

## Creating reasons for tourists to stay; REGIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATION FOUR

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Can this region's tourism economy increase by 25% in three years?

David Peacock thinks it can. He's the CEO of Regional Tourism Organization Four (RTO4), which represents Huron, Perth, Waterloo and Wellington. Back in 2011, Ontario was divided into 13 regions to attract visitors to each region not just individual communities.

He stressed the strengths in this region include world-class theatre, heritage towns, rich culinary experiences and "soft" outdoor adventure. Those strengths have created the ultimate in day trip destinations, he said, but that strength is also a weakness.

"They don't stay overnight. Someone comes they have a three or four hour Stratford experience -- we have to create reasons for them to stay," Peacock said.

"You've got to cluster things together to create reasons for people to stay overnight."

Peacock suggests packaging attractions is a good way to get those overnight stays and money across the region. For example, getting visitors to the St. Jacob's Market, Stratford Festival for an overnight stay and then off to Bayfield the following day.

"It's been a really great partnership so far from our perspective," said Lisa Middleton, director of marketing and audience development at the Stratford Festival.

She suggested a 25% increase in tourism money isn't unthinkable.

"It would get us back up to where we were a few years ago."

It's a tough economy and American visits have been on the decline for years, but the RTO4 target, at the moment, is other Canadians.

A new reservation system is intended to make it easy to book a vacation around region four. Visitors can book a tour of St. Jacobs, a play or two and their accommodations all at once through the Stratford Festival, for example.

"Our customers are able to book additional items that would extend their stay," Middleton said.

That could mean another meal at a local restaurant and perhaps some shopping.

Bookings are adding up at Mornington Rose Bed & Breakfast for the upcoming season, but whether it's an indicator of a strong playbill at the Stratford Festival or regional marketing is hard to say, said Murray Sanderson, president Stratford and Area Bed & Breakfast Association.

"It's too early to tell. Once the season gets going we'll start talking to people and find out what they're doing. Right now we know we have bookings, whether any were planning to go to a matinee then decided to stay over then go to Bayfield the next day, we don't know until they arrive and we can talk to them."

There have been more two-day stays booked at the B&B so far this year compared to last but Sanderson noted attendance was down quite a bit at the Festival last year.

Cathy Bieman, Perth County Visitors' Association manager, believes a 25% increase in tourism money in three years is attainable.

"Definitely, if we're all working together. The region is fabulous, a lot of people don't know that," she said.

She noted that once the word gets out more visitors will take advantage of what region four has to offer.

The region has been marketed at large events by RTO4 most recently at the Woman's Show in Ottawa.

It's still early days, 2012 was the first full year of operations but Eugene Zakreski, executive director of the Stratford Tourism Alliance is optimistic.

This year and next he sees "significant" opportunities for local business.

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