

## Strathroy District

The former township of Caradoc and the town of Strathroy, both on the Sydenham River within Middlesex County, west of London, merged in the late 1990s to become the municipality of Strathroy–Caradoc (total population, 19,977 residents in 7,675 households). The area is primarily rural; its two largest settlements (circa 1832) are the towns of Strathroy and Mount Brydges. The principality produces turkey and chicken eggs and hatchlings, maize (corn), tobacco and wheat.

The populace is largely Caucasian and Anglo-Canadian, with large minorities of Portuguese and Dutch settlers who immigrated after World War II. The mother tongue of 85% of the population is English; only 0.6% of residents speak French; and 1.1% speak neither official language at all. Aboriginal peoples compose 1.4% of the population; visible minorities, 1.3%.

The District's median household income is \$59,108. The median income for individuals in the workforce (15,295 people at least 15 years of age) is \$26,854. The rate of unemployment is 5.4%.

### **The Cultural Master Plan of the Strathroy District Arts Council**

This Plan focuses, not on Arts and Culture as an end result, but rather on the relationship that arts and culture has with the community in terms of civic pride, economic development, tourism and the social well-being of the Township of Strathroy–Caradoc.

Although the Strathroy District Arts Council has been active in one form or another since 1998, it was formally incorporated as a registered, not-for-profit charitable organization in the year 2000. It soon became apparent that an overall cultural plan was required to guide the Council to continued success, and to build on the achievements of Strathroy's relatively brief history.

This Master Plan was developed in cooperation with the funding partners for the process: Ontario's Ministry of Culture, the Township of Strathroy–Caradoc, and the Strathroy Downtown Business Improvement Area, under the leadership of the District Arts Council. There was also participation from the Strathroy and District Chamber of Commerce, the Strathroy Lions Club, Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Middlesex Community Futures Development Corp., and many committed and enthusiastic area residents. The community was kept updated via a series of newspaper articles, a Cultural Master Plan page on the Strathroy District Arts Council website, and an information booth at the Council's 2004 Day for the Arts.

The Plan's vision statement is as follows:

The Cultural Master Plan is a fact-finding and consensus-building process through which Strathroy–Caradoc seeks to recognize and develop its arts, culture and heritage resources. By strengthening our cultural sector, we expect to build community identity and pride, improve quality of life, stimulate economic development, revitalize downtown business areas, and enhance sustainability for our municipalities' arts and culture sectors.

The goals of the planning process, aside from conducting a community-wide needs assessment and writing the Cultural Master Plan itself, was to identify and develop strong cultural, arts and heritage products with potential to attract visitors. Because the Needs Assessment found that \$0.85 of every entertainment dollar residents spend is spent outside of the District, the Arts Council also wants to encourage District residents to become "tourists in their own town" .

In this mostly rural area, research turned up much material that was not widely known and had never been promoted. Strathroy–Caradoc's tourism assets are virtually untapped. Long-

time local residents are still being asked to come forward with otherwise unknown cultural connections and tales of unusual past events. Actionable means to encourage this include suggestions to conduct interviews for amusing recollections (“Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide is an excellent resource for this”) and running an essay or short-story contest based on personal reflection (winners to be published in the local newspaper). Tales collected thus far have included, for example: 1) An 1881 swarm of bees, which descended on a Strathroy liquor store. The bees helped themselves to a liberal dose of alcohol then fell to the floor, apparently drunk. The proprietors swept them out the back door with brooms. 2) One of the town’s recurrent problems in the late 1800s was an unwelcome variety of visitor: escaped prisoners. Strathroy was the first stop for trains from London. Convicts apparently took advantage of “green” officers not yet alert to escape ploys.

The Cultural Master Plan has seven chapters, titled as follows.

- Introduction: A general overview of the role of the arts in and value to the community, along with introductions to related concepts.
- Our Cultural Landscape: Cultural planning concepts – defining the area’s market, diversity and activities; learning about and celebrating its past (see above); and marketing approaches for the community. (Current promotion was found to lack focus or apply equally to other communities near larger urban centres, e.g. descriptions such as “Small town living at its best” and “The best of both worlds”.
- Tourists in Our Own Town: Ideas and concepts (from inside and outside the community) relating to creating and improving on opportunities for tourism.
- How to Grow a Great Downtown: Ideas involving arts, culture and heritage to create a sense of place to attract people into downtown area. (Downtown revitalization is a major part of the Cultural Master Plan.)
- Creating a Buzz: Identifying strategic roles with respect to arts, culture and heritage that create a momentum of community awareness and participation.
- The Centre for the Arts: The dream of a Centre for the Arts was the founding issue of the Arts Council; this chapter outlines possible paths for its creation.
- Next Steps: A review of the many Action items in the Cultural Master Plan, identifying potential stakeholders, general costs, community readiness, and human resource needs.

A Needs Assessment Survey was carried out by Insights, Inc., a London market-research firm, as part of the Cultural Master Plan. This document became a snapshot of local people’s knowledge and participation in the Arts, their attitudes towards the Arts, and their shopping and spending habits. One of the Needs Assessment’s findings was that residents of Strathroy-Caradoc are quite active in attending arts, cultural and heritage events and attractions – but the majority of their attendance occurs outside of the municipality. There was a willingness to attend local events, and therefore a strong perceived need to learn/communicate more about what is happening locally, in addition to a desire for increased and enhanced local offerings.

A 2003 needs assessment, moreover, found that youth in the region do not currently have a place to express themselves constructively and engage in a variety of appropriate artistic and cultural activities. While writing the Cultural Master Plan, the Strathroy District Arts Council was extremely pleased with the level of participation from the community, and appreciates those organizations and people who supported decisions to continue meeting to ensure that its ideas and action items are carried out. The Council is proud of the legacy this project will create in the community.