



**The Corporation of the
City of Sault Ste. Marie**

C O U N C I L R E P O R T

February 23, 2026

TO: Mayor Matthew Shoemaker and Members of City Council
AUTHOR: Travis Anderson, Director Tourism and Community
Development
DEPARTMENT: Community Development and Enterprise Services
RE: Tourism Development Fund Applications – February 2026

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide recommendations to Council from City staff and the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors for the distribution of Tourism Development Funds.

Background

The Tourism Development Fund (TDF) was implemented on June 1, 2021 to provide financial support to the broader tourism sector in two different streams: Festivals and Special Events, and Attractions and Product Development. The funds for both streams of the TDF are generated from revenue collected by the Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT).

Consideration is given to support initiatives that produce positive results in at least one of the following criteria:

- Development of quality tourism products and events;
- Increase in overnight stays and visitor spending in Sault Ste. Marie;
- Enhancement of the Sault's tourism product offerings;
- Support of the city's reputation and position as a first-rate visitor destination;
- Fulfill a gap in the tourism visitor experience landscape; and
- Encourage private sector tourism investment in SSM.

Upon receipt of a TDF application, Tourism staff review it for eligibility and assessment criteria and makes recommendations to the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors. The Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors further evaluates the applications and makes recommendations to Council for distribution of grant funds.

Analysis

Tourism Development Fund applications are permitted on an ongoing intake and are reviewed monthly at the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors meetings. The recipient expends the funds and claims them through the Tourism Development Fund after the event or project is completed.

At the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors meeting held on January 20, 2026, four applications were reviewed with the following recommendations:

1. Ice Fest (\$2,000);
2. Sault Female Hockey Association (\$10,000);
3. Sault Major Hockey Association (\$15,000); and
4. Killarney Air Services Ltd. (\$50,000).

Ice Fest 2026

Ice Fest Sault Ste. Marie is a new three-day winter festival taking place February 27–March 1, 2026, celebrating the region’s exceptional ice climbing assets at Gros Cap and Searchmont. Led by a committed local organizing group with strong support from the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) Sault Ste. Marie Chapter, and collaboration with ACC Toronto and ACC Thunder Bay, the festival is designed to attract ice climbers, outdoor enthusiasts, and winter travelers from across Canada and the United States.

The event includes independent climbing, guided ice climbing clinics, free “Try Ice Climbing” beginner sessions, and evening social events featuring speakers, entertainment, and local food and beverages. ACC volunteers will staff climbing sites, distribute an Ice Fest Guidebook, and provide route information and safety support. In addition to the festival weekend, beginner clinics will run from January through April to build skills and grow the local ice climbing community.

Ice Fest fills a gap in the winter event calendar and aligns strongly with Tourism Sault Ste. Marie’s strategic priority to grow outdoor winter adventure tourism.

Previous Tourism Development Fund Support

Not Applicable

Visitor Projections and Economic Impact

- 72 local
- 45 Ontario
- 30 USA

Economic Impact

75 out of town visitors x 3 days x \$175 per day = \$33,750

Recommendation

In support of Ice Fest 2026, the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors passed the following resolution “Be it resolved that the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors recommend a contribution of \$2,000 through the Tourism Development Fund, Conferences and Special Events Stream to support Ice Fest SSM 2026 to be hosted February 27-March 1, 2026 and that a report be submitted to City Council for consideration and approval.”

Sault Female Hockey Association

The Sault Female Hockey Association (SFHA) has applied for association-level support to deliver two hockey tournaments during the 2026 winter season at the Northern Community Centre (NCC). The North of Hwy 17 Tournament, taking

place February 20–22, showcases SFHA’s House League Program, and the Deb Sims Memorial Tournament runs February 27–March 1.

Each three-day tournament will host five divisions of four to six teams, with games played across both ice pads at the NCC to create a high-energy, festival-style environment. In addition to competitive gameplay, both events include a skills competition, individual achievement awards, and a catered team lunch on Saturday to encourage connection and celebration.

Together, these tournaments are expected to attract hundreds of visiting athletes, families, and spectators, generating overnight stays and economic benefits for local hotels, restaurants, and small businesses. The events align with SFHA’s mission to foster female athletic development, leadership, and inclusive, high-quality hockey opportunities.

Previous Tourism Development Fund Support

Not applicable

Visitor Projections (both tournaments combined)

Local – 711

Ontario visitors – 900

USA visitors – 175

Economic Impact

1,075 Out of town visitors x 3 days x \$175 per person per day = \$564,375

In support of the Sault Female Hockey Association’s 2026 tournament hosting initiatives, the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors passed the following resolution “Be it resolved that the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors recommend a contribution of \$10,000 through the Tourism Development Fund-Conferences and Special Events Stream to support Sault Female Hockey Association’s North of Hwy 17 Tournament (Feb 20–22, 2026) and Deb Sims Memorial (Feb 27–Mar 1 2026), and that a report be submitted to City Council for consideration and approval.”

Sault Major Hockey Association

During the 2025–2026 season, the Sault Major Hockey Association will host four major hockey tournaments in Sault Ste. Marie, including one league-designated Showcase Tournament and three Northern Ontario Hockey Association (NOHA) Tournament of Champions events. The Showcase Tournament is part of a rotating host model among northern communities, while the Tournament of Champions events are awarded through a competitive bid process and are not guaranteed annually. Sault Ste. Marie was selected as the host city following a successful bid by Sault Major Hockey Association.

The tournaments will take place between November 2025 and April 2026 and will involve more than 45 teams, the majority of whom will travel from outside the community. Events include the U16 and U18 Showcase (November 14–16, 2025) and Tournaments of Champions for U10AA (April 10–12, 2026), U15 AA (March 20–22, 2026), and U13 AAA & U15 AAA (March 27–29, 2026).

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Previous Tourism Development Fund Support

2024 – U18AAA Central Regional Championships, \$12,000

Visitor Projections (tournaments combined)

- 1,030 local participants and spectators
- 3,700 Ontario visitors

Economic Impact (tournaments combined)

3,700 out of town visitors x 3 days x \$175 per person per day = \$1,942,500

Recommendation

In support of Sault Major Hockey Association's 2025-2026 tournament season hosting initiatives, the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors passed the following resolution "Be it resolved that the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors recommend a contribution of \$15,000 through the Tourism Development Fund, Conferences and Special Events Stream to support the U16 and U18 Showcase and U10AA, U15AA, U13AAA and U15AAA Tournament of Champions to be hosted in Nov 14-16, 2025 (Showcase), Mar 20-22, 2026 (U15 AA TOC), Mar 27-29, 2026 (U13 AAA and U15 AAA TOC), and April 10-12, 2026 (U10AA), and that a report be submitted to City Council for consideration and approval."

Killarney Air Services Product Development Application

Killarney Air Services Ltd. is an established Ontario-based aviation company owned and operated by Eric Tremblay and Dave Flaherty. The company offers aerial sightseeing tours of Sault Ste. Marie and the Algoma Region using a vintage de Havilland Beaver floatplane, providing visitors with a unique, heritage-based aviation experience. Flight tour operations launched in 2025 and experienced strong demand and an extremely positive market response. As a result of this early success, Killarney Air Services Ltd. is planning to expand its operations for the 2026 season to accommodate increased visitor interest and demand.

The project includes a series of enhancements designed to improve the overall guest experience, increase passenger safety, and strengthen operational reliability. Killarney Air Services is planning to expand and upgrade its docking facilities at the Canadian Bushplane Heritage Centre, acquire and brand a mobile vendor and office trailer to provide a professional workspace for staff and weather-protected waiting space for guests, aircraft modifications to accommodate additional passengers/viewing windows, and passenger safety improvements (steps). The project also includes the purchase of a backup fuel system to reduce the risk of service interruptions, along with financial support to strengthen marketing efforts and promote the expanded operation.

Budget

Seawall Upgrades: \$7,500

Vendor Trailer: \$15,500

Backup Fuel System: \$10,500

Marketing and Advertising: \$21,000

Aircraft Modifications: \$20,000

Total Project Cost: \$74,500

Additionally, Killarney Air Services is acquiring an additional aircraft, which will double the capacity for flight tours. Estimated cost ~\$500,000.

In support of Killarney Air Services' introduction of a new tourism product that enhances the visitor experience, encourages extended stays, and celebrates Sault Ste. Marie's rich bushplane heritage, the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors passed the following resolution: "Be it resolved that the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors recommend a contribution of \$50,000 through the Tourism Development Fund- Product Development and Attractions Stream to support Killarney Air Services Inc. and that a report be submitted to City Council for consideration and approval."

Financial Implications

No new funds would be required. The Tourism Development Fund currently has \$551,970.60 uncommitted for the purposes of financial assistance within the tourism sector.

Strategic Plan / Policy Impact / Climate Impact

This item supports the Corporate Strategic Plans Focus Area:

- Community Development and Partnership focus of Maximizing Economic Development and Investment with the commitment to maintain financial viability.
- Community Development - Develop partnerships with key stakeholders and reconciliation.

There are no climate change-related impacts associated with this report.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that Council take the following action:

Resolved that the report of the Director of Tourism and Community Development dated February 23, 2026 concerning Tourism Development Fund Applications – February 2026 be received and that the recommendation of the Tourism Sault Ste. Marie Board of Directors to allocate \$77,000 as detailed below, be approved.

1. Ice Fest (\$2,000);
2. Sault Female Hockey Association (\$10,000);
3. Sault Major Hockey Association (\$15,000); and
4. Killarney Air Services Ltd. (\$50,000).

Respectfully submitted,

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