

TOWN OF AURORA VISITOR GROWTH PLAN

2026 - 2030



Land Acknowledgement

The Town of Aurora acknowledges that the Anishinaabe lands on which we live and work are the traditional and treaty territory of the Chippewas of Georgina Island, as well as many other Nations whose presence here continues to this day. As the closest First Nation community to Aurora, we recognize the special relationship the Chippewas have with the lands and waters of this territory. They are the water protectors and environmental stewards of these lands, and as a municipality we join them in these responsibilities.

We further acknowledge that Aurora is part of the treaty lands of the Mississaugas and Chippewas, recognized through Treaty #13 as well as the Williams Treaties of 1923.

A shared understanding of the rich cultural heritage that has existed for centuries, and how our collective past brought us to where we are today, will help us walk together into a better future.

Foreword

A Message from Central Counties Tourism

One of the key outcomes of a successfully implemented visitor growth plan is a stronger resident connection to and pride-of-place for the community. From the first introductions of the members of the working group that put this plan together, I knew the process was going to be special. Their knowledge of the Town of Aurora was only overshadowed by their enthusiasm for the community they call home.

Aurora already has a robust visitor economy and is a hub for commerce and recreation for residents in neighbouring communities as well as visitors travelling more than 40 kms each way to partake in an experience in town. Investors understand this, as is evidenced by the new hotels that have opened or are still under construction.

This plan is Aurora-specific, built by a volunteer working group of industry professionals, town staff and concerned citizens. At the heart of the process was trying to determine what success looks like for the Town of Aurora in terms of the visitor economy. They reviewed and prioritized current assets, dissected challenges and barriers, before focusing on opportunities that ensure that Aurora continues to be a destination of choice for visitors.

I have never experienced a more engaged working group. They came to each meeting prepared and, more importantly, willing to share their thoughts and opinions on how the community should work together to grow visitation. It was an absolute pleasure to facilitate this process.

The result is a plan that is uniquely Auroran. You will see this in the areas of focus, goals and actions to keep Aurora top-of-mind for visitors near and far. Central Counties Tourism is Aurora's partner in the execution of this plan. We will work with staff to develop yearly business plans that address the identified actions, ensuring that Aurora's Visitor Growth Plan is always active and ever evolving.

Best regards,



Chuck Thibeault, Executive Director

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Executive Summary

The Town of Aurora is approximately one hour from downtown Toronto. It is easily accessible off Highway 404 on Wellington Road, or the 407 north on Yonge Street. It offers a GO station with trains (soon to be all day) and buses. Its population sits at just over 66,000 residents.

Aurora has just recently opened its new Town Square & Cultural Centre, which many anticipate will become the new “hub” of the Town. Rooted in Aurora’s rich history and designed with sustainability at its core, Town Square is a vibrant hub for residents, local businesses, and visitors. It’s where tradition meets innovation, creating opportunities for connection, creativity, culture, and community. It includes the Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Museum & Archives, and Aurora Public Library.

In addition to an emerging focus on arts & culture with the new Town Square, Aurora has a significant draw as one of the best locations in the province for sports facilities and tournaments. Its sporting facilities are second to none and include numerous fields, pools, arenas, golf courses and more.

In 2023, there were more than 1.1 million visits to the main sporting venues in Aurora. Roughly two thirds of those visits were made by non-residents and a full 10% traveled more than 40 kms each way to attend a game. The town also has the advantage of Sport Aurora, with a mission to “support and develop sport and recreation for all ages, genders and abilities by advocating on behalf of our community in order to build capacity, increase participation, enhance integration, celebrate excellence, and for the love of sport.”

The town also has unique and well-programmed retail hubs including the St. Andrews Shopping Centre and the shops and restaurants along Yonge Street. Those areas received more than 3.3 million visits in 2023, of which more than 60% were non-residents and close to 9% travelled more than 40 kms each way to spend time and money in town.

This 2026-2030 Visitor Growth Plan is a refresh of Aurora’s 2015 Plan. It will serve to guide the Town staff, along with local visitation stakeholders and regional partners, in welcoming more visitors to enjoy all that Aurora has to offer. The plan was developed by a steering committee with representatives from local businesses, attractions, outdoor assets, residents, and Town staff. The committee assessed the challenges and opportunities for ‘visitor readiness’ across five key categories: attractions, businesses, infrastructure, customer service, and marketing/promotion.

The work of the Steering Committee resulted in the identification of five core pillars for 2026-2030 Visitor Growth Plan: Champion, Connect, Collaborate, Create and Communicate. Each of these pillars has associated objectives and goals and will serve as the roadmap for the Visitor Growth Plan.

Introduction

The formula is simple: A strong visitor economy = A vibrant community

A vibrant visitor economy benefits everyone:

- It provides the assets and programming that make both visitors excited to come and residents proud to live there.
- It attracts new businesses seeking to leverage visitor spending and new residents who value community vibrancy.
- The result is a stronger municipal tax base.

In 2023, visitors traveling over 40km to Aurora's sports complexes and retail hubs alone contributed over \$36 million in spending. Including all non-resident visitors drives the total economic impact to well over \$100 million.

Strong visitation also drives major investment, as seen with Aurora's three existing hotels and a fourth under construction. These investments boost local employment and increase overnight stays, leading to even greater community spending.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the individuals who made up the steering committee and devoted their time to support the development of this Visitor Growth Plan.

Steering Committee

Angela Haynes	Town of Aurora – Economic Development
Lisa Hausz	Town of Aurora – Economic Development
Sandra Ferri	Aurora Chamber of Commerce
Alison Mumford	Aurora Chamber of Commerce
Deb Wilson	Aurora Chamber of Commerce
Amanda Versterfelt	Microtel Inn & Suites
Tatyana Spiridonova	Microtel Inn & Suites
Bob McRoberts	Aurora Citizen
Emily Hlusko-Huard	The Armoury
John Firman	Town of Aurora – Business Support Services
Mason Gooch	Town of Aurora – Business Support Services
Hailey Jones	Town of Aurora – Sport and Community Development Specialist
Suzanne Haines	Aurora Cultural Centre
Jane Taylor	Aurora Cultural Centre
Jodi Marr	Aurora Public Library
Kathleen Vahey	Aurora Historical Society
Laurie Mueller	Sport Aurora
Lynette Lanning	Neighbour Media
Michelle Johnson	Museum Services
Ron Weese	Sport Aurora
Rosa Calabrese	Royal Rose Gallery
Shelley Ware	Town of Aurora – Special Events
Phil Rose	Town of Aurora – Cultural Services

The development of this plan was facilitated by Chuck Thibeault, Executive Director and Sara Sterling, York Industry Relations Manager of Central Counties Tourism.

The Planning Process

The plan was developed with feedback from four facilitated sessions and surveys with the steering committee. The four sessions were interactive with clear objectives to support the development of the plan.

Session One: The group discussed the value of the visitor economy as an economic driver, job creator and contributor to the residents' quality of life and identified why people visit Aurora – the visitation assets and started to define “Success”.

Session Two: The group ranked the visitor assets and reviewed the current landscape in Aurora including: attractions, businesses, infrastructure, customer service and marketing/promotion.

Session Three: The group identified and evaluated Aurora’s visitor readiness to understand the challenges and opportunities that exist to achieve “Success”.

Session Four: Finally, the group aligned the final “Vision” for success and the objectives, goals and action items for the Aurora Visitor Growth Plan.



Guiding Principals - Vision & Mission

Vision

A collaborative ecosystem where Aurora's resident and local business pride fuels a vibrant visitor economy, positioning the town as a hub for cultural discovery and small-town sophistication.

Mission

Aurora will be a year-round destination that welcomes visitors of all ages into a vibrant hub of authentic cultural discovery and distinctive, high-quality experiences. Every visitor will be encouraged to connect deeply with our unique community ultimately leaving feeling enriched, renewed, and eager to return.



Visitor Growth Plan - Five Plan Pillars

PILLAR ONE: CHAMPION

Objective: Establish a clear, accountable, and sustainably funded structure to govern the Visitor Growth Plan, ensuring council support and organizational ownership for its execution.

Goals

1. **Designate Accountability:** Assign formal ownership for the plan's execution.
2. **Establish Advisory Body:** Charter a Visitor Advisory Committee.
3. **Cultivate Ambassadors:** Mobilize residents, staff, volunteers, and local businesses/services as champions.
4. **Secure Sustainable Funding:** Develop a long-term funding strategy.
5. **Plan Integration:** Ensures Visitor Plan Growth deliverables are factored into all related departmental decision-making.

PILLAR TWO: CONNECT

Objective: Cultivate a robust network that seamlessly connects municipal governance, local businesses, and community organizations to one another and to the objectives of the Visitor Growth Plan.

Goals

1. **Centralize Information:** Develop a hub for stakeholder communications.
2. **Cross-Sector Alignment:** Connect staff and businesses for service alignment.
3. **Invest in Training:** Provide targeted professional development opportunities.
4. **Bridge Assets:** Connect businesses with local sport, art, and heritage assets.

PILLAR THREE: COLLABORATE

Objective: Forge active strategic partnerships across the municipality, businesses, and organizations to maximize collective effort in driving increased visitation and elevating visitor spending within Aurora.

Goals

1. **Implement Cross-Promotion:** Establish a mutual marketing network.
2. **Activate Downtown Hub:** Partner with the new town square to drive traffic downtown.
3. **Optimize Visitor Flow:** Develop strategies to guide visitors seamlessly throughout the Town.
4. **Foster Creative Partnerships:** Partner businesses with e.g. artists to create unique experiences.

PILLAR FOUR: CREATE

Objective: Strategically build and enhance Aurora's destination appeal by ensuring a consistently high level of visitor readiness and focusing development efforts on compelling, best-in-class assets and experiences.

Goals

1. **Cross-collaborate on strategy:** Jointly update the plan to attract a wide range of events.
2. **Refine/Expand Wayfinding:** Develop and implement a clear branded navigation plan.
3. **Curate Signature Experiences:** Develop compelling, proprietary reasons to visit.

PILLAR FIVE: COMMUNICATE

Objective: Execute a focused marketing and communications strategy to tell distinctive Aurora stories and reach high-value audiences through the most effective channels with consistent, compelling messaging.

Goals

1. **Unify Messaging:** Create a set of authoritative brand messages.
2. **Consolidate Digital Assets:** Maintain one dedicated visitation website (in progress: Aurora Chamber of Commerce).
3. **Track Performance (KPIs):** Establish and monitor shared metrics for the plan.
4. **Welcome to Aurora!:** Design and distribute a high-quality visitor welcome package.

Visitation in Aurora

Visitation

Geo-fencing research was conducted across key sports oriented locations (including the Stronach Complex, Lambert Wilson Park, and Sheppard's Bush), as well as major retail areas (St. Andrews Shopping Centre and Yonge Street shops). This research revealed **over 4.4 million** visits to these sites in 2023. Critically, only **1.6 million** of those visits were from Aurora residents. The remaining activity was generated by **319,000 visitors** traveling more than 40km one way, contributing an estimated **\$36.3 million in visitor spending**.

Aurora 2023 Geo-Fence Data		# of Locals (0-40km)	% of Locals	# of Tourists (40+km)	% of Tourists	Total Count
Sports Tourism	Total Daily Visits	1,026,861	89.16%	124,781	10.84%	1,151,642
	From Aurora	381,770	33.15%	NA	NA	381,770
Retail	Total Daily Visits	3,039,781	91.26%	291,172	8.74%	3,330,953
	From Aurora	1,219,006	36.60%	NA	NA	1,219,006

Visitor Readiness - Gap Analysis

The steering committee was asked to assess Aurora’s visitor readiness and identify the challenges across the key visitor asset categories: Attractions, Businesses, Infrastructure, Customer Service, and Promotion. Opportunities were then identified to address the challenges, and this formed the basis to develop the objectives and action items for the plan. The opportunities were organized into five key pillars: **Champion, Connect, Collaborate, Create, and Communicate**.

Glossary

Tourist or Visitor - The term “Tourist” or “Visitor” can have various meanings and the terms may be interchanged, but for the purposes of this report, we use the following definitions. Destination Canada defines a “Visitor” as a traveler taking a trip outside his/her usual environment, for less than a year, for any purpose (business, leisure or other personal purpose) other than to be employed.¹ To measure visitation the province of Ontario defines a “Visitor” as someone who takes an overnight out-of-town trip, or an out-of-town same-day trip of 40 kilometers or more away from their home.² Visitors could include such groups as bus tours, sports teams, or individuals visiting friends and relatives etc.

Index - Index numbers are a way of expressing the difference between two measurements by designating one number as the “base”, giving it the value 100 and then expressing the second number as a percentage of the first. Example: If the population of a town increased from 20,000 in 1988 to 21,000 in 1991, the population in 1991 was 105% of the population in 1988. Therefore, on a 1988 = 100 base, the population index for the town was 105 in 1991. (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-533-x/using-utiliser/4072258-eng.htm>)

Example: An index for visitation is how your audience compares to the average of the area being studied, the benchmark. An index of 110 means that there is a 10% higher concentration of that specific variable within your audience than the average. An index of 100 is the average for the area

Inbound Visitor Spend / Expenditure - The expenditure of a non-resident visitor within the economy of reference.

Unique Visitors - The average number of individuals visiting the analyzed domain, within the country and time period analyzed. A user who arrived at a site once or a number of times is a single unique visitor to that domain.

TRIEM Model - The Tourism Regional Economic Impact Model (TREIM) is a data analysis simulation tool that helps organizations and people who are interested in tourism to learn more about the economic impact of tourism in Ontario. The model is capable of simulating tourism-related economic impacts from 2010 to 20, such as: economic impact of specific tourism events, impacts on the supply side by tourism industry sector, impacts by type of capital project for the chosen region.

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/tourism-regional-economic-impact-model>

Central Counties (RT06) - This is the geographic area that makes up the Ontario government Regional Tourism Organization Six (RT06). Central Counties or RT06 includes all of Durham Region, York Region, and the Headwaters area.

Glossary cont.

FSA - A forward sortation area (FSA) is a way to designate a geographical unit based on the first three characters in a Canadian postal code. All postal codes that start with the same three characters, for example, K1A—are together considered an FSA.

Geo-fencing - Geofencing can provide an understanding of your customers through mobility data. By creating specific geofences (a virtual geographic boundary around a particular area), you will be provided with an accurate estimate of the number of people that entered the area within your specified timeframe, where they came from, the average number of times locals vs non-locals visited, and important information about the behaviours of your predominant visitors. The numbers are determined based on cell phone data collected from people above the age of 15 that have their location services enabled which is then filtered through a weighted statistical model with proper sample size. Geofence data captures the number of unique visitors, the number of trips made by those visitors, the distance they travelled from their Common Evening Location (aka their home), and provides an analysis of these cell phone holders over a specific time period.

TAC – Tourism Advisory Committee

TIAO – Tourism Industry Association of Ontario

TIAC – Tourism Industry Association of Canada

Appendix I

Why Visitation?

The tourism industry is critical to Canada, contributing significantly to the economy and job creation. The Tourism Industry Association of Canada [TIAC] describes the tourism workforce as “the backbone of the travel economy. Our ability to provide hospitality to all visitors to Canada, and its impact on the visitor experience, keeps businesses thriving.”³

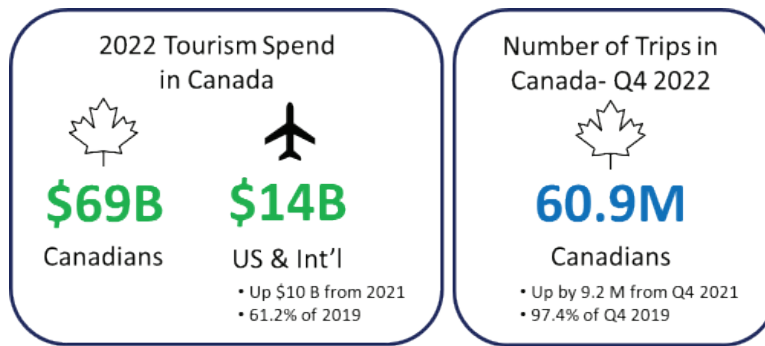
The 2019 Federal Tourism Growth Strategy: Creating Middle Class Jobs recognizes that every community has something to offer as a destination within the Canadian cultural landscape for visitors to explore.⁴ Tourism is one of the only sectors that employs Canadians in every area of the country. This includes every province, territory, and electoral riding.

In 2019, pre-pandemic, tourism was Canada's number one service export, totaling 2% of total exports, generating \$105 billion in revenue, and employing 1 in 11 Canadians with 2.1 million jobs.⁵

While the industry was the first and hardest hit sector during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022), results from Canada's National Travel Survey indicate that the industry is now recovering. (see National Tourism Indicators Graph below) As reported in Destination Canada's fall 2022 Tourism Outlook⁶, domestic tourism spending in 2022 reached 92% of the 2019 pre-pandemic levels, with expectations for a full recovery in 2023. This 2022 domestic spending included Canadian residents who spent \$69.0 billion at home and international travelers to Canada, who spent \$14 billion (US-\$7.4B, overseas-\$6.6B). This international expenditure was an increase of \$3.8 billion, over the \$10.0 billion spent in 2021. Despite this increase, this is still only 61.2% of what these international visitors spent in Canada during 2019, before the pandemic.

The fourth quarter of 2022 showed the strongest signs of recovery, with Canadian residents taking 60.9 million domestic trips, up by 9.2 million from the fourth quarter of 2021, and reaching 97.4% of the same quarter in 2019.⁷ Domestic travel expenditures by Canadian residents were \$14.5 billion in the fourth quarter of 2022, up 30.8% from the fourth quarter of 2021 (\$11.1 billion).

Quick Facts about Tourism - Provincial & Regional



<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230526/dq230526b-eng.htm>

Tourism in Ontario

The Tourism industry in Ontario has a huge impact on the economy with job creation and contribution to the provincial GDP. In 2019, pre-pandemic, the tourism industry in Ontario generated revenue of over \$38 billion (up 11.4% from 2018), which represents 4.3% of GDP.⁸ This industry generated \$13.3 billion in tax revenues and employed more than 396,000 people in over 200,000 businesses. In addition, tourism employs the most significant percentage of young people in Ontario (23%) aged 15-24 and grows year-round jobs in our communities.⁹



Tourism in Central Counties and York Region

In 2022, there were 13 million domestic overnight visits (from 60+km away) to Central Counties (RTO6). Ten million of these overnight visits originated from Ontario, with the remaining 3 million from the rest of Canada. Together they contributed an estimated \$3 billion in visitor spend to the region.

The Tourism Industry Association of Ontario [TIAO] and Global Payments Canada released a Travel and Destination Analytics Report in October 2019.¹⁰ The report highlights findings for the 2018 inbound visitor spending trends in Ontario:

- Toronto, Niagara, and Central Counties accounted for 78.9 percent of inbound spending in Ontario.
- Inbound spend made up 2.3% versus domestic spend at 97.7%. For Central Counties region, this inbound spend came primarily from the United States [U.S.] (49.5%) and China (36.4%).

Appendix II

Many organizations play critical support roles in Ontario's tourism industry, with varying responsibilities and areas of focus to attract and service visitors and maximize the economic benefits to communities. At a local municipal level, there is a need to help coordinate and develop tourism experiences and products within the community that can be positioned in the market at a regional, provincial, and national level.

Regional Tourism Organization 6 - Central Counties Tourism

Central Counties Tourism is one of 13 Regional Tourism Organizations province-wide, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism, and Culture Industries.¹¹ Central Counties, encompasses the regions of Durham, York, and Headwaters and coordinates, aligns and invests in product development, workforce development, strategic marketing, and investment attraction.

Municipal Visitation – The Town of Aurora

Currently, the Town of Aurora manages visitation initiatives through its Economic Development Office. The Town's new Town Square offers many opportunities and a new "base" for visitors. The Town's Event staff promote the Town through their local events, and the Communications team includes visitation messaging in their marketing. Aurora's Chamber of Commerce also plans several of the Town's main events including the Street Festival and the Aurora Home & Living Show.

Local Visitation Businesses

Local businesses, attractions, and events collectively make up the Town of Aurora's visitation assets and are the key drivers of the visitor economy. See list below for examples of local businesses that support visitation.

Partners in Visitation

The products and offerings of local businesses are the foundation of the visitation economy. The hierarchy of partners works vertically through alignment, strategic marketing, investment attraction, themed product development, and funding.



Visitation Partner Tools and Resources

Current Tools and Resources											
Tourism Support Partner	Tourism Education Research / Tracking Advocacy	General Marketing Targeted Marketing	Visitor Information Wayfinding Signage	Tourism Website Maps and Guides	Industry Equipping Community-Engaged						
Destination Canada Promotes Canada’s market-ready products and experiences internationally.		✓		✓	✓			✓			
Destination Ontario (DeON) Promotes Ontario’s market-ready products and experiences domestically and internationally. DeON is an agency of the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism, and Culture Industries.		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Tourism Industry Association of Ontario [TIAO] Advocates tourism policy, regulation, education, and economics of tourism.	✓	✓	✓								
Central Counties Tourism-Regional Tourism Organization Tourism product development, workforce development, industry equipping, and marketing in York, Durham and Headwaters regions.	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓		✓	
The Town of Aurora Promotes Aurora as a destination - the unique experiences, products, community and visitation assets.				✓					✓		✓

Appendix III

Aurora's Visitation Assets

Visitation is the business of attracting and serving the needs of visitors who are travelling for leisure or business. It is essential to understand the primary attractors that draw visitors to a destination to understand the visitor needs and destination development requirements. Marketing will draw visitors to a destination once; great amenities, outstanding customer service, and a welcoming community will bring them back!

With input from the working group, an audit of Aurora's key visitation assets was completed, and these assets were ranked according to their "Visitation Strength" which includes:

- How attractive is the asset to visitors? i.e. the number of visitors it attracts
- How much it contributes to the visitor economy? i.e. the spending it generates
- How unique is the asset to the Aurora community?
- How easily can the asset be promoted to tourists?

Attractions	Primary draws (natural, cultural, entertainment) that define the destination. Aurora offers diverse attractions spanning family, outdoor, sports, arts, and heritage.
Visitation Businesses	Local enterprises fulfill visitor needs, including accommodation, food & beverage, transportation, and essential support services.
Infrastructure	Essential services (transportation, utilities, emergency services) supporting visitors. Aurora has strong GO Train links and is expanding hotel capacity (new hotel 2025–2026).
Customer Service	Foundational element where staff and businesses act as ambassadors. Superior service builds reputation, generates positive word-of-mouth, and drives repeat visits.
Marketing/Promotion	Strategies to attract visitors and lengthen stays: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Owned (website/social)• Paid (advertising)• Earned (media coverage/reviews).

Visitation Asset Inventory

Town Assets

More than 150 individual assets were identified. The breadth and depth of assets under each of the categories means that there is a critical mass of valuable options for visitors. The strength of the sports facilities, restaurants and retail have made Aurora a go-to destination for visitors from near and far. This is unique, and an unexpected strength of the municipality. Included is an inventory of some of the top visitation assets Aurora currently offers to residents and visitors.

ATTRACTIONS		NATURAL ATTRACTIONS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aurora Cultural Centre & Library • Air Riderz • Labyrinth Escape Games • Pet Cemetery • Dead House • The Armoury 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sheppard’s Bush • Aurora Arboretum 	
ARTS AND CULTURE			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Galleries • Pine Tree Potters • Theatre Aurora • Historic Walks 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aurora Museum • Hillary House • Royal Rose Gallery 	
FESTIVALS AND EVENTS			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aurora Street Festival • Family First Night • Arctic Adventure • Farmers Market • Saturday Night Fever on Yonge • Christmas Market • Doors Open 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RibFest • Deck the Halls • Aurora Art Show & Sale • Concerts & Movies in the Park • Culture Days • Contact Photo Festival 	
SPORTS			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport Aurora organization • Sports Hall of Fame • Fields & Turf Fields • Arenas • Equestrian • Lacrosse • Rugby • Soccer • Football 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pools • Golf clubs • Tennis & Pickleball • Indoor Climbing • Beach Volleyball (The Town is expanding its courts to include lighting, seating, and two more courts in 2026) • Ball Diamonds 	
ACTIVITIES / OTHER			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spectating sports/tournaments • Shopping (St. Andrews Village, Yonge Street etc.) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visiting friends • sDining (Joia, Aw Shucks, Fishbone, Hurst Bakery etc.) 	

Resources

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