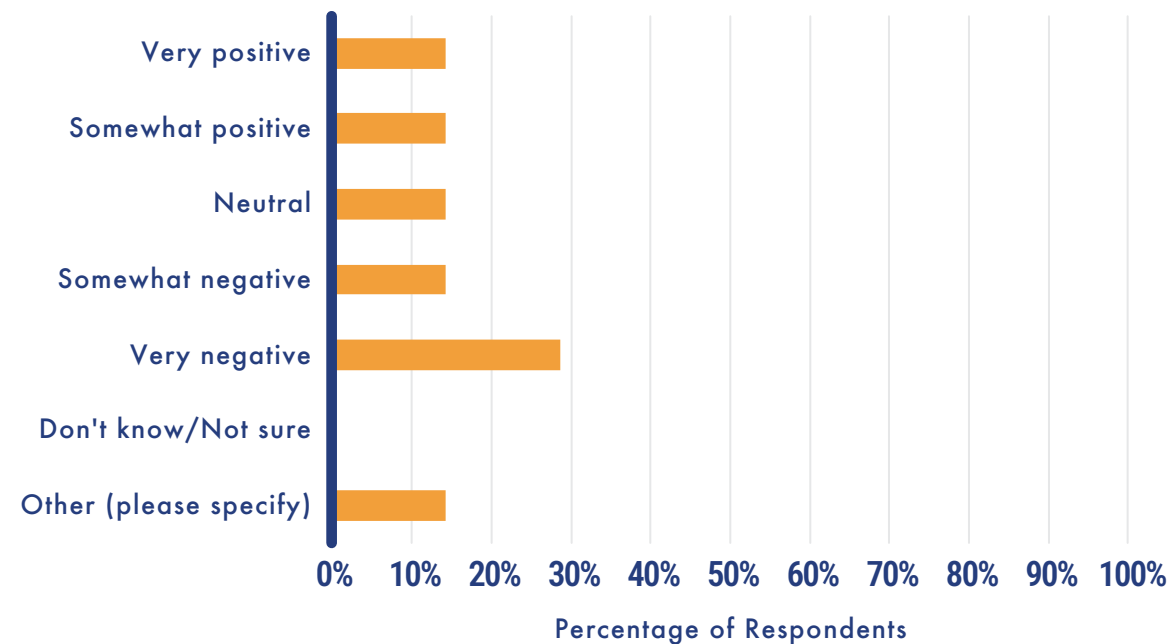


Do you feel your business is currently:





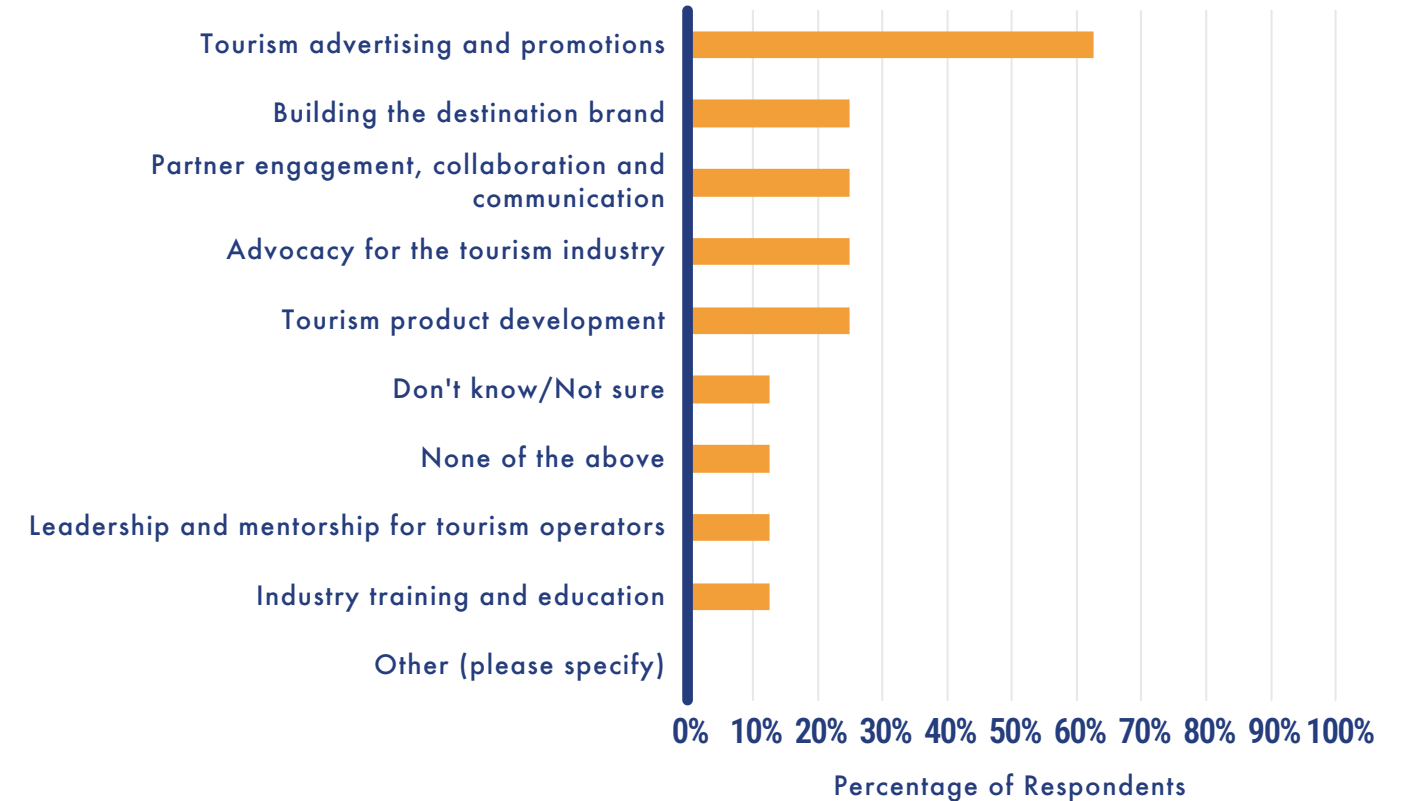
*Over the next 12 months, how do you feel about the future outlook of your business?**



*It should be noted that only seven businesses provided a response to this particular question. Therefore, the results should not be considered representative of the broader business community in Okotoks. A Business Survey conducted in 2023 indicated that 84% of respondents are satisfied with the Town as a place to do business.



In the future, what types of destination development services would most help your business grow tourism in Okotoks? Please select up to 3 options.



What can your business do to help develop tourism in Okotoks?

Respondents identified the following:

- Provide service options.
- Willing to get involved to encourage others to visit the local area.
- Nothing.

Non-Governmental Organizations

The following information is applicable specifically to survey respondents who identified as a non-governmental organization.

Opportunities:

Respondents identified the following:

- Close to Calgary.
- Could be marketed as a close to home getaway.
- Agribusiness tourism around Okotoks.
- Sports tournaments.

Challenges:

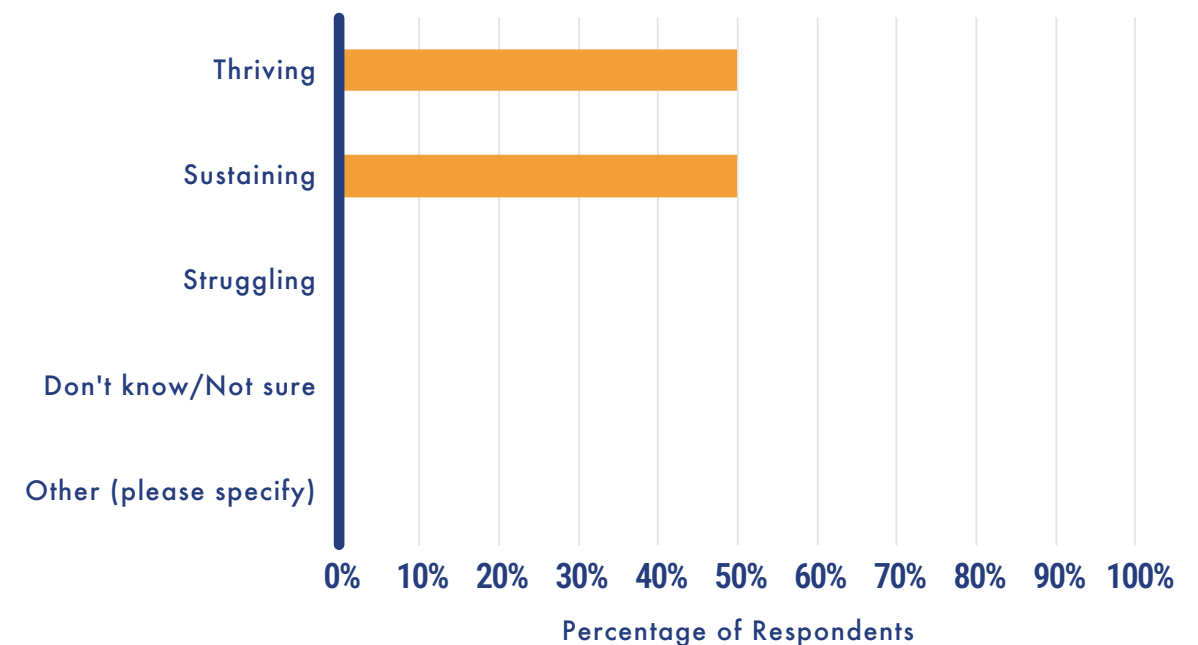
Respondents identified the following:

- Not enough well-known businesses to draw in out of town crowds.
- Okotoks is a desirable community. We need to manage the number of people who might want to move here.

In 2023, what percentage (%) of your customers originated from the following locations. Please ensure responses total to 100%.

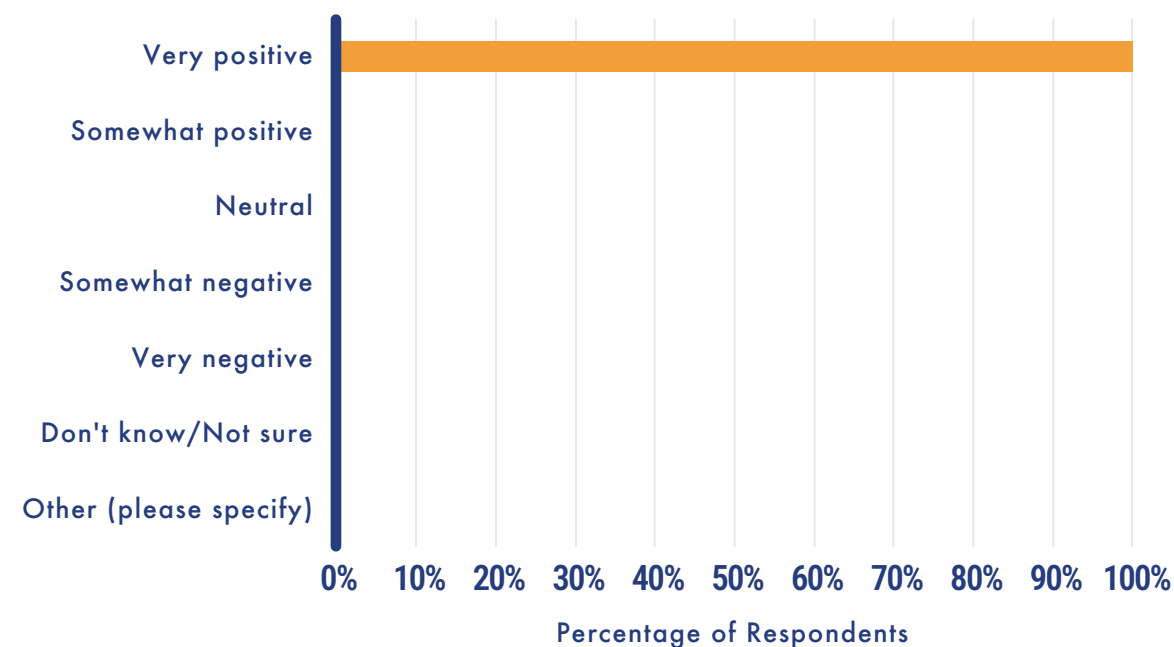
- Okotoks – 100%

Do you feel your organization is currently:

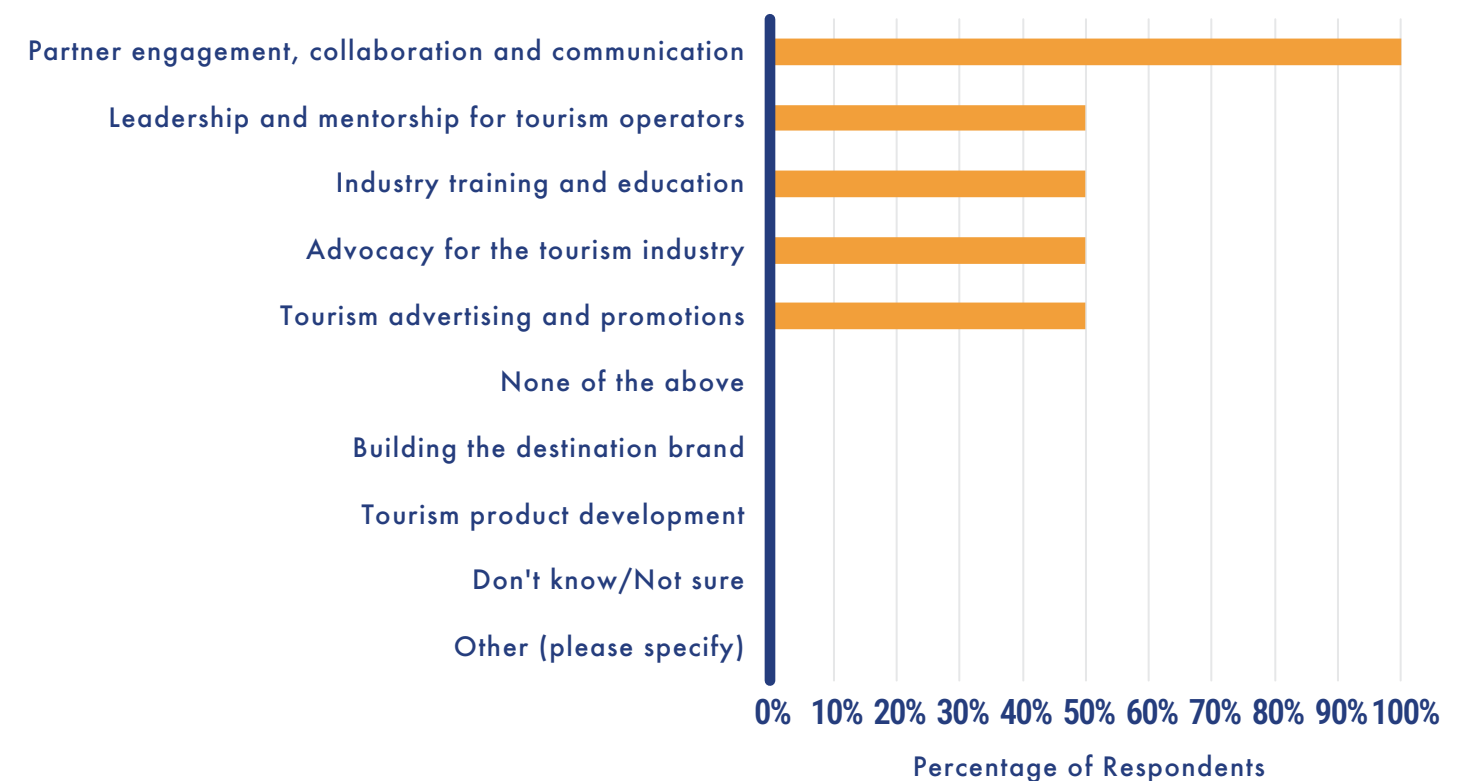




Over the next 12 months, how do you feel about the future outlook of your organization?



In the future, what types of destination development services would most help your organization grow tourism in Okotoks? Please select up to three options.



Please share what you think your organization can do to help develop tourism in Okotoks?

Respondents identified the following:

- If there was a business that wanted to launch, we could support anywhere from business plans to loans.
- We could make seniors feel welcome and provide activities/entertainment for them.

Government

The following information is applicable specifically to survey respondents who identified as government.

Opportunities:

Respondents identified the following:

- Okotoks is a young and vibrant community that offers a lot to visitors both short stay and longer stay.
- Okotoks is a great weekend and evening destination through further activation of the downtown.
- Natural spaces could attract tourists.
- Daycations.
- Okotoks as a regional tourism hub.
- Arts, culture, events, sports, and guided regional tours.
- Recreational related businesses.
- Location, retail, restaurants, recreation, River Valley, parks, and trails/pathways.
- Sporting venues.
- Leveraging the town's proximity to Calgary to attract visitors looking for a quieter, more scenic destination.
- Promoting local outdoor attractions.
- Cultural and heritage tourism.
- Developing unique festivals, events, and experiences.
- Expanding partnerships with local businesses.
- Marketing the town's growing arts and culinary scenes.

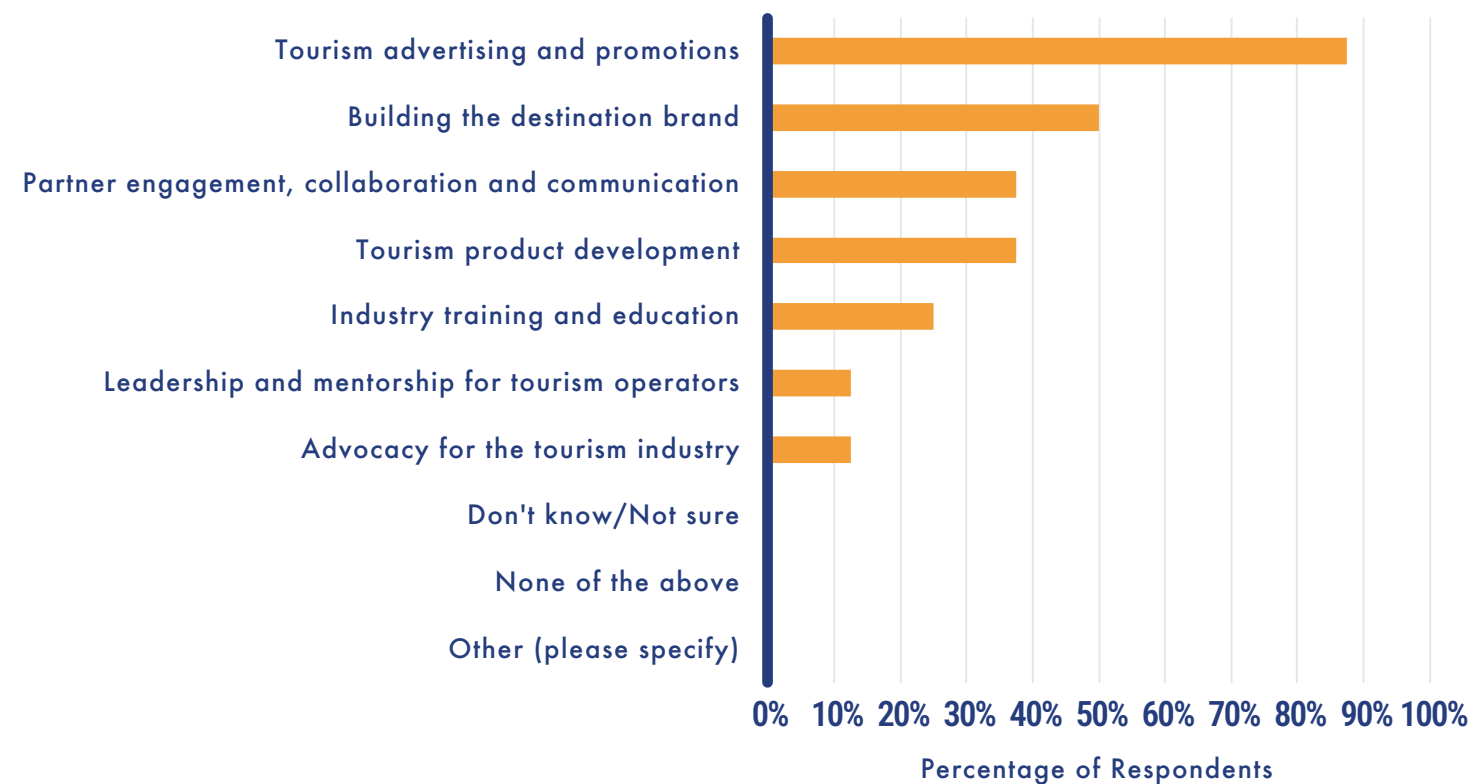
Challenges:

Respondents identified the following:

- Lack of accommodations.
- Businesses that aren't an activated retail space in the downtown.
- Retail type businesses being able to afford longer hours in the evenings.
- Need for more public transportation options.
- Need for regional connectivity.
- Amenities.
- Cost.
- Time.
- Coordination.
- Red tape and resources.
- Limited awareness of the town as a tourist destination.
- Balancing the desire to increase tourism with maintaining the small-town charm and quality of life for residents.
- Ensuring local businesses and organizations are fully engaged and leveraging tourism opportunities effectively.



In the future, what types of destination development services would most help your organization grow tourism in Okotoks? Please select up to 3 options.



Please share what you think your organization can do to help develop tourism in Okotoks?

Respondents identified the following:

- More structured approach.
- Managing tourism and developing a framework.
- Continuing to prioritize.
- Dedicated budget.
- Willingness to partner/collaborate and/or have outside organizations assist and help manage tourism development.
- Marketing through social media to promote the facilities we have.
- Creating and promoting a cohesive tourism strategy.
- Engaging with local businesses to offer tourism packages or collaborative promotions can enhance visitor experience.

Businesses, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Government



We would like to better understand what makes Okotoks a unique place to live and visit. In your opinion, what makes this place a special destination?

Respondents identified the following:

- The small town.
- Arts and events in the downtown.
- Unique natural spaces and access to nature.
- River valley and Sheep River.
- Proximity to the mountains.
- Animals (e.g. deer)
- Historic downtown.
- Culinary and shopping experiences.
- Friendly people and strong sense of community.
- Venues.
- Lots of activities to do.
- Unique local businesses.
- Focus on sustainability.



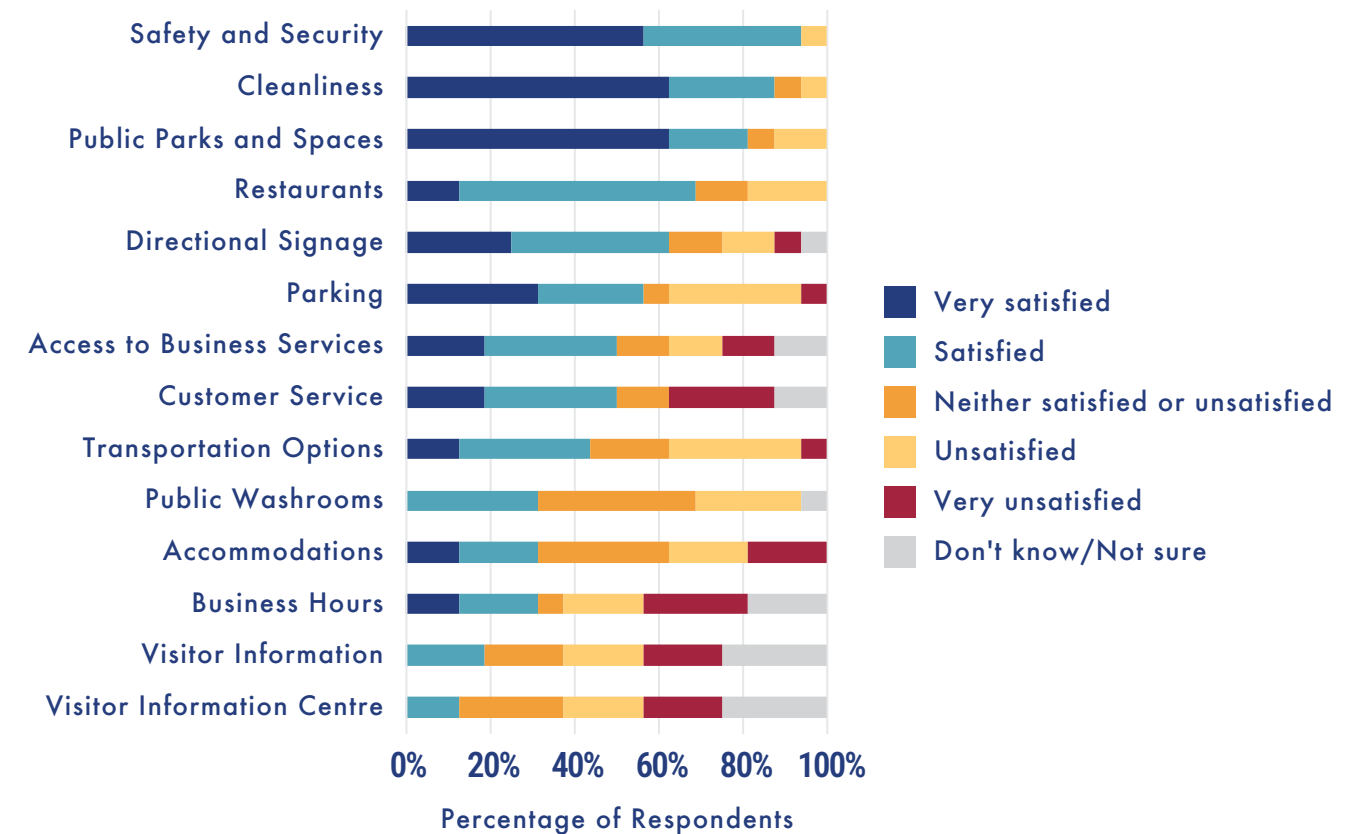
We would like your help identifying the best tourism assets in Okotoks. Please list what you consider to be the top 5 assets in the boxes below.

Respondents identified the following:

- Events including sporting events, local festivals, baseball and hockey tournaments, and Light Up Okotoks.
- The Sheep River and River Valley.
- Pathways and trail system.
- Attractions including Big Rock.
- Historic downtown and main street.
- Location including the town's proximity to Calgary, mountains, and airport.
- Venues.
- Food and beverage options and the town's culinary scene.

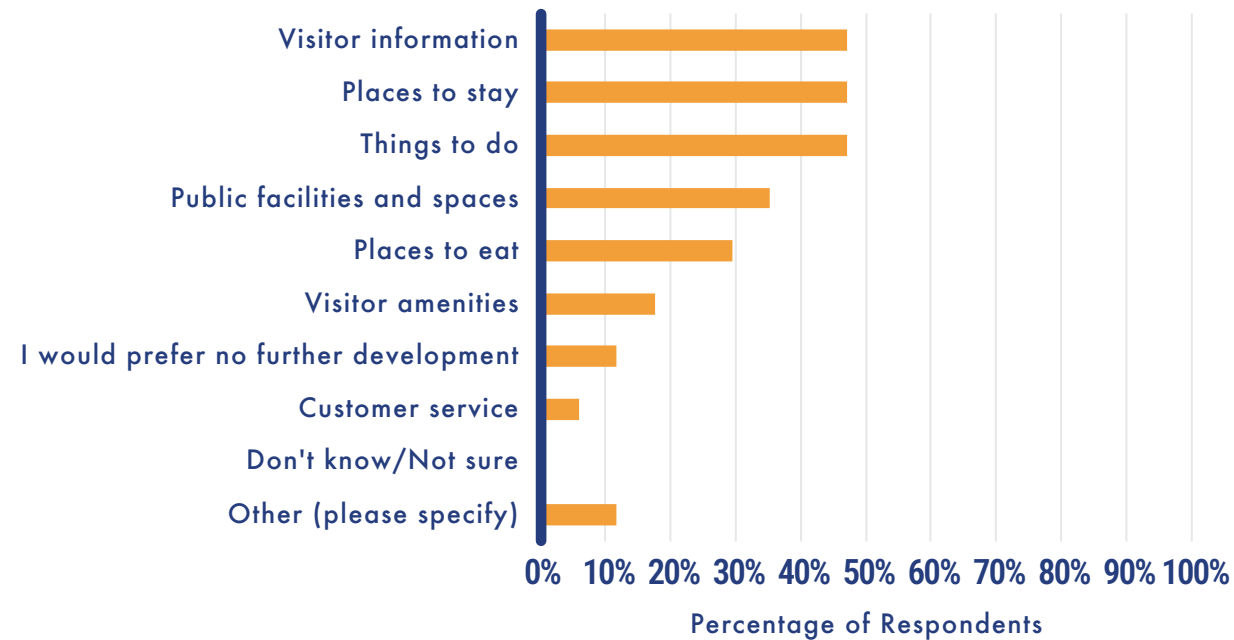


Please rate the following visitor services and amenities in Okotoks.

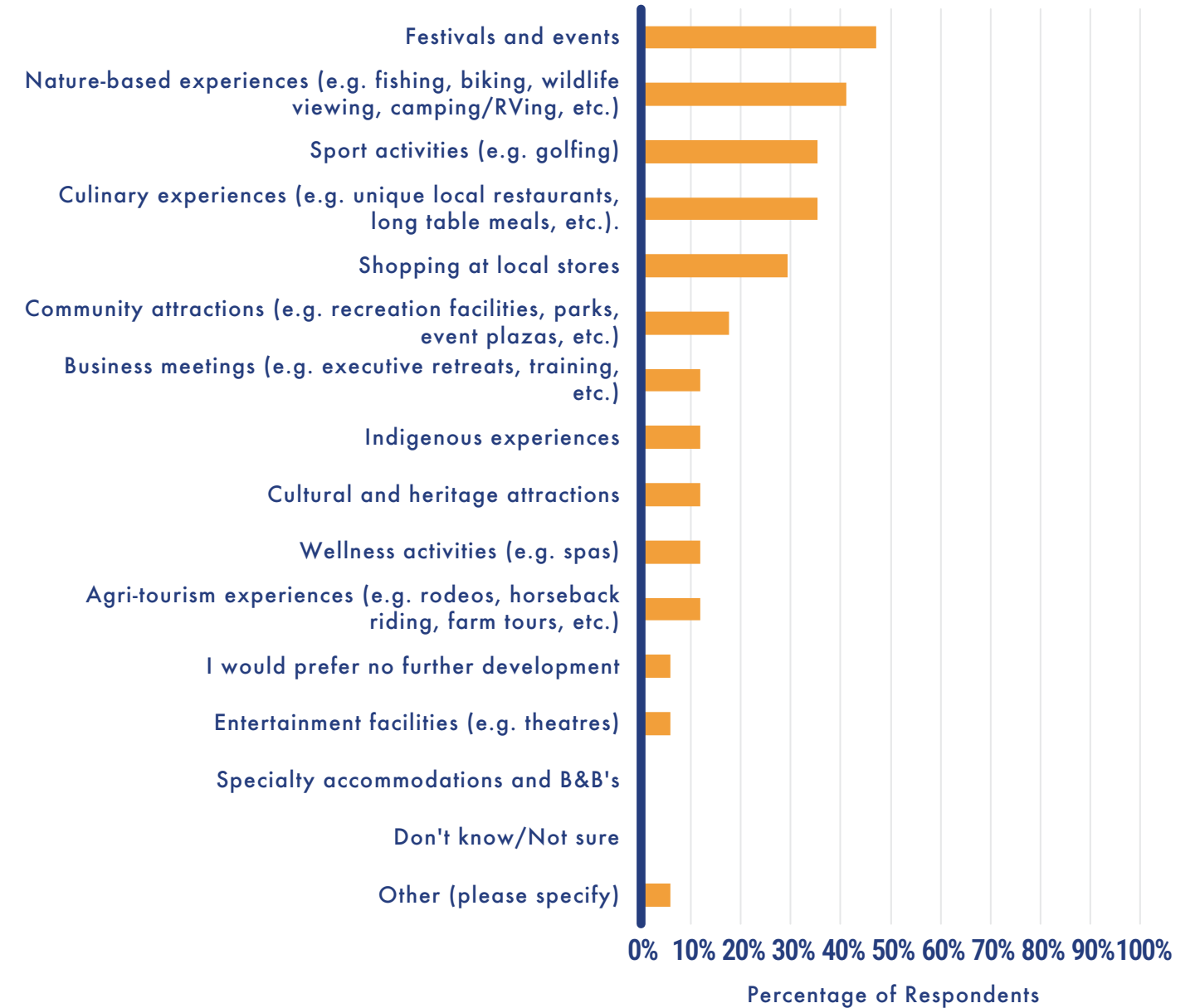




In order to enhance the visitor experience in Okotoks, what do you think could be most improved? Please select up to 3 options.

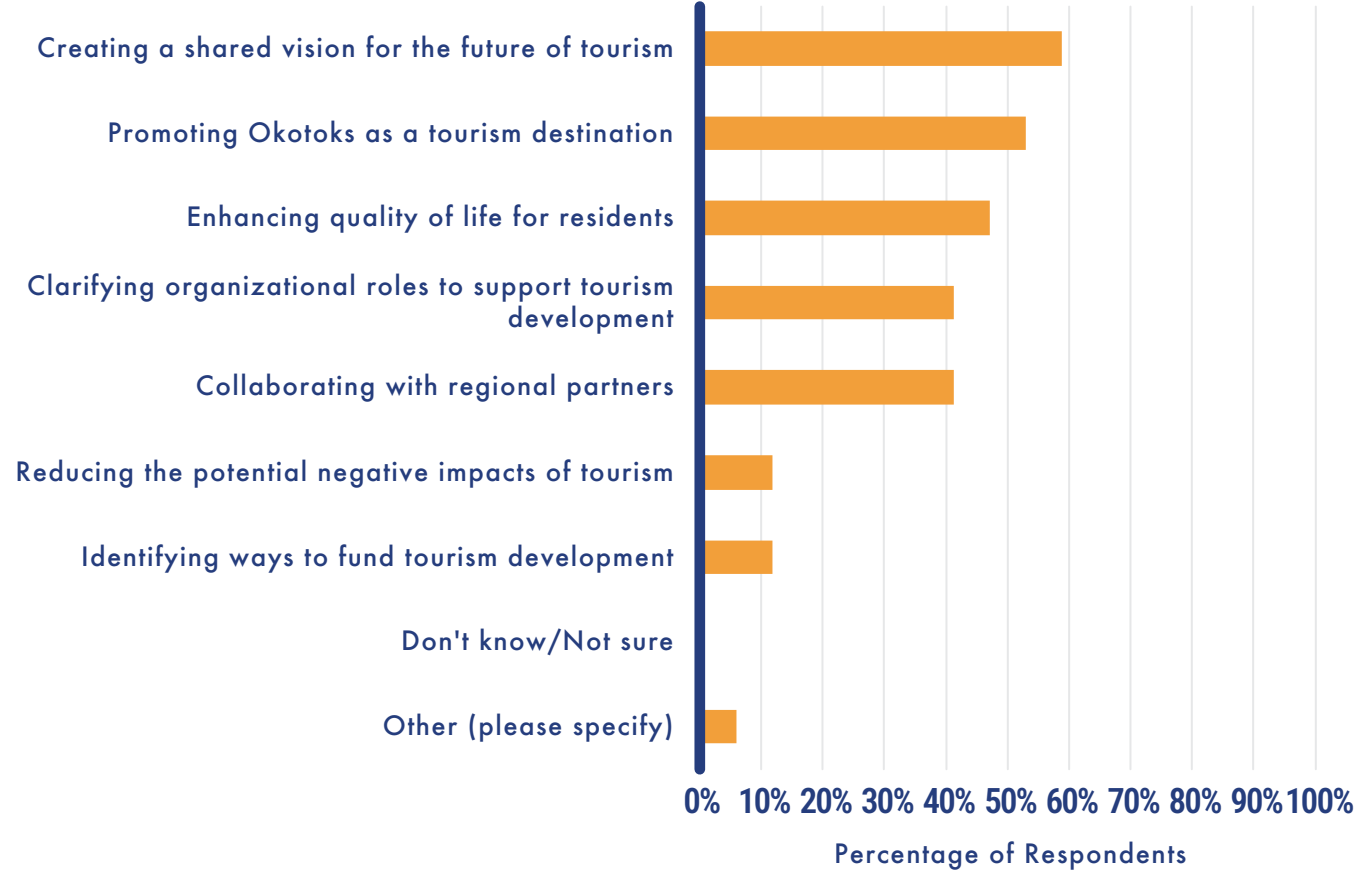


What types of activities have the greatest potential to be developed to encourage visitation? Please select up to 3 options.





In your opinion, what should Okotoks focus on most to enhance tourism service delivery in the community? You may select up to 3 options.



Community Input Workshops

Two digital input workshops were hosted on September 26 and October 8, 2024. 8 participants attended the workshops. The following summarizes the input received.



What opportunities and challenges do you foresee in relation to tourism development in Okotoks?

- Okotoks has tourism assets in sports (hockey and baseball), arts, crafts, river, and nature.
- Events, particularly downtown, are lucrative but face sustainability concerns.
- There is a desire to develop more winter and off-season events.
- Access to capital for expansion/development is a challenge.
- Opportunity to pursue value-based tourism.
- A caution against centralizing tourism only in downtown.
- Opportunity for more collaboration.
- Defining what tourism is and who the visitors are.
- Proximity to Calgary and Edmonton.
- Currently, Okotoks is not known as a tourism destination.
- Opportunity for a greater dispersion of visitors and benefits.



What are the most important tourism development issues to address in the short term?

- Identity.
- Identifying what Okotoks' tourism brand is.
- Developing experiences that will bring visitors to town.
- Understanding Okotoks' market and determining what the market wants.
- More collaboration (e.g. Town, Travel Alberta, and businesses).
- Addressing seasonality and elevating the shoulder and winter seasons.
- Accommodations.



What can your business or organization do to help tourism in Okotoks?

- Business coaching.
- Loans.
- Accessing grants.
- Encourage businesses to get involved in tourism.
- Educating businesses on tourism opportunities.
- Being creative with business partnerships and collaborations.

Foothills Tourism Development Zone Input Workshop

A Foothills Tourism Development Zone Input Workshop was hosted on October 4, 2024. 5 participants attended the workshop. The following summarizes the input received.



What stage of development is Okotoks' tourism sector currently at?

- Exploratory phase. Tourism is a largely untapped resource.
- There is opportunity to expand our reach.
- Small businesses need education for how to reach new markets.
- Most customers come to Okotoks for a specific purpose.
- Need period is Sunday through Thursday as well as the shoulder season and off-season.
- Important to consider the regional draw.
- Resident support is vital.



Is tourism viewed as a viable business opportunity in Okotoks? Are there any opportunities or barriers to growth?

- Awareness/marketing is a barrier.
- Stay and play packages are too prescribed and need to be more flexible.
- Need to focus on what we have locally.
- Costs associated with growth can be a challenge.
- Businesses need to collaborate.
- Need to draw in the 21–35-year-old demographic.
- Visitors are being choosier.
- Events bring visitors.
- Some locals are going further with their tourism dollars.
- Attracting Stampede visitors.
- Marketing Okotoks at Costco. Customers don't know what else is available in the town.



Please describe how Okotoks fits into the tourism landscape in the Foothills TDZ. Are there opportunities for greater alignment or mutual support?

- Start working together. Foothills Tourism Association (FTA) should be working with towns.
- Town more engaged with FTA and vice versa.
- There is no formal mechanism to bring everyone together.
- Would like to see a true regional tourism website.
- Establish a regional group that meets regularly.
- Cognizant of costs. For example, people and businesses don't want to pay membership fees for several organizations.
- Opportunity to build packages on the Town's website.
- There are advantages to a central approach.
- Changing the perception from day visits to multi-day visits.

Appendix B – References

- ¹ Town of Okotoks. (2023). Uniquely Okotoks: Municipal Development Plan.
- ² Retrieved from: <https://www.go2hr.ca/getting-know-bcs-tourism-industry/what-is-tourism>
- ³ Alberta Economic Development, Trade and Tourism. (2018). Tourism Business Startup Workbook.
- ⁴ Town of Okotoks. (2024). 2024 - 2029 Economic Development Strategic Plan.
- ⁵ Town of Okotoks. (2024). 2024 - 2029 Economic Development Strategic Plan.
- ⁶ City of Calgary. (2023). Calgary and Region Population Outlook 2024-2029.
- ⁷ Town of Okotoks. (2022). Citizen Satisfaction Survey Results.
- ⁸ Town of Okotoks. (2021). Okotoks Agriculture Sector Profile.
- ⁹ Town of Okotoks. (2024). 2024 - 2029 Economic Development Strategic Plan.
- ¹⁰ Travel Alberta. (2023). Foothills Tourism Development Zone Discovery Report.
- ¹¹ Western Wheel. (2023). Summer Games Economic Impact on Okotoks.
- ¹² Town of Okotoks. (2023). Sport Tourism Grant Policy.
- ¹³ Town of Okotoks. (2021). Okotoks Commercial & Industrial Growth Study.
- ¹⁴ Government of Alberta. (2022). Domestic Tourism in Calgary and Area Tourism Region 2019.
- ¹⁵ Travel Alberta. (2023). Foothills Tourism Development Zone Discovery Report.