

North Middlesex



Municipality of North Middlesex Economic Development Strategic Plan

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1. Introduction

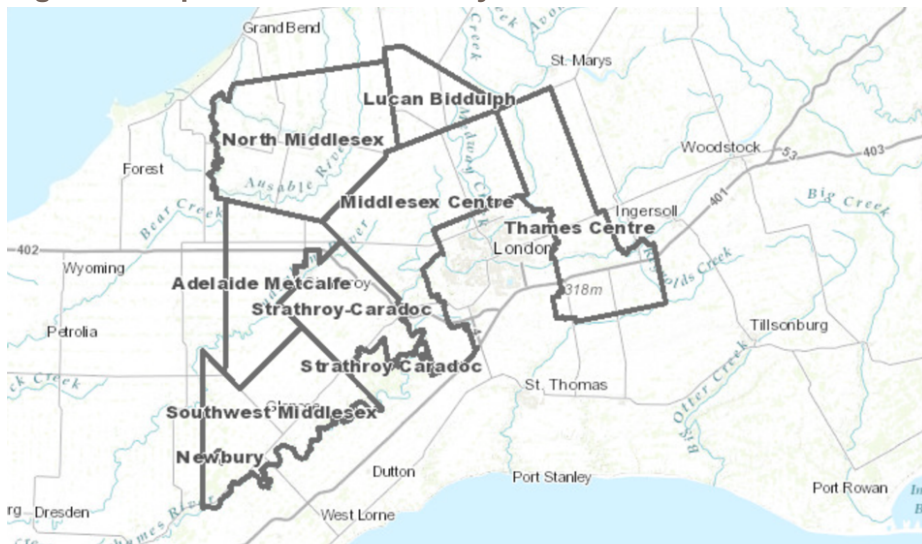
North Middlesex has commissioned the development of a new Economic Development Strategic Plan to update the previous plan established in 2016. North Middlesex has experienced significant changes since 2016: a global pandemic, disruptions of global supply chains, increased demand for broadband access to support a mobile workforce, population increases after a long period of declines, increasing housing prices, demand for a range of new housing options and a tightening labour market.

This strategic plan will guide the municipality’s efforts to create a vibrant, prosperous economy to address today’s economic challenges and opportunities.

1.1 SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Municipality of North Middlesex, population 6,790¹ is located in the northwest corner of Middlesex County in southwestern Ontario. It was established on January 1, 2001, with the amalgamation of the townships of East Williams, West Williams and McGillivray, the town of Parkhill and the village of Ailsa Craig.

Figure 1: Map of Middlesex County

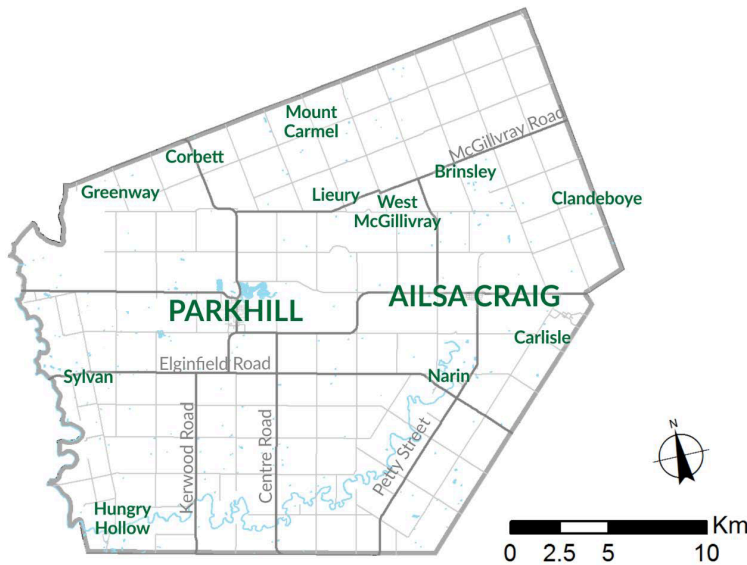


Source: County of Middlesex, maps.Middlesex.ca

¹ At July 1, 2023. Statistics Canada Table 17-10-0155-01.

The Municipality consists of two urban settlement areas (Parkhill and Ailsa Craig), a community settlement area (Nairn) and 10 hamlet settlement areas surrounded by agricultural land.

Figure 2: Map of North Middlesex



Source: North Middlesex Recreation & Facilities Master Plan

The London Census Metropolitan Area (CMA), one of the fastest growing urban centres in Canada, is a short commute from North Middlesex. The North Middlesex economy has strong linkages with London as many residents work, shop and access services in the city.

Important trends informing the strategic planning process

Population dynamics: The population in North Middlesex increased by 4.8% between 2019 and 2023. This increase was below the provincial and national growth rates but significant for North Middlesex as it reversed a pattern of gradual population decline in the recent past. The population living in North Middlesex is younger than many of its peer communities in southwestern Ontario. There were 111 people under the age of 20 for every 100 people aged 65 and older (as of the 2021 Census). Further, the number of people aged 25 to 39 living in North Middlesex increased by 10% between 2016 and 2021. Attracting and retaining young families will be important to ensure there are enough workers to meet workforce demand in the years ahead.

Workforce dynamics: North Middlesex has a very high self-employment rate, as 25% reported self-employment income in 2020, well above the national level of 15%. The high self-employment rate is partly due to the larger share of farmers; however, self-employment rates are also higher in all other industry groups.

Employers are adding workers in the municipality. According to Lightcast total employment in North Middlesex grew 26% between 2018 and 2023. This growth rate, combined with one of the highest workforce participation rates among peer communities (72% of adults) means that future workforce growth will increasingly require attracting workers from outside the community.

Industry dynamics: North Middlesex has a much higher share of workers employed in agriculture compared to the country overall (13 times the national average). There are 85% more workers employed in construction, 37% more in real estate and 28% more in health care compared to the country overall. As of 2023, the top five employment sectors in North Middlesex were agriculture (541 workers), health care and social assistance (404), construction (346), retail trade (225) and education services (135). Construction is the fastest growing sector in recent years. There is potential to grow services, retail trade and food services industries in the municipality if workforce constraints do not negatively impact this potential.

Quality of life dynamics: Canadians are more mobile than ever before. Across Ontario, 22% of the population aged five and older in 2021 lived in a different municipality five years earlier (2016). In communities such as Southwest Middlesex, Petrolia and Lucan Biddulph, around 30% of the population moved to the municipality over the five-year period. The inward migration rate in North Middlesex was 19%. In addition, 72% of workers who live in North Middlesex commute out for work (excluding those who work from home). These individuals are choosing to live in the municipality even though they commute outside for work. This high commuting rate highlights how important quality of life is to attract and retain population.

By many indicators, North Middlesex offers a good quality of life. Crime rates are low, and houses are affordable, although the recent population growth has put upward pressure on housing prices. Broadband internet access is also improving.

There are some areas for improvement, however. There are strains on the health care system. North Middlesex has fewer health professionals per 1,000 population compared to the province overall. Further, many families send their children outside the municipality for high school.

Potential to attract services: North Middlesex's economy and population are highly interconnected with neighbouring municipalities as illustrated by the workforce commuting pattern and by population migration. North Middlesex's interconnectedness with neighbouring municipalities is also indicated in revenue patterns in several industries. As examples, the City of London generates 2.2 times as much revenue per capita from the restaurant sector as North Middlesex and 3.7 times as much revenue from the childcare sector. There could be potential to attract new services, retail and restaurants to North Middlesex, particularly with the recent population growth.

Addressing infrastructure gaps: In order to support continued population growth and ensure there are enough workers to meet local industry demand, North Middlesex will need:

- Sufficient serviced employment land to support industry growth.
- Capacity to develop more housing with an appropriate mix of housing options.
- Reliable high speed broadband internet access across the community.

2. The Strategic Planning Process

The North Middlesex Economic Development Strategic Plan was developed in three phases incorporating research and analysis, broad stakeholder consultation and strategic plan development.

Figure 3: The strategic planning process



Phase 1 included a document review to ground the strategic plan in previously established policies and programs. A detailed analysis of the economic and demographic makeup of North Middlesex compared to neighbouring jurisdictions and provincial and national averages provided context for assessing the municipality’s competitive advantages and disadvantages. This phase also included an assessment of the municipality’s investment readiness or its ability to generate awareness, respond to inquiries, attract and secure business investment.

Phase 2 focused on consultation with community stakeholders. The consultation included individual interviews, an online survey for residents and businesses and a focus group with the North Middlesex Economic Development Advisory Committee.

The results of the analysis in Phase 1 and community consultation in Phase 2 is documented in the Key Findings Report, completed in August 2024.

The Economic Development Advisory Committee reviewed the results of Phase 1 and Phase 2 and established the strategic priorities that form the foundation of the strategic plan.

Phase 3 is the culmination of the strategic planning process. This final phase includes the development of a draft plan which will be reviewed and refined by the Economic Development Advisory Committee. Once the plan is approved an implementation plan will breakdown each recommended action including the key partners to be engaged, the priority level, timing and an estimated budget. The implementation plan will also identify performance measures to allow North Middlesex to track its progress towards its goals.

The Strategic Plan, outlined in the following pages, was assembled with these building blocks.

Element	Description
Strategic Priorities	The issues and opportunities that must be addressed to ensure a successful outcome.
Vision	An aspirational statement of where North Middlesex want to be in the future.
Mission	A statement of what the North Middlesex does, for who and how.
Goals	Broad based strategies needed to achieve the mission.
Strategic Objectives	The desired outcome as a result of the goal.
Actions	Specific, actionable items that are assigned to individuals or organizations to achieve.

3. Strategic Priorities

Strategic priorities are the factors that will have the most significant impact on North Middlesex's economy. The Economic Development Advisory Committee met in August 2024 to review the Key Findings Report and identified the following strategic priorities as the foundation of the Economic Development Strategic Plan.

1. **Sector development**

North Middlesex recognizes its inherent strengths and the opportunities to attract and grow the following sectors: agriculture, tourism, local resident services (including restaurants), and specialized manufacturing.

2. **Business development**

There is a high proportion of entrepreneurs, sole proprietors and small businesses in North Middlesex. These micro businesses will benefit from policies and programs specifically targeted to facilitate their start up and growth.

3. **Workforce development/resident attraction**

Growing the local population is critical to the future prosperity of North Middlesex. A growing population will build the local workforce and help to grow the market for local commercial businesses and services. North Middlesex's population growth is dependent on the supply of housing as well as residents' services including schools, childcare, health care, arts and culture and recreation programs.

4. **Investment readiness**

North Middlesex's ability to generate awareness, respond to inquiries, attract and secure business investment depends on several factors. Businesses must have available land and buildings in which to set up shop. North Middlesex must also be prepared to support existing businesses and prospective investors with data, business friendly policies and processes and incentives for investment.

4. Vision and Mission

The vision statement is a description of the desired future state that North Middlesex is ultimately moving towards. The mission statement is a definition of North Middlesex's purpose. It describes what North Middlesex does and why. Together the vision and mission statements provide a picture of North Middlesex's economic development aspirations and the efforts to get to that desired state.

Economic Development Vision



A vibrant, growing community providing economic opportunity and supporting residents' well-being.

North Middlesex residents and businesses welcome the growing interest in living and working in the Municipality and are prepared to leverage the economic and quality of life opportunities that will come with that growth.

Economic Development Mission



To advance economic opportunities for North Middlesex businesses and residents through managed growth, strategic investment and targeted business development.

The mission statement acknowledges the important role of the Municipality to ensure that the growth is aligned with its aspirations for the future, financial realities, community needs and emerging opportunities.

5. Goals and Objectives


North Middlesex has established four broad goals and aligned objectives that will support the municipality’s efforts to achieve its economic development vision and mission.

Goals describe the broad end state that North Middlesex wants to achieve while objectives describe the desired outcome as a result of the goal.

	Goal	Objective
	1 Managed population growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •North Middlesex businesses have access to a larger local labour pool. •The growing population supports a greater range of commercial and public services. •North Middlesex has a range of housing to support its population growth.
	2 Investment readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •North Middlesex has the infrastructure and data to effectively attract and retain business investment.
	3 Business development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •North Middlesex’s entrepreneurs and business community have the supports and resources they need to thrive and grow.
	4 Sector development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •North Middlesex leverages its strengths and the emerging opportunities in agriculture, tourism, commercial services and specialized manufacturing.

6. Strategic Actions

Strategic actions are specific and measurable activities that will be undertaken over the period of the strategic plan to achieve the goals and objectives. They need to be aligned with the capacity and budget of the municipality to implement and should be tracked on an ongoing basis to see if the municipality is making progress against the goals and working towards its economic development vision.

Goal 1: Managed population growth	
	<p>Strategic Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Middlesex businesses have access to a larger local labour pool. • The growing population supports a greater range of commercial and public services. • North Middlesex has a range of housing to support its population growth.

North Middlesex needs to attract new population to the community to meet future workforce demand. Nearly one-third of the working age population is over the age of 55 and many can be expected to retire in the next decade. Employers in the community reported they struggle to find workers, particularly in service, retail and food services industries. It is possible that people will commute from London and the region to work in North Middlesex, but they are unlikely to commute for lower to moderate income jobs.

North Middlesex can manage the population growth by facilitating and incentivizing certain types of housing and development, promoting the community to targeted audiences such as young families and ensuring the municipality is an attractive place to live.

Residents and businesses expressed concerns about access to childcare and low enrollment at the North Middlesex high school as barriers to attracting and retaining working age families in the community. Similarly, addressing gaps in personal services, food services and health care locally will be important to provide a complete community for residents. North Middlesex should identify target businesses and services and promote these opportunities as part of its investment attraction efforts.

North Middlesex should strive to make the planning approvals process as transparent and streamlined as possible to facilitate investment. This approach should include providing a easy to follow process map and targeted timelines on the municipal website.

Related Actions:

1. Establish a target range for population growth on an annual basis.
2. Align housing development with the population growth target.
 - a. Invest in infrastructure to ensure housing can be developed as needed.
 - b. Establish residential development guidelines such as the mix of housing that is needed and the price range based on demand.
3. Ensure the municipality has compelling “Move to North Middlesex” marketing materials including website, social media, etc.
4. Work with the business community on a workforce attraction campaign.
5. Continue to expand childcare services.
6. Develop a plan to attract entrepreneurs into local opportunities (personal services, retail, food service, health care, etc.).
7. Work with the Thames Valley District High School to maintain and expand enrollment at the North Middlesex high school.
8. Work to ensure the municipality has the capacity to support a growing population and business community (e.g. permitting in a timely fashion, public infrastructure investments, etc.).



Goal 2: investment Readiness

Strategic Objective:

- North Middlesex has the infrastructure and data to effectively attract and retain business investment.

In a competitive investment environment, North Middlesex must create an environment that is conducive to business investment. The North Middlesex economy has benefitted from new investments by a large manufacturing company and new services-based companies in recent years. The construction sector also continues to grow.

Industrial and commercial businesses are important contributors to the municipal economy. These businesses pay municipal property taxes, create jobs, boost household property tax revenues and improve the standard of living of residents.

Middlesex needs places for new and existing businesses to establish and grow with available and serviced land and buildings and related infrastructure. It needs specific development zones/commercial nodes such as King Street where service, retail and restaurant firms can cluster. The Community Improvement Plan should provide incentives to attract investments that are aligned with North Middlesex’s economic development and planning goals.

The list of available properties and buildings is typically one of the most frequented section of a municipality’s economic development website. The municipality should work closely with County planning staff to identify commercial and industrially zoned land and buildings and then contact property owners to determine their interest in selling. The municipality should assemble and maintain an inventory of available buildings and land with detailed information on the property and contact information for the real estate agent or owner to support the property’s sale or lease.


It is also very important to have access to investment-related information on the municipality’s website. The website should provide information on industries that have potential for growth in the municipality, the workforce, access to energy and telecommunications infrastructure, available properties and buildings and development zones.

Providing relevant information to potential business investors and the current base of firms in the municipality, will create the environment for investment and growth of the business community in North Middlesex.

A detailed list of critical economic development data to compile and share on the municipal website is included in the appendix.

Related Actions:

1. Identify, inventory and promote existing land and commercial/industrial properties available for development.
2. Identify potential new areas for the development of employment lands.
3. Explore funding options for investment into needed infrastructure.
4. Develop a website with all investment attraction-related data available for potential investors.
5. Invest in priority commercial nodes such as King Street.
6. Evaluate potential design guidelines for the commercial nodes to ensure the right kinds of development using the CIP as an incentive tool.
7. Ensure broadband internet is available across the municipality. Monitor and inform the community about the implementation of broadband deployment.
8. Continue to invest in economic development training for staff and Council.
9. Work with Middlesex County Planning to establish a process flow and estimated times for the development approval process.
10. Actively engage in all relevant Middlesex County economic development initiatives and identify other government programming that could be leveraged to help achieve the municipality's economic development goals (e.g. the Ontario Ministry of Farming, Agriculture and Agribusiness).

	<p>Goal 3: Business Development</p> <p>Strategic Objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Middlesex’s entrepreneurs and business community have the supports and resources they need to thrive and grow.
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One in four adults in North Middlesex reported some form of self-employment in 2020, many in agriculture related businesses. Establishing a formal visitation program with existing businesses will allow North Middlesex to understand the common issues and opportunities these small businesses are facing. This proactive program would provide North Middlesex with the information it needs to ensure programs and policies are business friendly, connect businesses facing challenges with the supports they need and ensure businesses who don’t currently need assistance know that supports are available should they have a problem in the future.

North Middlesex’s website should include an inventory of all the supports and agencies available to help them to get started, to grow and access any other assistance they need. The resource lists should include information on the services available from North Middlesex as well as the North Middlesex Business Association, Middlesex County Economic Development, Community Futures Middlesex, provincial and federal funding programs and other aligned organizations.

North Middlesex should work with the North Middlesex Business Association as a platform to provide training and networking activities to build the connection that local businesses have with the municipality and with their peer businesses. These events are another opportunity to profile the municipality’s programs and other organizations’ programs and services for small businesses.

Community stakeholders indicated that many North Middlesex businesses were not aware of the Community Improvement Plan. All communications to businesses in the Municipality should include some information on this program.

The current program was established in 2021, and some stakeholders suggested that the funding had not kept pace with escalating construction costs. The Municipality should conduct regular reviews of the program to ensure funding is sufficient to incentive investment and identify opportunities to best support the goals and objectives outlined in this report.

A tight labour market continues to be a concern for local businesses. North Middlesex should continue to support local businesses with job fairs and other recruitment initiatives. North Middlesex should work closely with the Middlesex Workforce Development Partnership and the Elgin Middlesex Oxford Workforce Planning Board to

gather data and access programs that can support local businesses in attracting and retaining the workforce they need to be successful.

Finally, the North Middlesex Economic Development office should ensure that the Official Plan, currently under review, reflects needs of local businesses and the municipality's development goals through regular engagement with the business community and participation in public consultation sessions.

Related Actions:

1. Establish a structured visitation program to connect with local businesses and entrepreneurs, identify common issues and opportunities and seek solutions.
2. Prepare and maintain an online database of resources, aligned organizations and funding sources for businesses and entrepreneurs.
3. Continue to support the North Middlesex Business Association to provide training and networking activities.
4. Seek opportunities to profile organizations providing small business supports in North Middlesex communications, workshops and networking events.
5. Develop a marketing campaign to build awareness of the Community Improvement Plan.
6. Consider updating the Community Improvement Plan to target key investments and reflect increased construction costs.
7. Support local businesses' recruitment efforts using tools such as the North Middlesex website and recruitment fairs.
8. Work with the Middlesex Workforce Development Partnership and Elgin Middlesex Oxford Workforce Planning Board to connect local businesses with workforce development services and training.
9. Advise and advocate for the needs of local businesses in the Official Plan update.

	<p>Goal 4: Sector development</p> <p>Strategic Objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> North Middlesex leverages its strengths and the emerging opportunities in agriculture, tourism, commercial services and specialized manufacturing.
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The Key Findings report identified four sectors that have the potential to attract new investment in North Middlesex.

- Agriculture:** Farms and farm product merchants make up a large share of the revenue and the employment in North Middlesex. The agriculture sector represents an opportunity to encourage investment in value added activity and related services.

Sector specific associations supporting this sector include the Ontario and Middlesex Federation of Agriculture, National Farmers Union and Christian Farmers' Federation of Ontario as well as crop/produce specific organizations such as the Grain Farmers of Ontario, Ontario Soybean and Canola committee, Dairy Farmers of Ontario, etc. Middlesex County Economic Development is actively working to attract investment in this sector and would be an important ally for North Middlesex.

- Tourism:** Tourism is a large part of the economy in the neighbouring jurisdictions of Lambton Shores and South Huron. North Middlesex could take advantage of its proximity to large numbers of visitors by offering tourism experiences that build on its small town and rural setting.

Tourism Middlesex and Ontario's Southwest (Regional Tourism Organization 1) could be key partners in developing and promoting tourism experiences in North Middlesex.

- Commercial services:** As the population grows, the demand for goods and services to support residents will also grow. The key findings report identified several gaps in local services. A detailed market threshold analysis would help generate interest and awareness in addressing the local market demand.

The Strathroy and District Chamber of Commerce is a non-profit organization that serves as a voice of business in the region. Community Futures Middlesex serves entrepreneurs and small businesses located in Middlesex County including North Middlesex. These organizations should be key partners in supporting new and existing small businesses in North Middlesex.

- Specialized manufacturing:** The provincial guideline for permitted uses in Prime Agricultural Areas includes agricultural uses, agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses. On-farm diversified uses that are secondary to the agricultural use

of the property allow for home occupations, home industries, agritourism uses and uses that produce value-added agricultural products. Manufacturing of agricultural related products and systems including crop management, conveyance systems, customized tooling and value-added processing are common extensions of farming operations.

Aligned associations for this sector include the Ontario Manufacturers Association, Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium, Agricultural Manufacturers of Canada and Ontario Agri-Business Association.

North Middlesex should use the existing online business inventory to monitor and report on industry trends, goods produced, number of employees, and key markets widely. The municipality should ensure it is updated regularly to track these areas of opportunity and help to build the case for further investment by providing local success stories.

North Middlesex should explore opportunities to join and partner with sector specific agencies and associations that can help better understand and quantify the opportunities for local investment through regular reports, workshops and other activities.

The municipality should also consider using the Community Improvement Plan to provide incentives for investment in the identified target sectors. The existing businesses in these areas could provide guidance on the types and value of funding required to provide a meaningful incentive for further investment. They could also help identify aligned businesses and services that would complement the existing business network.

North Middlesex currently profiles three local business success stories on the economic development website (provided with support from Middlesex County Economic Development). The business inventory and business visitation program will help North Middlesex to profile additional companies and provide additional success stories in a range of business sizes and sectors.

Related Actions:

1. Maintain the directory of businesses and industry data by sector to monitor and report on trends and development in North Middlesex.
2. Seek opportunities to engage with sector-based business associations to better understand and respond to the unique needs and challenges facing North Middlesex's target sectors.
3. Review the Community Improvement Plan to consider specific incentives for target sectors.
4. Identify opportunities to attract complementary businesses and services aligned with North Middlesex's target sectors.
5. Profile existing businesses in target sectors in North Middlesex's economic development communications.

7. Next Steps

Following the approval of the Economic Development Strategic Plan, North Middlesex will develop an implementation that identifies key actions, priority level, timing and estimated budget for the action items. The Implementation Plan will also include recommended performance measures to track North Middlesex's progress towards its goals and objectives.

8. Appendix: Critical Economic Development Data²

Compiling and sharing economic development data is a critical action in the Economic Development Strategic Plan. The economic development information should be updated regularly and supported by professional video and images. Recent estimates indicate that 90 percent of investment decisions (by local and new investors) are initiated by a web search and over half begin with a search for available property.

Key Elements

- Location (map)
- Department mission and services
- Contact information (Ideally available on every page)

The following content is recognized as the baseline for a standard economic development website.

Site Selection

- Demographics (population, workforce, buying power)
- Economic profile (industries, utilities)
- Business climate
- Higher education
- Transportation
- Taxes
- Incentives
- Quality of life
- Support

Sites & Buildings

- Business park or zones
- Buildings
- Sites
- Maps
- Development approvals process
- Support
- Property listings include detailed zoning, permitted uses, utilities, and sales/leasing data.

Sector Profiles

- Sector data
- Value propositions for key sectors
- Sector associations

Supports for Business

- Success stories
- Business services (talent, workforce, training)
- Business directory
- Entrepreneurship
- Incentives

Resources/News

- Reports (community profile, strategic plans, annual report)
- Newsletter/blog
- Funding sources
- Media releases
- Media (photography, pdfs)
- Economic development partner links

About Us

- Mission, vision
- History
- Map of service area
- Directions
- Staff
- Economic Development Committee

² Adapted from Economic Development for the Team, Eric P. Canada, 2018

