FIRST IMPRESSIONS COMMUNITY EXCHANGE

City of Clarence-Rockland Visits the City of Pembroke

Visit period: August–September 2026
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Program: Ontario Ministry of Rural Affairs
First Impressions Community Exchange











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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The First Impressions Community Exchange (FICE) program pairs communities to assess one another from the perspective of first-time visitors. Participants act as “mystery visitors” and consider the community through different lenses, including those of tourists, prospective residents, students, families, municipal representatives and people passing through. The purpose is to provide respectful, constructive observations that can help a community recognize its strengths, address challenges and identify practical opportunities.

The findings in this report reflect six completed survey submissions representing seven Clarence-Rockland participants. Visits took place between August 7 and September 8, 2026, during daytime hours and lasting approximately four to six hours. Participants completed online research before travelling to Pembroke, conducted a short initial drive-through, explored selected areas and facilities, interacted with residents, business owners and staff where possible, and recorded their observations using the Ministry’s assessment questionnaire. Because visits occurred on different days and at different times, and several took place on weekdays, the report should be read as a snapshot of visitor impressions rather than a comprehensive review.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Pembroke exceeded many visitors' expectations, leaving participants with a positive impression of the community. The waterfront was consistently identified as the community's strongest asset: attractive, accessible, well maintained and supported by trails, gardens, seating, recreation, event infrastructure and visitor amenities.

The downtown also exceeded expectations, particularly its historic buildings, murals, independent shops, restaurants, walkability and close connection to the waterfront. Algonquin College, regional health services, green spaces and the community's visible heritage further strengthened the overall experience.

Visitors identified several areas that would benefit from further attention. These included a limited sense of arrival at community gateways, uneven property and building conditions, downtown vacancies, quiet weekday activity, gaps in wayfinding and the absence of a clear, unified identity that communicates what distinguishes Pembroke.

Together, these observations point less to a lack of assets than to an opportunity to connect, activate and present them more effectively. A stronger community narrative linking the waterfront, downtown, heritage, murals, outdoor recreation, dining, events and regional location—supported by clear gateway signage, improved wayfinding and a shared "Why Pembroke?" message—could help visitors understand the community's appeal and encourage them to explore beyond a brief stop en route to Algonquin Park or other Ottawa Valley destinations. Renewing recreation facilities, expanding indoor and year-round activities, improving accessibility, increasing English- and French-language visitor information, and making newcomer and community-support services more visible would further strengthen Pembroke's appeal.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

- **Standout strengths:** waterfront and recreational spaces; historic downtown; murals and heritage; quality independent dining and retail; landscaping and horticultural contributions; educational and regional service assets.
- **Immediate priorities:** stronger gateway signage; functioning mural QR codes; clearer visitor information; improved downtown–waterfront wayfinding; activation of vacant storefronts; consistent promotion by frontline ambassadors.
- **Longer-term opportunities:** a unified destination identity; downtown and waterfront development; year-round activities; reinvestment in recreation facilities; housing renewal and infill; attraction of young professionals, entrepreneurs and visitors.

BEFORE THE VISIT

ONLINE PRESENCE

Participants generally rated Pembroke's websites and social media presence as good. The city website was described as professional, current, accessible and useful for trip planning, while the Visit Pembroke content, downtown website and regional tourism resources helped visitors identify parks, restaurants, shops and attractions. Social media conveyed an active, inviting small-town experience through a mix of municipal updates, business features, event promotion and short videos.

Opportunities: Make Visit Pembroke content easier to reach from the City's main navigation, improve the discoverability of official social accounts, link event posts directly to detailed information, and expand French-language visitor and recreation content to reach nearby Francophone communities and Quebec travellers.

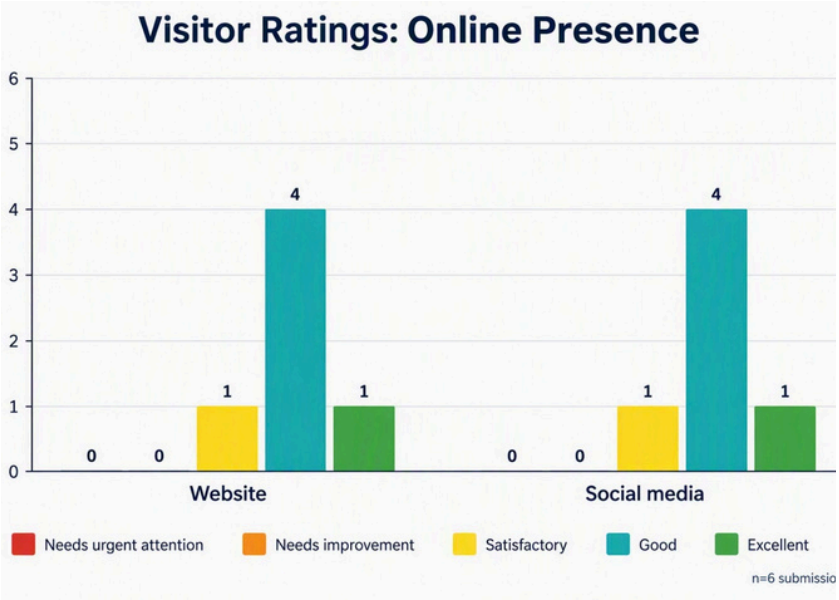


Figure 1. *Visitor ratings of Pembroke's website and social media presence.*

PRE-VISIT PERCEPTIONS

Expectations varied. Some participants anticipated a vibrant waterfront and attractive downtown based on online promotion; others expected a conventional small Ontario city or a brief highway stop with limited distinctive appeal. Most expected shops, restaurants, green spaces and outdoor activities. These differing starting points made the strong waterfront, quality dining and independent downtown businesses especially notable during the visits.

COMMUNITY ENTRANCES AND INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

Initial impressions depended heavily on the route taken. Approaches through industrial, older residential and highway-oriented commercial areas felt functional but did not communicate Pembroke's character. Several visitors noticed only small provincial or directional signs and did not see a prominent municipal welcome feature, particularly from Highway 17 and Paul Martin Drive. By contrast, arrival in the downtown and waterfront area felt more welcoming because of the historic architecture, murals, flowers, banners, public spaces and visible care.







Opportunities: Create prominent, consistent gateway features that signal arrival and showcase Pembroke's waterfront, heritage and outdoor identity; improve landscaping and property presentation along principal visitor routes; and add wayfinding from major approaches to downtown, the waterfront and key attractions.

Figure 2. Overall participant ratings of Pembroke's community entrances.



Figure 2. *Overall participant ratings of Pembroke's community entrances.*

HOUSING AND RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Visitors observed a varied housing stock that includes heritage homes, post-war neighbourhoods, row housing, retirement options, social and market housing, and pockets of newer development. Established areas often had significant character, and proximity to parks, trails and the waterfront was a notable advantage. Conditions were uneven, however, with some older homes, properties and small bridges appearing to require maintenance. Participants saw relatively few larger apartment buildings and identified potential demand associated with students, young professionals, families and attainable housing needs.

Opportunity: Pembroke could frame its established neighbourhoods as assets for renewal by encouraging renovation, infill and adaptive reuse while protecting heritage character. Additional rental and apartment options, sidewalk connections and property-improvement initiatives could support students, newcomers and households at different income levels.

GOVERNMENT, EDUCATION, HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

City Hall was easy to locate in an attractive historic building near the waterfront. Visitors who entered generally found staff courteous and helpful, with maps, brochures and business information available. Some participants did not visit because the building was closed during their trip. Feedback from multiple visitors highlighted an opportunity to strengthen destination awareness, as frontline staff and residents were not always aligned in their recommendations about what visitors should see and do.

Opportunity: Review existing visitor resources, including maps and community-generated recommendations, and consider consolidating or promoting them more widely through a concise “Why Pembroke?” reference for municipal staff, businesses and community organizations. The resource could highlight top attractions, restaurants, events, museums, trails, family activities, historic sites and seasonal experiences.





EDUCATION

Schools were generally described as visible, clean and well maintained. Algonquin College made a particularly strong impression and was viewed as an important post-secondary and regional asset. Participants also valued the availability of English- and French-language schools within both the public and Catholic school systems. Social services were less visible to some visitors, and a few noted signs of homelessness.

Opportunity: Review and build on existing connections among English and French language schools, public and Catholic school boards, Algonquin College, local employers, entrepreneurs, downtown businesses and recreation providers. Where partnerships or programs are already in place, consider increasing their visibility and coordination to support student retention and to attract young adults.

HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

The hospital was easy to identify and appeared modern and well maintained. Visitors also noticed dental, physiotherapy, mental health, chiropractic, hearing, retirement and other health-related services, reinforcing Pembroke's role as a regional service centre. Public and community services included provincial and federal offices, court and correctional services, municipal facilities, recreation amenities and community programming.

Opportunity: Although these observations do not assess the availability or effectiveness of local services, they suggest an opportunity to make information about community supports and referral pathways more visible and accessible.



***Figure 3**. Average visitor ratings for housing and public services.*

DOWNTOWN

The downtown was one of the most positive surprises. Visitors praised its walkability, historic architecture, murals, flowers, benches, small public spaces, independent shops, quality restaurants and convenient access to the waterfront. Parking was generally considered available and affordable. Occupied storefronts were often stylish and inviting, and creative uses of small spaces added character.

At the same time, vacant or underused buildings, inconsistent façade conditions and limited activity during some weekday visits created an uneven impression. Accessibility appeared variable in heritage storefronts. Visitors also felt that downtown lacked a clearly recognizable identity despite its strong physical assets.

Opportunities: Support pop-ups, temporary uses and adaptive reuse in vacant properties; encourage patios, outdoor dining, evening activity and year-round programming; use murals, heritage and creative public spaces as the foundation for a downtown brand; improve pedestrian connections and wayfinding between downtown and the waterfront; and review accessibility barriers while continuing façade and streetscape improvements.









BUSINESS, RETAIL, DINING AND EMPLOYMENT

RETAIL AND SERVICES

Visitors found the retail environment appealing and convenient. Downtown Pembroke features a healthy mix of locally owned businesses, national retailers and essential services. The presence of grocers, pharmacies, hardware stores, clothing and specialty shops makes day-to-day needs easy to meet, while boutiques, wellness studios and professional services add character and choice. Independently owned shops brought authenticity and warmth to the shopping experience.

Opportunity: Position Pembroke as a distinctive Ottawa Valley dining stop by connecting independent restaurants and cafés with the downtown, Ottawa River waterfront and local events. Coordinated “eat local” promotion, current business-hour information and short food-focused itineraries could help travellers—including those passing through the region or continuing to Algonquin Park—discover local options and spend more time in the city.







FOOD AND DINING

Food and dining were among the strongest visitor experiences. Participants found a good mix of familiar chains and distinctive local restaurants, cafés, bistros and seasonal food options. Independent operators were praised for quality, atmosphere, service and creative use of historic buildings. The waterfront ice cream and food options added to the visitor experience.

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EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Visitors recognized CFB Petawawa, the hospital, Algonquin College, government services, retail and small business as important regional economic drivers. Employment opportunities were difficult to assess during short visits, and few visible hiring signs were noted. Vacant commercial properties created concern about perceived vitality, but also represent potential spaces for entrepreneurship, adaptive reuse and investment.

Opportunity: Build on Pembroke's regional employment base, relative affordability and quality-of-life assets through coordinated talent-attraction and business-support efforts. Promote employment opportunities, housing, amenities and recreation to young professionals, remote workers, entrepreneurs, families, students and outdoor enthusiasts; strengthen connections among Algonquin College, local employers and entrepreneurship supports; and identify vacant commercial properties that could accommodate business succession, start-ups, pop-ups and adaptive reuse.

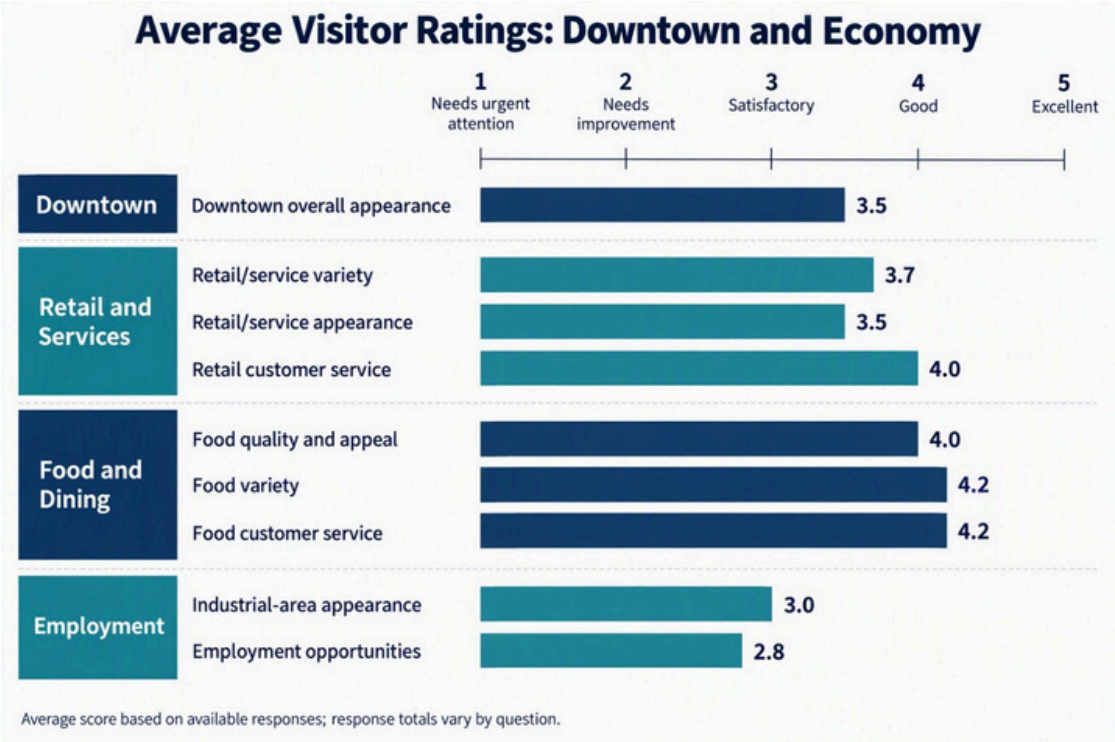


Figure 4. *Average visitor ratings for downtown, retail, dining and employment.*

TOURISM, RECREATION, CULTURE AND HERITAGE

TOURISM AND VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Pembroke has a strong collection of visitor assets, including the waterfront, Riverfront Park, camping, paddling, trails, museums, murals, historic buildings, festivals, waterfront events, accommodations, local dining and access to wider Ottawa Valley outdoor experiences. Waterfront Live and the amphitheatre were viewed as particularly strong foundations for event-based tourism. Most participants considered Pembroke suitable for a half-day or day trip; fewer immediately saw it as a multi-day destination.

Opportunity: Build on Pembroke's waterfront, downtown, dining, heritage, trails and event programming by coordinating these assets into clearly defined half-day, full-day and overnight visitor itineraries. Packages could connect local accommodations, restaurants, museums, murals, recreation providers and seasonal events, supported by consistent wayfinding, current business information and cross-promotion among tourism partners. Continue to leverage the strong foundation provided by the Visit Pembroke website, social media channels, the Pembroke fold-out map and other promotional tools by aligning their messaging and using them to feature these itineraries. Regular updates and coordinated distribution across digital and physical visitor touchpoints would help visitors move more easily from trip planning to exploring the community. Marketing could position Pembroke as a destination in its own right while also encouraging travellers moving between Ottawa, North Bay, Algonquin Park and other Ottawa Valley communities to stop, explore and extend their stay.









TOURISM, RECREATION, CULTURE AND HERITAGE

RECREATION

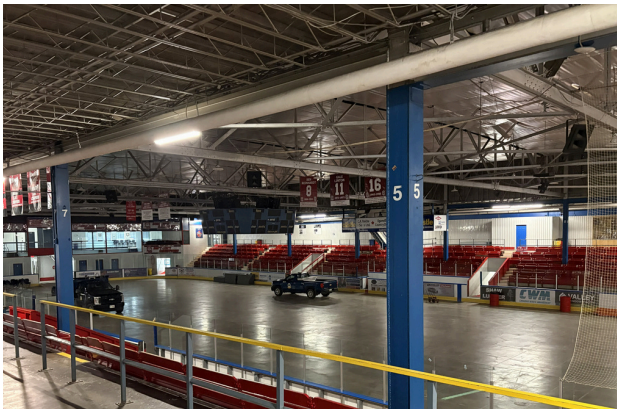
Recreation was consistently identified as one of Pembroke's strongest areas. The waterfront and surrounding green spaces offer trails, boardwalks, camping, paddling, fitness equipment, playgrounds, soccer fields, beach access, gazebos, seating, landscaped areas and event spaces. The converted railway corridor provides valuable year-round opportunities for walking, cycling, snowmobiling, snowshoeing and other activities.

Some visitors felt that the condition and presentation of the Pembroke Memorial Centre and the Pembroke and Area Community Centre did not fully reflect the prominence of Pembroke's hockey heritage and identity. Some also perceived gaps in indoor entertainment and programming for families, young adults and teens.

Opportunity: Build on Pembroke's strong waterfront, trail and outdoor recreation network by reviewing how facility renewal, program visibility and year-round indoor activities could strengthen the overall recreation experience. Opportunities could include celebrating Pembroke's hockey heritage more visibly at arena facilities, improving the promotion of existing programs, identifying service or programming gaps for families, young adults and teens, and exploring partnerships with community organizations and recreation providers to expand accessible activities throughout the year.







CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Historic architecture, museums, heritage artifacts, railway and lumber history, public interpretation and approximately 35 downtown murals provide a strong cultural foundation. Visitors also noticed Francophone programming, Indigenous interpretation, places of worship and visible signs that many downtown businesses welcome diverse communities.

Opportunity: Create a formal Pembroke Heritage and Mural Walk linking murals, historic buildings, museums, plaques, waterfront and railway history, and local stories. All related QR codes should be tested and maintained, with accessible digital content and French-language information where feasible.







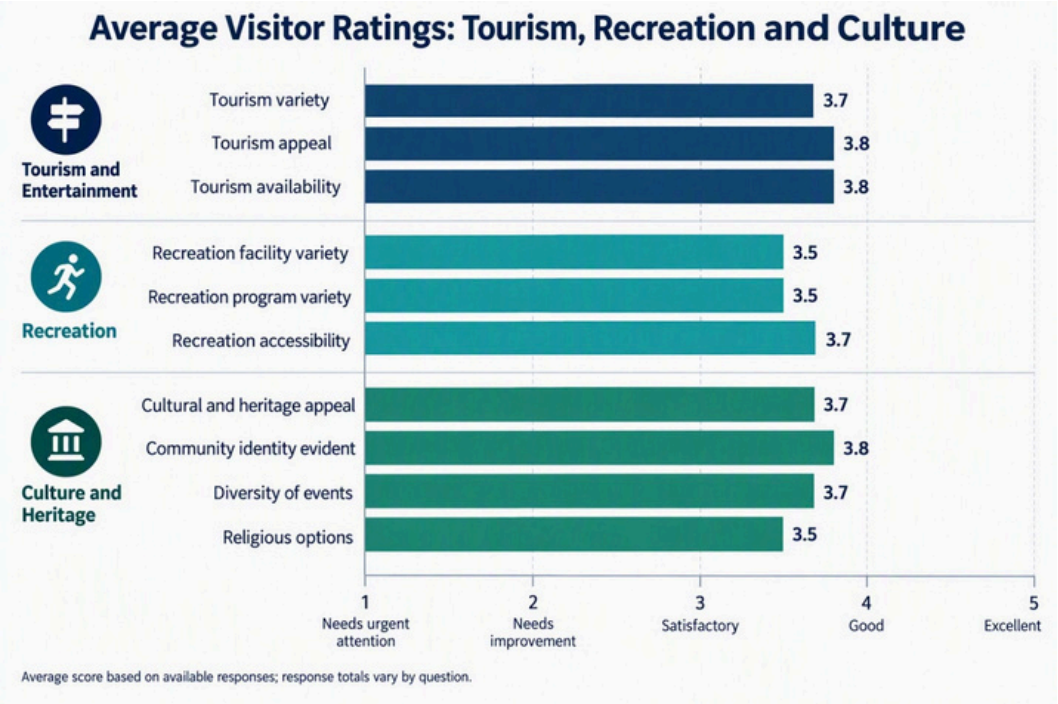


Figure 5. *Average visitor ratings for tourism, recreation, culture and heritage.*

WELCOMING COMMUNITY AND RESIDENT FEEDBACK

Interactions with residents, business owners, volunteers and staff were generally friendly and positive. People spoke proudly about the waterfront and community, offered recommendations and showed visible care through local business service and horticultural work. Some participants found the community's energy harder to assess during quiet weekday visits. When asked about things to do in the area, some residents recommended attractions in nearby communities as well as options within Pembroke, suggesting an opportunity to build a stronger shared understanding of Pembroke's own visitor experiences.

Opportunity: Build on Pembroke's welcoming interactions and community pride by making its sense of belonging and visitor identity more visible and consistent. Review how newcomer resources, accessibility information and English- and French-language services are promoted across municipal, community and business touchpoints; develop a concise shared visitor message that highlights Pembroke's waterfront, downtown, heritage, recreation, dining and events; and equip residents, frontline staff and businesses with current tools and information to confidently answer "What makes Pembroke special?" and recommend experiences within the community.



Figure 6. *Average visitor ratings for welcoming character, newcomer services, inclusion and accessibility.*

SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

TOP STRENGTHS

1. **Waterfront and recreation:** an attractive, accessible and well-equipped public realm supported by trails, gardens, amenities and event infrastructure.
2. **Downtown, dining and local business:** a walkable historic core with distinctive shops, quality restaurants, murals and welcoming service.
3. **Heritage, education and regional services:** architecture, museums, local stories, Algonquin College, health services and government functions that reinforce Pembroke's regional role.









TOP OPPORTUNITIES

1. **Create a unified and welcoming community identity:** connect Pembroke's waterfront, downtown, heritage, recreation, dining, events and regional role through a shared visitor message; strengthen gateway features and wayfinding; and equip residents, frontline staff and businesses with current visitor information, newcomer resources, accessibility information and English- and French-language promotional tools.
2. **Revitalize places and strengthen community services:** activate vacant downtown and commercial properties through pop-ups, business succession and adaptive reuse; continue façade, streetscape and accessibility improvements; encourage housing renovation, infill and additional rental options; renew recreation facilities in a way that celebrates Pembroke's hockey heritage; and improve the visibility of community supports and referral pathways.
3. **Grow visitation, talent and local economic activity:** develop half-day, full-day and overnight itineraries that connect the waterfront, downtown, dining, heritage, murals, trails, recreation and events; align the Visit Pembroke website, social media, fold-out map and other promotional tools; strengthen eat-local and shop-local promotion; connect Algonquin College, schools, employers and entrepreneurship supports; and market Pembroke to visitors, young professionals, remote workers, entrepreneurs, students and families.

TOP CHALLENGES

1. **Limited sense of arrival and fragmented visitor identity:** gateway signage, principal routes and wayfinding do not consistently communicate Pembroke's waterfront, downtown, heritage and recreation assets, while visitors may not always encounter a clear, shared explanation of what distinguishes the community.
2. **Uneven property conditions, vacancies and accessibility**: vacant or underused commercial spaces, inconsistent building and property maintenance, accessibility barriers in some older storefronts, aging recreation facilities and renewal needs in established neighbourhoods can affect perceptions of vitality, inclusion and readiness for investment.
3. **Connectivity, activation and year-round depth:** Pembroke's individual assets are not always connected through coordinated itineraries, current visitor information and cross-promotion, while quiet weekdays, variable business hours, limited indoor options for some age groups and seasonal fluctuations can make the community feel less active and reduce its appeal for longer stays.

QUICK WINS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

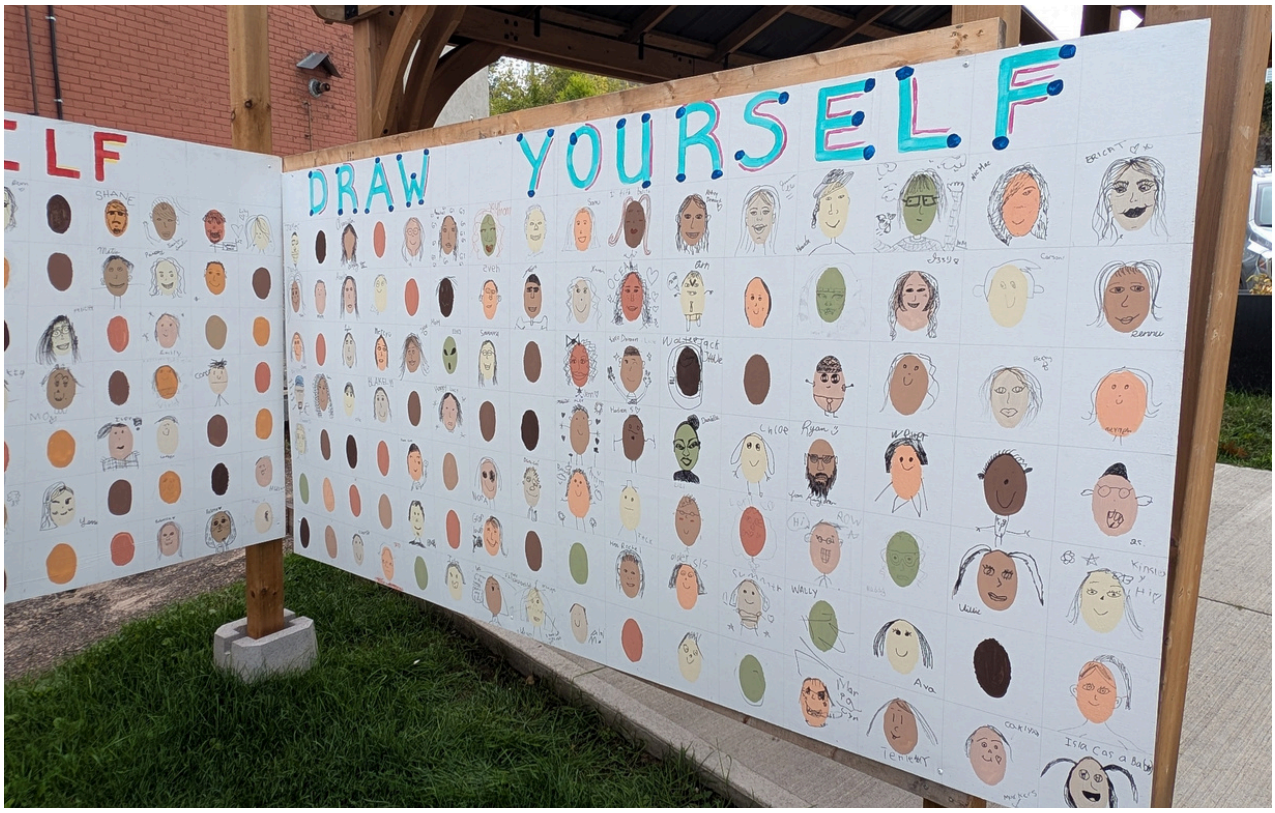
IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

1. Repair and routinely test all mural QR codes.
2. Review and update existing visitor maps—including the Pembroke fold-out map—to clearly connect downtown, the waterfront, restaurants, trails, museums, parking and key attractions; ensure business hours and visitor information are current; and distribute these resources consistently through the Visit Pembroke website, social media, municipal facilities, businesses and other visitor touchpoints.
3. Build on existing visitor resources by developing a concise “Why Pembroke?” toolkit that gives residents, frontline staff and businesses a shared visitor message, a current “Top 10 Things to Do” list, and clear information on attractions, dining, events, museums, trails, family activities, accessibility, newcomer resources and English- and French-language services.
4. Improve gateway signage and wayfinding from Highway 17 and other principal approaches.
5. Strengthen pedestrian wayfinding between downtown and the waterfront.
6. Build on existing promotion of waterfront events and local dining by coordinating messages across platforms and ensuring posts include direct links to current event, business and visitor information.
7. Explore temporary patios, pop-ups, art installations and short-term uses for vacant properties.
8. Formalize a self-guided mural and heritage route.
9. Expand French-language visitor information and promotion.
10. Coordinate voluntary property-improvement, façade, accessibility, landscaping and beautification initiatives along principal visitor routes and in other highly visible areas, building on the contributions of property owners, businesses and community organizations.



LONGER-TERM PRIORITIES

- Develop a unified community and destination identity rooted in waterfront, heritage, outdoor recreation, food and culture.
- Advance downtown revitalization through façade renewal, adaptive reuse, investment attraction and year-round programming.
- Assess the renewal and future positioning of arena and indoor recreation facilities, including opportunities to celebrate Pembroke's hockey heritage, improve accessibility, strengthen program visibility and address year-round activity needs for families, young adults and teens.
- Encourage attainable housing, rental development, infill and rehabilitation of established neighbourhoods.
- Strengthen coordination among the City, Downtown Pembroke, Algonquin College, English- and French-language school boards, CFB Petawawa, employers, entrepreneurship supports, tourism operators, community organizations and local businesses to advance talent attraction, student retention, business succession, visitor promotion and year-round programming.
- Develop and promote half-day, full-day and overnight itineraries that connect Pembroke's waterfront, downtown, dining, accommodations, heritage, murals, trails, recreation and events with complementary Ottawa Valley and Algonquin Park experiences, encouraging visitors to extend their stay and retain more spending in the city.



IDEAS FOR CLARENCE-ROCKLAND

Participants identified several Pembroke initiatives that could inform work in Clarence-Rockland. The waterfront's integrated combination of recreation, events, trails, seating, landscaping, food and visitor amenities was the strongest example. Other transferable ideas included murals and heritage interpretation, creative use of small public spaces, community-led horticulture, strong event promotion and improved walkability between commercial areas and the waterfront.









CONCLUSION

Pembroke’s full range of strengths may not be immediately apparent upon arrival. Its exceptional waterfront, strong recreation network, historic downtown, murals, heritage assets, local dining, educational presence and regional services provide a solid foundation for community and tourism development. Visitors consistently found the waterfront memorable, and many were pleasantly surprised by the quality of downtown businesses and public spaces.

The central opportunity is to make these strengths immediately understandable and easier to experience as a whole. By strengthening gateways, connecting downtown and waterfront experiences, activating vacant properties, renewing key facilities and building a shared community narrative, Pembroke can enhance its appeal as a place to visit, live, study and invest—while retaining the small-town character that visitors appreciated.

