

# RTO4 Partnership Program

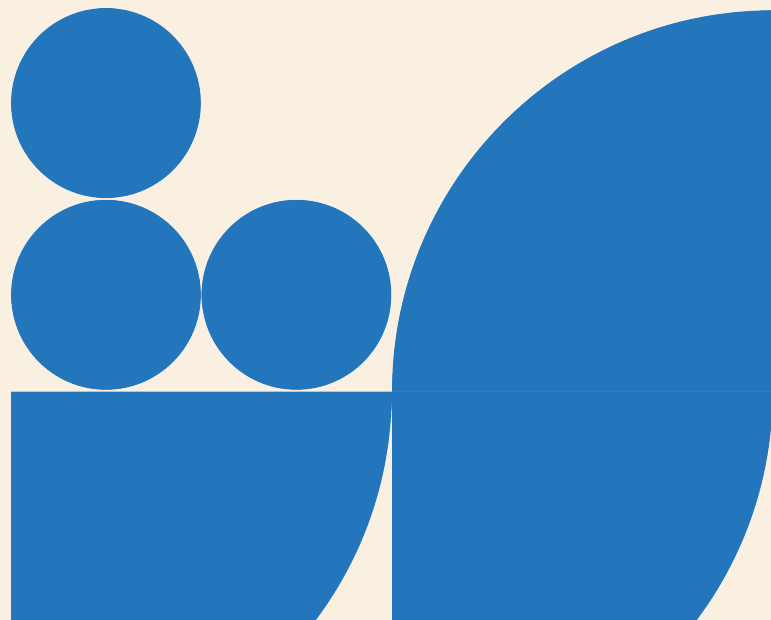
Application Guide  
Spring 2026



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This Partnership Program is designed for tourism operators, such as attractions, museums, festivals and events, and for tourism supporters, such as Organizations (DMOs), Municipalities, BIAs, and Chambers of Commerce.

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## Introduction

RTO4's Partnership Program is a co-investment initiative designed to foster tourism across our region, which includes Huron, Perth and Wellington Counties as well as Waterloo Region.

The program offers funding streams tailored to support businesses and organizations that are part of the tourism ecosystem such as attractions, accommodations, festivals and events, DMOs, Municipalities, BIAs and Chambers of Commerce.

**To be eligible for funding, applicants must demonstrate their business or project attracts visitors from at least 40 km away and their proposed initiative will contribute to drawing more visitors or enhancing their experiences in a meaningful way.**

We are looking for sound and innovative ideas supported by a strong case for investment and a clear demonstration of need. Equally important is the confirmation that no conflicts of interest are present.

While the specific goals and formats of partnership projects may vary, RTO4 supports destination development projects that reflect the diversity of our region and contribute to long-term community benefit.

## All successful applications will demonstrate alignment with the following principles:

- **Community Relevance and Reach:** Projects should reflect the spirit of the place and invite a wide range of visitors to engage meaningfully with the destination.
- **Responsible Use of Resources:** Partnerships should use resources wisely, drawing on local suppliers, providers, workers, and settings to create authentic and sustainable experiences.
- **Enduring Impact:** Partnerships that leave a lasting footprint—through learning, capacity building, or repeatable models—are encouraged.

# Route/Trail Development

Please contact [karen@rto4.ca](mailto:karen@rto4.ca) to discuss your application prior to submission.

**Minimum Request:** \$2,500

**Maximum Request:** \$10,000

**Applicant Contribution:** at least 50% of final costs

**Timeline:** Project should be completed by December 31, 2026

## Overview

RT04 is making funds available for the support and execution of new route or trail developments.

Tourism route development involves creating themed trails or multi-stop itineraries to enhance visitor experiences, boost regional visitation, and stimulate economic growth. It's about connecting attractions and businesses to offer unique, visitor-focused journeys that align with broader destination goals.

Examples of tourism routes:

- **Wine routes** - Offering tours and tastings at vineyards and wineries.
- **Cultural routes** - Highlighting historical sites, museums, and cultural events.
- **Culinary trails** - Showcasing local restaurants, farmers' markets, and food producers.
- **Scenic drives** - Providing itineraries that highlight natural landscapes and points of interest.

Key aspects of tourism route development:

- Building strong partnerships between tourism operators.
- Creating experiences that are engaging and relevant to the target audience.
- Highlighting the unique aspects of the region and its communities.
- Developing routes around specific themes (e.g., culinary, cultural, historical) to attract niche markets.

### Types of support available:

- Research
- Marketing (photo, video, influencer)
- Graphic design

### Application Questions

1. What is your concept for a trail theme?
2. How will you share your trail (online or print)?
3. What is your target demographic? Do you have data to support this demographic's interest in your route?
4. What stage of the project are you in?
5. What support are you looking for?
6. Who would be involved in the trail?
7. What is the proposed timeline including estimated start and completion date?
8. How will you measure the success or impact of the program? Can you name the KPIs you will use?
9. Provide a detailed budget, including partner contributions and requested funding using the [template provided](#).

## Applications are due:

April 22, 2026

## Apply Here:

<https://forms.gle/6E3h2YU4jJ7QmgHEA>

# Destination Level Signage

Please contact [karen@rto4.ca](mailto:karen@rto4.ca) to discuss your application prior to submission.

**Minimum Request:** \$5,000

**Maximum Request:** \$35,000

**Applicant Contribution:** at least 50% of the final costs

**Consultation Period:** Installation must be completed by December 31, 2026

## Overview

RT04 is making funds available for the execution of signage and wayfinding strategies within the region.

These funds are targeting the fabrication/installation of permanent signage and wayfinding infrastructure (traditional or creative) from an existing signage plan or specifications manual. Multiple partners can contribute to and support the project.

Signage does not have to be in a traditional format. It can be more interpretive in nature, but it must still clearly delineate a path that would guide individuals from one location to another. Interpretive signs often include maps, photos, and illustrations to provide information on local culture, history, and nature.

## Eligibility Requirements

1. **Status:** This stream is open only to municipalities, DMOs, community groups (BIAs, Chambers of Commerce, trail and conservation organizations).
2. **Readiness:** Applicants must have an existing Wayfinding Signage Standards & Specifications Manual to guide the project.
3. **Completeness:** A sample of the manual, specifications, or design must be submitted with the application, along with a detailed description or map showing proposed sign locations.
4. **Timeliness:** All signage must be fabricated and installed by December 31st, 2026.

All selected participants must submit a final report after the installation and launch of their projects, along with copies of receipts for the investment amount.

## Application Questions

- **Existing Wayfinding Signage Plan:** Confirm a Wayfinding Signage Plan is in place. Attach the document or provide a link to the signage design/specifications guide/manual.
- **Signage Details:** Specify the type and quantity of signage to be installed (e.g., gateway, amenities, directional).
- **Installation Locations:** Describe the location(s) where signs will be installed or include a map via attachment or link.
- **Previous Installations:** State whether any wayfinding signs have been previously installed based on the provided signage manual.
- **Multi-Year Plan:** Indicate if there is a multi-year plan for installing additional wayfinding signs.
- **Approvals and Permits:** Confirm that the project has received necessary approvals and permits from relevant authorities.
- **Project Timeline:** Outline key activities, critical deadlines (milestones), and the individuals or teams responsible for each activity.
- **Supporting Materials:** Submit any supporting documentation, such as quotes from third-party suppliers. Quotes are not required at this stage, but they would be helpful.
- **Total Project Budget:** Provide the overall project budget using the [template provided](#), including the amount your organization will contribute and the funding requested from RTO4.

## Applications are due:

April 22, 2026

## Apply Here:

<https://forms.gle/mLzcixnU2kiE5sfW9>

# AccessOutdoors Program

Please contact [karen@rto4.ca](mailto:karen@rto4.ca) to discuss your application prior to submission.

**Value:** \$5000

**Contribution from Application:** \$2500 (50% of the total cost)

**Application Deadline:** April 22, 2026

**Consultation Period:** April 2026–November 2026. Majority of projects would occur between Spring–Fall with the exception of snow or winter-related locations.

## Overview

Through this stream, you gain access to AccessNow's [AccessOutdoors Program](#), a comprehensive initiative designed to support parks and trail organizations in creating more inclusive outdoor spaces. The program provides tools and guidance to help map and assess accessibility features, engage local communities and collaborators, and share critical information with the public. By doing so, it empowers organizations to better serve visitors with diverse needs. While the AccessNow app is crowdsourced, the AccessOutdoors Program is verified and mapped directly by AccessNow staff. This process ensures that the information is accurate and safety-focused, giving users confidence and peace of mind when planning their visits to outdoor spaces.

[Accessnow](#) is an accessibility organization based in Toronto, ON, dedicated to increasing accessibility awareness and information worldwide. Through its community-driven platform, AccessNow helps people discover accessible locations by highlighting places with specific accessibility features, while enabling users to rate and review public spaces based on real experiences.

Accessible, accurate information plays a vital role in reducing uncertainty and anxiety for individuals with disabilities or specific access needs. It helps minimize the risk of encountering unexpected barriers, allowing for safer, more confident, and inclusive outdoor adventures for everyone.

## The Process:

1. AccessNow will meet with you to gather information about the size and complexity of your property.
2. Using the AccessOutdoors collector tool, they will conduct a comprehensive mapping assessment on site.
3. The results will be reviewed to better uncover all aspects of accessibility.
4. The verified results will be published on the AccessNow platform to begin engaging visitors to discover your area through the AccessNow app as well as shareable for promotion online through a website or listing.

## Applications are due:

April 22, 2026

## Apply Here:

<https://forms.gle/nfeTQFiSaTvkJGmd9>

## Eligibility:

This stream is open to

- Tourism operators and organizations
- Municipalities and regional partners
- Not-for-profits working in tourism, culture, trails, or conservation

## Expression of Interest

### Submission:

1. Contact information
2. Name of trail or area
3. Address
4. Confirmation of partnership support.

Follow the link to familiarize yourself with an example of an AccessNow Otudoors listing:

Example of a AccessOutdoors listing for a Trail: [The Saigon Trail in Richmond Hill](#)

Example of an AccessOutdoors listing for a Trail that includes a park: [Trans Richmond Trail](#)

# Indigenous Signage (and Related Research)

Please contact [karen@rto4.ca](mailto:karen@rto4.ca) to discuss your application prior to submission.

**Minimum Request:** \$500

**Maximum Request:** \$15,000

**Applicant Contribution:** at least 50% of final costs

**Timeline:** Project must be completed by December 31, 2026

## Overview

This stream supports projects that promote deeper awareness and recognition of Indigenous presence, language, and history in the region through signage and related initiatives. While physical signs are one potential outcome, this stream also encourages preparatory work—such as research, consultation, and relationship-building—that contributes to respectful and accurate representation of Indigenous places and stories in tourism contexts.

The goal is to foster visibility of Indigenous worldviews and contributions across the landscape, whether on trails, in parks, at attractions, or online.

### Sample Projects:

- Installation of bilingual signage using Indigenous and colonial place names
- Research into the original names and uses of rivers, hills, settlements, or landmarks
- Collaborative workshops with local First Nations or Métis communities on cultural interpretation
- Creation of interpretive signage that includes Indigenous agricultural practices or seasonal knowledge
- Development of digital maps or audio stories based on Indigenous knowledge of the region
- Restoration of Indigenous names and languages on existing visitor-facing materials

## Eligibility:

### Eligible Applicants

- Tourism operators, cultural institutions, festival and heritage organizations
- Municipalities and regional partners
- Not-for-profits working in tourism, culture, trails, or conservation

### Additional Eligibility Criteria

- Applicants must demonstrate a commitment to respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge and communities

## Application Questions:

1. Description of the project. What aspect of Indigenous language, place-naming, or storytelling does your project aim to share?
2. Have you consulted or do you plan to consult with Indigenous communities or knowledge keepers? If so, how?
3. What format(s) will your project take—signage, interpretation, mapping, digital content, or other?
4. How will this project support greater public awareness or connection to Indigenous perspectives in the region?
5. How will your project ensure cultural safety, accuracy, and ongoing respect for Indigenous contributions?
6. Evaluation: How will you measure the success or impact of the program?
7. Proposed timeline including estimated start and completion date?
8. Provide a detailed budget, including partner contributions and requested funding using the [template provided](#).

## Applications are due:

April 22, 2026

## Apply Here:

<https://forms.gle/U1GtiLrDN7bLqhXs5>

# Indigenous Programming

Please contact [karen@rto4.ca](mailto:karen@rto4.ca) to discuss your application prior to submission.

**Minimum Request:** \$500

**Maximum Request:** \$5,000

**Applicant Contribution:** at least 50% of final costs

**Timeline:** Project must be completed by December 31, 2026

## Overview

The Indigenous Programming stream supports the creation, development, or enhancement of tourism experiences led by, co-created with, or meaningfully engaging Indigenous communities, artists, knowledge holders, and entrepreneurs.

This stream is designed to contribute to cultural diversity and the visitor experience in the RTO4 region by fostering authentic representation and sustainable tourism opportunities that celebrate Indigenous languages, histories, and worldviews.

Projects should contribute to

- Cultural Inclusion – Creating space for Indigenous perspectives, narratives, and voices.
- Visitor Education – Offering respectful, accurate, and engaging opportunities for visitors to connect with Indigenous knowledge and heritage.

## Sample Projects

- Guided cultural experiences, workshops, or seasonal activities grounded in Indigenous knowledge
- Co-created festivals, performances, or exhibits featuring Indigenous artists, storytellers, or knowledge keepers
- Interpretive programming connected to land-based learning, traditional ecological knowledge, or Indigenous foodways
- Digital storytelling or media campaigns showcasing Indigenous-led tourism experiences
- Collaborative programs between Indigenous operators and non-Indigenous tourism businesses
- Development of new Indigenous tourism experiences or events

## Eligibility

Open to tourism operators, cultural institutions, festival/event organizations, Indigenous businesses, co-operatives, and not-for-profits working in tourism, culture, trails, or conservation.

Projects should be new, and if they are not brand-new, they should be enhanced in some significant way.

We ask that projects be developed with Indigenous partners, not just about them. This means that we are looking for respectful engagement and confirmation of the intent to collaborate.

Respectful Engagement – Taking time to connect early, listening to community perspectives, following cultural protocols, acknowledging contributions, and ensuring people are fairly compensated for their time and knowledge.

Confirmed Collaboration – Having a shared understanding of how you'll work together. This could be a letter of support, an email confirming the partnership, or a simple work plan you've developed together. It's also about checking in and agreeing on how stories, images, and cultural content will be shared.

You do not need to have formal documents in place to apply—what is most important is that there is genuine relationship-building and mutual agreement about the project.

## Application Questions

1. Project Overview: Describe your Indigenous tourism program or experience. What makes it unique?
2. Cultural Engagement: With which Indigenous communities or partners are you working?
3. Collaboration Evidence: Please attach any letters of support, Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), or confirmation emails showing involvement.
4. Engagement Process: Describe how you have engaged your Indigenous partners in the development of this project.
5. Format & Delivery: What format(s) will your programming take (e.g., guided tour, performance, workshop, digital content)?
6. Impact: How will your project support public awareness, appreciation, or connection to Indigenous perspectives?
7. Proposed timeline including estimated start and end date?
8. Evaluation: How will you measure the success or impact of the program? Can you name the KPIs you will use?
9. Provide a detailed budget, including partner contributions and requested funding using the [template provided](#).

## Applications are due:

April 22, 2026

## Apply Here:

<https://forms.gle/rUJFYke2j4co8DLq5>

# New Experience Marketing Support

Please contact [karen@rto4.ca](mailto:karen@rto4.ca) to discuss your application prior to submission.

**Minimum Request:** \$500

**Maximum Request:** \$5,000

**Applicant Contribution:** at least 50% of final costs

**Timeline:** Project must be completed by December 31, 2026

## Overview

Are you an operator who has recently launched a new experience, or are in the process of launching one? If your experience has launched since the start of the year and occurs on a regular basis—or is scheduled to launch soon—you may be eligible for our New Experience Marketing Support Stream.

An "experience" is an immersive and interactive activity that moves beyond simple sightseeing to foster a deeper connection to a place, its culture, and its people. Examples are eco-tours, farm-to-table dining experiences, culinary or artisan workshops.

RTO4 is happy to collaborate to market new experiences within the RTO4 Region. These funds help amplify your new tourism offering by sharing the cost of digital storytelling assets with a focus on promoting unique new experiences.

The stream is designed for experiences that include:

- Hands-on activities;
- Workshops or classes;
- Special events or festivals;
- Tourism Trails or Routes
- Agritourism experiences.

The content can be used for marketing, promotional campaigns, and social media.

If your experience does not fall neatly into one of these categories but is new and unique, feel free to reach out to see if it qualifies.

## Example Projects Include

- Videography
- Photography
- Graphic Design
- Website Design
- Virtual Tours (Google 360)

## Process

1. Complete your application.
2. If approved, choose a service.
3. Schedule your shoot
4. Coordinate directly with the chosen professional to set a date that works best for your experience.
5. Receive your assets
6. Submit a final report outlining your experience and how the assets will be used.

## Eligibility

### Eligible Applicants

- Within the RTO4 region (Waterloo, Wellington, Huron and Perth)
- Destination marketing organizations (DMOs)
- Tourism Organizations and Businesses
- Festivals and Events
- Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) or Chambers of Commerce

### Additional Eligibility Conditions

- Experience must launch between January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026 and September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2026 and occur on a regular basis.
- Applicant should have experience launching successful creative content or have a plan in place to ensure the success of this content through digital platforms
- Three Quotes Required
- Expenses cannot be claimed retroactively

## Application Questions

1. Describe your new experience.
2. When did or will your experience launch?
3. Proposed Timeline. Estimated Start and Completion Date
4. What type of digital content do you hope to capture/create?
5. How will the content captured be used in your promotional strategy?
6. Evaluation: How will you measure the success or impact of the program? Can you name the KPIs you will use?
7. Provide a detailed budget, including partner contributions and requested funding using the [template provided](#).

## Applications are due:

April 22, 2026

## Apply Here:

<https://forms.gle/u8NrkBf7FK9CdgqU8>

# Tourism Research

Please contact [karen@rto4.ca](mailto:karen@rto4.ca) to discuss your application prior to submission.

**Minimum Request:** \$2,500

**Maximum Request:** \$25,000

**Applicant Contribution:** at least 50% of final costs

**Timeline:** Project must be completed by December 31, 2026

## Overview

RTO4 is making funds available for research projects to help obtain the required data and information for future data-driven decision making and for establishing benchmarks to improve tourism. Examples Below. If you do not see your research project idea below, please discuss with us.

### Sample Projects

- Economic Impact Studies
- Feasibility Studies
- Resident Sentiment Surveys
- Risk Management Plans
- Visitor Attendance Studies
- Visitor Satisfaction Surveys
- Tourism Management Plans

## Eligibility

### Eligible Applicants

- Organizations located within the RTO4 region (Waterloo, Wellington, Huron and Perth)
- Destination marketing organizations (DMOs)
- Tourism Organizations and Businesses
- Festivals and Events
- Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) or Chambers of Commerce

#### Additional Eligibility Conditions

- Eligible expenses include third-party expertise to conduct research studies.
- Multiple partners may provide support for the project.
- Depending on project size and scope, an RFP may be issued by RTO4 for the research project.

**Applications are due:**

April 22, 2026

**Apply Here:**

<https://forms.gle/9pGgMa1RxUboQMAMA>

### Application Questions

1. Describe the research project you are applying for. How will the research help with future tourism projects or initiatives?
2. What are the intended outputs for the research project? E.g. presentations, reports etc.
3. Please state the name of your partners if partnering on the research project.
4. Proposed Timeline. Estimated Start and Completion Date
5. Provide a detailed budget, including partner contributions and requested funding using the [template provided](#).
6. Submit supporting materials (this should include quotes from third party suppliers).

