

An aerial photograph of a rural landscape during autumn. The foreground shows a residential area with houses and trees in shades of yellow and orange. A road runs diagonally through the middle ground. In the background, there are large, flat agricultural fields, some of which are harvested and appear brown. The horizon is flat under a clear sky.

# Rural Oxford

Economic Development

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## Economic Development Strategic Plan

2026-2030



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2026-2030

Prepared by:

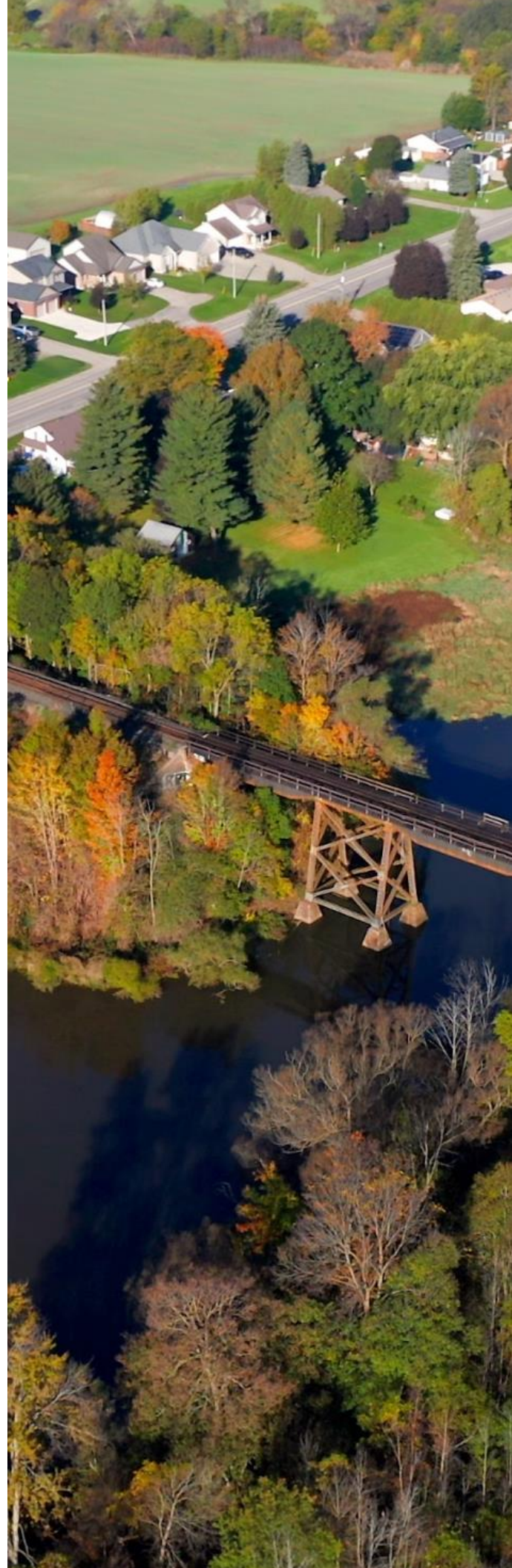


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## Executive Summary

Rural Oxford Economic Development Corporation (Rural Oxford EDC) is a local non-profit organization that focuses on the diverse economic development and investment attraction needs of Oxford County's rural municipalities. Oxford County is a regional municipality in Southwestern Ontario and is amongst the most prosperous rural communities in Ontario with its rich agricultural heritage and extensive agri-business, food processing, transportation, logistics, manufacturing, construction and small business sectors. It is a two-tiered County and home to eight area municipalities including the Townships of Blandford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, Norwich, South-West Oxford, Zorra, Town of Tillsonburg, Town of Ingersoll, and the City of Woodstock.

Rural Oxford EDC supports business growth and development in the Townships of Blandford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, Norwich, South-West Oxford, and Zorra. Rural Oxford EDC is a collaboration funded by these five-member municipalities. The organization is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors (with two representatives from each member municipality) and employs one full-time staff. The Economic Development Director works with two part-time contractors - an Economic Development Officer and a Brand & Marketing Consultant.

Building on the organization's current Strategic Plan's success, this new Strategic Plan takes a fresh look at the current economic climate, priorities, and opportunities for impact in Rural Oxford. This new Strategic Plan, based on research and community engagement, delivers an action-based roadmap that defines and outlines Rural Oxford EDC's 2026-2030 strategic objectives and goals.

The Strategic Plan was built on an economic and situational analysis of the area's economy and a comprehensive public consultation process. This process merged qualitative and quantitative analyses to develop actions that are realistic and doable, supported by the community, and grounded in the realities of Rural Oxford's economic and cultural landscape.



# Process

The Rural Oxford Economic Development team worked with McSweeney & Associates to develop this Strategic Plan. It was prepared through a four-stage process, with each stage building on the work completed previously. The first stage focused on high-level “discovery,” including a review of guiding documents and strategies, as well as an analysis of local labour force data, business activity, and industry strengths. In the second stage, consultation activities were undertaken to develop a deeper understanding of stakeholder perspectives, municipal priorities, and broader community realities. The third stage shifted from understanding to action, beginning with the development of a Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities, Aspirations and Results (SCOAR®) Analysis and a working session to identify practical, achievable actions. This was followed by a Strategic Action Planning Session, which further refined objectives and informed the preparation of a draft Strategy. The final stage concluded with the presentation of the completed Strategic Plan to the organization’s Board.

## 1: DISCOVER

### Current Status Review.

- » Document Review.
- » Employment/Industrial Land Review.
- » Community Analysis.
- » Situational Economic Analysis.
- » Informal Investment Readiness Assessment.

## 2: DEFINE

### Stakeholder Engagement.

- » One-on-one Interviews.
- » Online Survey.
- » Focus Groups.
- » Community Open House.
- » Staff Priority Setting Session.

## 3: DEVELOP

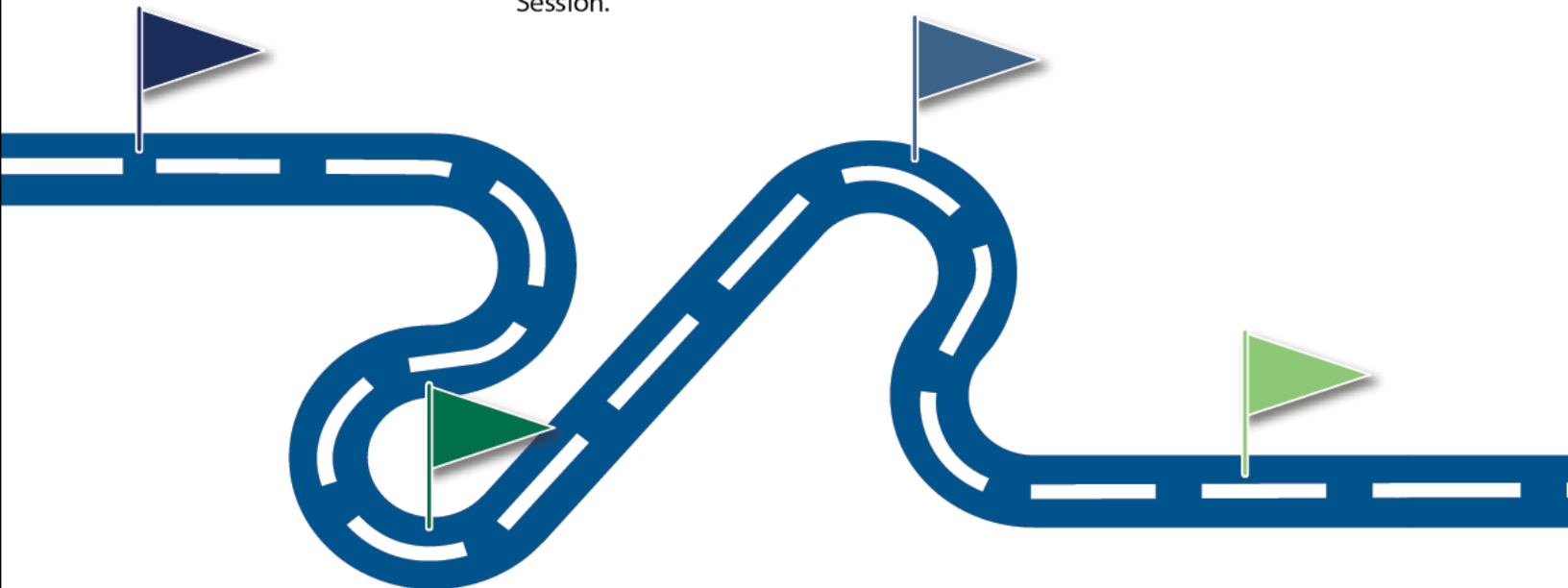
### Strategic Development & Implementation Plan.

- » SCOAR®.
- » Working Session.
- » Strategic Action Planning Session.
- » Draft Strategic Plan.
- » Implementation Plan.

## 4: DELIVER

### Present the Results.

- » Final Strategic Plan.
- » Presentation to Board.



## Discover: Current Status Review

To begin developing the Rural Oxford Economic Development Strategic Plan, a background analysis was conducted to gain an understanding of the history of the region, and of the area’s economic profile. This background analysis included a Document Review and a community and economic analysis.

### Document Review

A literature review was undertaken to examine the local climate and economic realities affecting the organization, member municipalities, Oxford County and the broader Ontario context. This review incorporated municipal and county documents, along with various development strategies, providing valuable context to support the project’s quantitative data analysis and qualitative stakeholder consultations.

### Economic Analysis

The Economic Analysis began with an assessment of the local labour force, noting job counts by sector and occupation. The area’s economic picture was further built out, with economic output, sales, and exports by industry profiled. Additional data analyzed included business counts, labour engagement rates, overall jobs and sales figures by industry, and export/supply chain data per sector.

This data was provided for the organization’s five member municipalities as well as Oxford County, to provide comparative analysis.

The Economic Analysis can be requested from Rural Oxford EDC staff or can be found on the organization’s website.



## Sector Analysis

A sector analysis was conducted, profiling agriculture/agri-business, food processing, transportation & logistics, manufacturing, construction, and small business outlooks within the five member municipalities. This data provides the organization with a wealth of information on its current strengths and overall outlook, and each profile is available on the Rural Oxford EDC website.

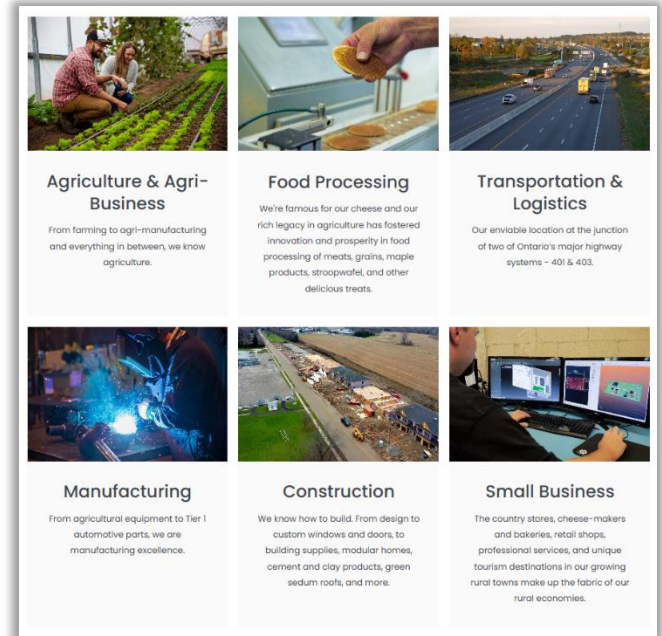
## Informal Investment Readiness Assessment and Employment/Industrial Land Review

An Informal Investment Readiness Assessment was undertaken to identify its current state of investment readiness.

The results were provided to staff as a separate, internal document.

### Highlights:

- Rural Oxford EDC regularly updates an evergreen list of available land and potential development properties as they become known.
- There are limited shovel ready lands with water, wastewater infrastructure in place. Most of the rural areas offer 'dry industrial'. This is what should be promoted.
- There is a community profile in place but there could be more robust profiles for Rural Oxford as a whole area, as well as each of the member municipalities. These comprehensive profiles would provide a fulsome set of information for site selectors as well as local businesses interested in locating and/or growing in Rural Oxford.
- Rural Oxford EDC has a newsletter that reaches 1,500 people/organizations to promote local opportunities. As well, they are a part of Oxford Connection and actively promotes Oxford County as the place to do business through annual trade shows and hosting industrial realtors for local Familiarization (FAM) Tours.



## Strategic Understanding of the Community and Economic Development Corporation

Rural Oxford EDC is the shared economic development service provider for the Townships of Blandford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, Norwich, South-West Oxford, and Zorra. The organization's mandate includes business retention and expansion, attraction, site selection, advocacy, and navigation support through planning and approvals across the five municipalities.

Past and current priorities include workforce development (youth, newcomers, entrepreneurship), targeted business support and networking, supporting the agricultural sector and other key economic opportunities, being a link between businesses and local government. The goals of the organization are vast, though they need to be tempered against the capacity of the organization and the realities of its rural members. That is, business attraction and site selection are valued endeavours and worthwhile goals, but these may be less valuable for the local economies than supporting existing businesses with resources to grow. Rural Oxford EDC has therefore striven to build locally first, then attract externally.

Organizationally, Rural Oxford EDC works to connect rural businesses to county-level planning/engineering (Official Plan, development applications, fees), provincial programs (e.g., Southwestern Ontario Development Fund), and community partners to support local investment opportunities. This connectivity to external governments is critical to manage, as planning and growth management are coordinated with the County through Official Plan policy and multi-year infrastructure planning as well as through each area municipality. Serving as a link between businesses and municipalities, it also seeks to streamline access to planning documents, relevant municipal contacts, and generally support businesses as they engage with government officials.



## Member Municipalities

Regarding its member municipalities, though they share a common “rural” identity within Oxford County, they are all unique. Blandford-Blenheim’s economic direction leverages location and logistics along the 400 series highway corridors. Strategically, Blandford-Blenheim is set up to capture small-to-mid scale logistics, agri-business processing, and construction/retail services. East Zorra-Tavistock has stressed “quality-of-life” growth through its agriculture, food, and small-business sectors. Norwich Township presents an agriculture-focused economy, noting opportunities in construction, value-added agri-food, with niche manufacturing and industrial opportunities, where permitted. South-West Oxford spans vast agricultural lands, with a noted emphasis internally around resident workforce development, business retention training/networking, and an interest in streamlining development processes. Finally, Zorra’s recent strategic plan noted the desire for managed growth through a diversified economic base in agriculture, construction, retail and transportation.



## External Connection: Oxford County

Oxford County's 2023–2026 Strategic Plan notes the desire for the County to have “a healthy, vibrant, sustainable future with emphasis on infrastructure, asset management, sustainable growth, and community well-being.” The County seeks to be collaborative with area municipalities, focusing on expansion support, new business formation, and investment attraction.

Oxford County's broader economic base is diversified - with strong roots in agriculture and agri-food, transportation/logistics, healthcare, construction, and a thriving automotive and advanced manufacturing sector. Oxford County as a whole benefits from its proximity to multiple international borders and major highways such as the 401/403 crossroads.

## External Connection: Southern Ontario

Within southern Ontario and across northeastern north America, the 401 corridor remains a dominant trade node, with hundreds of millions of dollars of goods passing through daily. As well, and aligned with the local economies, provincial/industry outlooks continue to place manufacturing and agri-food among the province’s core growth sectors. For Rural Oxford EDC and its member municipalities, this alignment supports a strategy centered on land-efficient industrial uses and value-add agri-food businesses. This opportunity is of course balanced against the lack of available ‘shovel ready’ land and the need to temper ambition due to rural infrastructure gaps and servicing timelines. Rural communities tend to pace growth slowly-and-responsibly, but the opportunity does exist.

## Define: Stakeholder Engagement

To better understand the community and to gather qualitative insights into the Economic Development Corporation, consultations took place through the summer of 2025. The consultations included representation from community organizations, Staff and Council from each member municipality, Oxford County, businesses, and residents providing input from 160 participants. The information was gleaned from:

- One-on-one interviews
- Online survey
- Focus Groups



Over 160 people/organizations participated in the consultation process.

## Develop: Strategic Development & Implementation Plan

### SCOAR®

Following the completion of background research and initial consultations, the development phase began with a summary of findings presented through a SCOAR® Analysis. This analysis served as the foundation for identifying the key themes that guided the Working Session.



### Working Session

A Working Session was held in mid-August 2025 and was based around 3 themes:

- Enhancing collaboration between the member municipalities and Oxford County.
- Supporting Business Growth in Rural Oxford.
- Strengthening Community Partnerships.

A comprehensive discussion was had by **21 participants** representing community organizations, Council and/or staff from the member municipalities, businesses, and residents. These discussions helped lay the groundwork for the Strategic Plan's community-supported actions.

### Strategic Action Planning Session

Drawing on the findings from both quantitative and qualitative research, a series of actions were developed. These actions were reviewed and refined during a strategic action planning session, which included open discussion with staff and the Board's Executive Team. The session resulted in a finalized set of practical and achievable actions that form the foundation of the Strategic Plan.



## Actions

Rural Oxford Economic Development Corporation (Rural Oxford EDC) is an arm's length organization that represents the five rural member municipalities in Oxford County - the Townships of Blandford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, Norwich, South-West Oxford, Zorra. Rural Oxford EDC is a collaborative organization that promotes business growth and development and elevates economic development efforts across the region. Focusing the efforts of Rural Oxford EDC and increasing awareness for rural development opportunities will grow the organization's capacity and help each member municipality to be ready for investment.

Rural Oxford EDC services currently include:

- ✓ Confidential site selection
- ✓ Assistance with permit and process navigation
- ✓ Liaisons with local, provincial and federal governments
- ✓ Support for expansion and modernization
- ✓ Increased exposure and promotion for your business
- ✓ Referrals to professional service providers
- ✓ Connection to community partners
- ✓ Networking opportunities






## Goals and Actions

### Goal 1: Strengthen the role and responsibilities of Rural Oxford EDC and how it collaborates with area municipalities and Oxford County.

#### Actions to establish roles and responsibilities:

1. Develop an Investment Lead Handling Process that outlines the role of Rural Oxford EDC and the role of the member municipalities and how to deal with investment inquiries so as not to duplicate efforts. Establish Rural Oxford EDC as the first point of contact for business and investment inquiries.
2. Work with each member municipality to map the development approvals process with direct contact with the municipal staff responsible. Rural Oxford EDC should have a clear understanding of County and local policy/planning and can clearly communicate those differences.
3. Establish routine meeting schedules with Oxford County staff and member municipality staff (CAOs, planners, CBO's) to specifically discuss local economic development, planning initiatives, and investment inquiries, etc.
4. Develop briefing notes based on information heard through the above meetings and discussions, to provide to local businesses, stakeholders, and Councils as relevant.
5. Create talking points/briefing notes for regional advocacy highlighting priority "infrastructure gaps" (e.g., shovel ready land, high speed internet, gas) which need to be solved to support local business growth.






## Goal 2: Marketing Rural Oxford while making it more 'ready for investment' for long-term growth.

### Actions for marketing Rural Oxford:

1. Create a new marketing and communications plan - include targeted marketing material, refreshed content for municipal websites, print, digital media, and in-person outreach/events. Continue sharing business success stories.
  - a. Use this marketing plan to secure additional funding through grants, in-kind contributions, and partnership funding.
2. Promote and support what can be done in Rural Oxford - focus on key sectors, on-farm diversified uses, dry industrial, and village cores, etc.
3. Continue to support and participate in Oxford Connection initiatives - collaboratively promote investment attraction in Oxford County.
4. Explore industry associations to promote doing business in Rural Oxford (e.g., The Grove, Agricultural Manufacturers of Canada and Ontario's Food Cluster).
5. Continue to represent Rural Oxford and engage with association partners already advocating for rural Ontario (e.g., ROI, ROMA, SCOR, WOWC, EDCO, EDAC).

### Actions to support investment readiness:

1. Inform member municipalities and the County on the need for additional industrial land to drive new investment to Rural Oxford, and then work with stakeholders to bring land to market.
2. Develop community profiles for Rural Oxford as a whole, as well as for each of the member municipalities to provide site selectors with relevant information that helps them to make decisions on investing.
3. Continue investing in relevant economic development and planning training for staff to enhance knowledge and support for business.



### Goal 3: Support the Local Business Community through Business Retention, Growth, and Succession Planning.

#### Actions to support rural downtowns and commercial areas:

1. Help preserve and protect the charm of small rural downtowns by promoting commercial real estate opportunities and businesses for sale in Rural Oxford.
2. Engage with businesses operating directly in rural downtown and village cores to offer marketing support, resources, and to be a collective voice, when needed.
3. Work with Tourism Oxford and the Small Business Centre to finalize and enact a Rural Downtown Partnership program.

#### Actions to support agriculture:

1. Help raise awareness about the value of the agri-food sector by promoting local agriculture businesses in alignment with the province's Grow Ontario strategy.
2. Support innovation and the adoption of emerging technologies in Rural Oxford's farming sector (e.g., connecting agricultural businesses with funding or research initiatives).

#### Actions to support business retention and growth:

1. Continue to implement an ongoing, formal business visitation program to consistently meet with businesses to understand their challenges and to explore growth and expansion opportunities.
2. Maintain a comprehensive knowledge base of business support resources and programs (e.g., employment, funding, and marketing).
3. Continue to collaborate with and promote local agencies that support rural businesses (e.g., Tourism Oxford, Community Futures Oxford, Small Business Centre, Community Employment Services, etc.).

#### Actions to support succession planning:

1. Work with community partners to set up a program that can be used to support succession planning for businesses and farms that are looking to sell.

## Goal 4: Continue building organizational capacity.

### Actions to support organizational capacity:

1. Continuing the ongoing operational functions and tasks as identified within the previous Strategy:
  - a. Coordinate Rural Oxford EDC board meetings and related administrative functions.
  - b. Support audit and finance committee meetings and reporting.
  - c. Provide economic development activity updates at every board meeting for the board and rural Councils.
2. Explore opportunities for external funding to support Rural Oxford activities, including the potential for additional resources to support new staff.
3. Invest in relevant governance and economic development training for board members to enhance knowledge and support for staff.
4. Investigate the potential to contract a professional planning consultant to provide land use planning support and expertise to Rural Oxford EDC.

### Future Forward Strategic Ideas for Rural Oxford

Oxford County is home to a strong network of livestock, plant/seed/fertilizer, equipment and construction businesses, and it has an agricultural base that supports a host of thriving businesses. Oxford County continues to be recognized as a leader in agricultural business practices that are focused on sustainable farming, producing less waste and emissions. Rural Oxford EDC continues to support the local agricultural network by advancing opportunities that attract innovative agricultural practices to the community that help local businesses grow, while minimizing the loss of prime agricultural land.

Other ambitious ideas the EDC could explore to enhance its support for local agri-businesses are projects like developing a local “food business hub”, advocating to host a second Ontario food terminal in Oxford County, or becoming a leader in next-generation agricultural innovation, focusing on the circular economy through adaptive reuse of existing rural commercial/industrial sites for new and expanding businesses (ex. rehabilitation of gravel pits).

These ideas are not presented as direct actions to be undertaken by Rural Oxford EDC but instead serve as forward-looking opportunities for the EDC to be aware of and keep in mind in the future.



# Rural Oxford SCOAR®

## Strengths

- **Centrally located in southwestern Ontario** with excellent access to major highways (401, 403), rail, key markets (e.g., Greater Toronto Area, London, Kitchener Waterloo) and U.S. border crossings.
- **Engaged Rural Oxford EDC Board of Directors** with representation across all member municipalities and is well-connected and well respected in the community.
- **Agricultural diversity and agricultural adjacent sector** (e.g., ag-related manufacturing) is an economic and cultural strength.
- **Sense of community** with a small-town feel, friendly residents that are considered hard-working.
- **Two-tiered government** allows member municipalities to offer shared services that other similar-sized municipalities across Ontario may not have access to (e.g., Planning).
- **Access to a large available workforce and post-secondary institutions** due to their easy proximity to large urban centres and a growing population that brings diversified skills to the area.
- **Local councils invested in business success** and support for local businesses, by residents and business-to-business relationships are strong.
- **Offers a variety of places (small towns and villages) for businesses to locate.**

## Challenges

- **Investment readiness differences between the rural and urban areas:** The urban areas (Woodstock, Ingersoll, Tillsonburg) have more 'shovel ready' land for new investment whereas the rural areas have very limited amounts of serviced/zoned industrial lands.
- **Economic capacity and development needs differ by member municipality** and can be difficult to balance.
- **Two-tiered government.** Member municipalities are regulated by Oxford County policies with respect to infrastructure (water and wastewater) that is required to develop the rural areas.
- **Limited infrastructure capacity** in member municipalities (e.g., hydro, infrastructure, water/wastewater, gas, internet) compared to larger urban communities.
- **Balancing agricultural land use needs** (and preserving agricultural land) with anticipated population growth.
- **Limited amount of public or privately owned shovel ready land for ICI growth** throughout most of the five member municipalities.

- **Understanding the complexities of the development process and costs**, is perceived that it is lengthy/burdensome administrative creating 'red tape' to slow the process down.
- **The Rural Oxford EDC brand can struggle to get the same visibility** to potential investors as Woodstock/Ingersoll/Tillsonburg.
- **Lack of clarity for businesses on who to engage with** (e.g., County or individual municipalities or Rural Oxford EDC).
- **Lack of public transportation options** or any transportation options outside of private vehicle.
- **There is no clear, documented process on how to deal with investment enquiries** between stakeholders (e.g., municipalities connecting businesses to Rural Oxford EDC).

## Opportunities

- **Work more closely with Oxford County** to find solutions to support development in member municipalities.
- **Continue to work better together with the member municipalities** on big picture issues aimed at being ready for investment with a clear understanding of the roles of the Rural Oxford EDC and the member municipalities to reduce duplication.
- **Increased consistent communications from municipalities to businesses** using social media and municipal websites to expand outreach and connectivity.
- **Continue to use Rural Oxford EDC as the connector** between businesses and member municipalities to help retain and grow businesses.
- **Continue to support the growth of agriculture and ag-related businesses** (rural-based tourism, food processing).
- Support the implementation of CIPs to beautify villages in member municipalities.
- **Rural Oxford EDC to be the organization to advocate for the member municipalities** to support the economic development concerns of the five municipalities.
- **Demonstrate how the member municipalities and Rural Oxford EDC can collaborate together for success.**
- **Support value-added agricultural businesses** to diversify the local economy.
- Work with municipal members to look at ways to streamline and modernize the planning and permitting process.
- Continue to feature rural businesses through local programs and digital media promotions.

## Aspirations

The Rural Oxford EDC aspires to:

- support rural diversification and growth in agriculture, agri-business, dry/light industrial, and commercial developments.
- have balanced growth in member municipalities that protects agricultural land while allowing for local business expansion and business attraction, making sure it works for the community and that what makes the community strong is protected.
- be proactive and connect businesses with business resources available to them.
- have an agricultural sector in member municipalities that is valued and respected for its contribution to the local economy.
- have greater connection with the five member municipalities and a stronger economic development focused voice with Oxford County on behalf of member municipalities - working as a cohesive collaboration.
- be a recognizable brand that reflects a positive impression of the area and what it has to offer to agri-business, dry/light industrial, and commercial investors.
- have vibrant villages and towns in member municipalities with businesses to support the growing population.

## Results

The Rural Oxford EDC will:

- **have a strong and united working relationship** with member municipalities, individually and collectively, and will have a common vision for bringing investment to member municipalities.
- **be a valued organization that is known as THE point of contact** for anyone interested in business growth/expansion.
- **promote the availability of serviced, shovel-ready land** for development.
- **improved infrastructure connectivity** (roads, internet, water/wastewater) that meet the needs of all member municipalities.
- **have developed a more sustainable, diversified economy** that can weather economic downturns.



# Rural Oxford

Economic / Development

Confidential Site Selection • Expansion Support  
Advocacy • Resources • Connections

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An aerial photograph of a town, likely Oxford, Ontario, Canada. The image shows a mix of residential neighborhoods with houses and lawns, and industrial areas with large buildings, silos, and grain elevators. The town is surrounded by green trees and fields. The sky is clear and blue.

**Rural Oxford**  
Economic Development  
[ruraloxford.ca](http://ruraloxford.ca)