TOWNSHIP OF BONFIELD

Five-Year Economic Development Strategy

WHAT WE HEARD

Engagement & Evidence Report

Prepared by

for the Township of Bonfield

Version 2.1 Final Copy | September 22, 2026

Evidence and engagement window: October 2025 - July 2026

In-Person Engagement Sprint: Bonfield, June 29 - July 17, 2026

Document Control

This What We Heard report is the consolidated engagement and evidence report (Deliverable D8) of the Township of Bonfield Five-Year Economic Development Strategy. It brings together, in one place, the four lines of evidence assembled for the Strategy - the Community Economic Profile, the Business Retention + Expansion (BR+E) Community Business Survey, the Community Survey, and the program of working sessions, focus groups, key informant interviews and public town hall conducted in June and July 2026 - and distils the cross-cutting themes that will carry into the weighted SWOT and the Draft Strategy. It fulfils the "close the loop" commitment made to every participant in the Engagement Plan (v1.0, May 20, 2026).

Field	Detail	Status
Document	What We Heard - Engagement & Evidence Report	Final Draft for BR+E Working Group and Ministry review
Project	Township of Bonfield Five-Year Economic Development Strategy	Active
Phase	Phase 3 deliverable (D8); precedes the weighted SWOT and Draft Strategy	In progress
Evidence window	BR+E fieldwork Oct 2025 - Jan 2026; survey May - Jul 2026; sessions Jun 29 - Jul 17, 2026	Complete
Project Authority	CAO / Clerk-Treasurer, Township of Bonfield	Confirmed
Project Manager	Christopher Cameron - Director of Consulting, Qatalyst	Confirmed
Companion documents	Community Economic Profile (Jun 2026); BR+E Survey Report v2.1 (Sep 2026); Community Survey: What We Heard (Jul 2026); Engagement Plan v1.0	Issued

How to use this document. The Executive Summary presents the headline findings for Council and community readers. Chapters 1-5 report each line of evidence in turn - the community in numbers, what businesses said, what the community survey found, and what we heard in the room. Chapter 6 is the synthesis: the cross-cutting themes where the evidence converges, the genuine points of divergence, and what both mean for the Strategy. Chapter 7 explains how this input will be used next. Detailed tables remain in the companion documents; this report cites the numbers that matter.

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Executive Summary

Between October 2025 and July 2026, the Township of Bonfield asked its residents, businesses, community leaders and regional partners a set of connected questions: what do you value, what is missing, what should the Township's first Economic Development Strategy in over twenty years do - and what should it deliberately not do? This report consolidates everything that came back: a structured survey of 24 businesses, a community survey with 81 responses, nine recorded working sessions, focus groups and interviews, a public town hall, written submissions, and a Statistics Canada-based economic profile of the community.

The most striking feature of the evidence is its consistency. Businesses interviewed in the winter, residents surveyed in the spring, and participants around tables in the summer - asked different questions by different methods - described substantially the same community, the same gaps, and the same realistic path forward. When four independent lines of evidence tell one story, a strategy can act on it with confidence.

What the evidence says, in ten findings

1. Bonfield is growing, and the community wants that - on its own terms. The township grew 7.8% between 2016 and 2021, outpacing Ontario, and 77% of survey respondents welcome or actively encourage growth. Almost all attach conditions: protect the lakes and water quality (61%), affordability (52%), and rural character. Growth is the engine; character is the constraint.

2. The everyday basics are the unanimous gap: fuel, food, and a place to gather. A gas station (71%) and grocery store (70%) top the survey's most-wanted list; businesses independently named the same anchors; and every single engagement session raised fuel unprompted. Participants were realistic - a full grocery store is unlikely at today's population - and pointed to practical formats: restored pumps at the Rutherglen store, a card-lock station, co-op and satellite grocery models, and a restaurant that doubles as the community's gathering place.

3. The economy runs through North Bay - and through Bonfield's households. 78% of employed residents commute to North Bay and 85% of respondents spend mostly or almost entirely outside the township. The realistic engine, named across all sources, is modest residential growth - more households sharing the tax burden and gradually making local services viable - plus remote work: 17% of surveyed residents already work fully from home.

4. Support what exists before chasing what doesn't. Bonfield's business base is loyal, rooted and expansion-minded - half of BR+E businesses plan to expand within 18 months and none plan to close. The town hall's starred priority, the survey's top-ranked direction (small business, ranked in the top three by 62 of 73 respondents), and the BR+E's core message all align: retention and visibility first, attraction second.

5. Space, servicing and process are the bottleneck. Commercial space for rent or lease is the single lowest-rated business factor (1.50 of 4); housing availability, municipal fees and the permit process fill out the bottom of the table; and the BR+E's summary finding - "even if they wanted somebody small to come in, there was no space" - was echoed around the engagement tables. Bonfield's fundamentals rate better than its enabling conditions.

6. Connectivity is an economic equity issue. 55% of surveyed residents say internet or cellular service limits their ability to work, run a business, or study from home. Better internet and infrastructure is the survey's top-rated priority (3.97 of 5) and drew the most first-place ranks and the highest investment allocation. The fibre build-out has stalled; and escalated advocacy is among the clearest municipal roles the community identified.

7. Agri-food is the under-appreciated pillar - and forestry the credible sector bet. Agri-food ranks third on survey priority and second on investment allocation, ahead of tourism and housing; it dominates the BR+E's sector energy and produced the engagement's richest idea set - co-operatives for purchasing, freight, labour and retail, a consistent farmers' market, processing capacity. Independently, two expert voices converged on value-added forestry - small, nimble wood manufacturing rather than a mega-mill - anchored by the region's private woodlots and the veneer plant already operating in neighbouring Calvin Township, near Rutherglen.

8. Roads are the daily measure of progress. Roads are the most-mentioned theme in the survey's open-ended answers - the top marker for both daily-life improvement (29%) and the five-year vision (40%) - and rate near the bottom on strength (2.10 of 5). Whatever the Strategy's ambitions, residents will read progress first through their windshields.

9. Housing diversity is a workforce precondition. Rental housing is 11.2% of Bonfield's stock against roughly 31% provincially; the district housing study identifies a one- and two-bedroom shortfall; and BR+E employers name housing and transportation as hiring barriers. Every employer large enough to hire reported difficulty hiring - the constraint that arrives precisely when a Bonfield business succeeds.

10. Trust is the currency. The survey's strongest closing message was a call for Council to genuinely listen and visibly act; businesses' lowest service rating was economic development itself (1.92 of 4) - read properly, a mandate for this Strategy rather than a complaint; and session participants urged quick, visible wins to defeat "shelf document" skepticism. Several such wins are already ready and waiting to happen, catalogued in Chapter 6.

The chapters that follow give each line of evidence its own voice, then bring them together. The consistency of the story - and the community's realism about scale, sequencing and the Township's finite capacity - is the foundation on which the Draft Strategy will be built.

1. Introduction: How We Listened

Engagement is the heart of the Bonfield Economic Development Strategy. The promise made in the Engagement Plan - “we will listen, we will be honest about what is feasible, and we will show you how your input shaped the Strategy” - was stated openly in every session and survey. This report is the first half of keeping that promise; the Draft Strategy, which will visibly carry these findings forward, is the second.

1.1 Four lines of evidence

No single method sees a whole community. The Strategy therefore triangulates four complementary sources, each with a different strength: the economic profile gives the statistical baseline; the BR+E survey gives structured depth on the business experience; the community survey gives breadth and numbers; and the sessions, interviews and town hall give dialogue, candour and ideas. Findings that recur across all four carry the most weight - and, as Chapter 6 shows, most of the important findings do.

Line of evidence	What it is	Participation
Community Economic Profile (Ch. 2)	Statistics Canada Census, Canadian Business Counts, labour market and housing data, June 2026	Secondary data baseline
BR+E Community Business Survey (Ch. 3)	Structured, confidential business interviews under the Growing Bonfield Together initiative, Oct 2025 - Jan 2026	24 businesses
Community Survey (Ch. 4)	Multi-media survey on values, priorities, spending, connectivity and vision, May - Jul 2026	81 valid responses
Working sessions, focus groups, interviews & town hall (Ch. 5)	Nine recorded engagement activities, a public town hall with facilitated table exercises, and written submissions, Jun 29 - Jul 17, 2026	Council, staff, ~30 business, community and partner participants; 2 written submissions

Prior Township initiatives - the 2023 community satisfaction survey (100+ responses) and the 2025 agri-food and developers’ forums - were treated as primary sources and built upon rather than repeated, consistent with the Engagement Plan.

1.2 How to read this report

- **Anonymity.** All engagement input is anonymized. Quotations are lightly cleaned of transcription artifacts and attributed by role only (“a member of Council”, “a business owner”). In a township of roughly 2,100 people, role labels are imperfect protection, so quotes were screened to avoid identifying combinations of detail. Facilitator remarks were excluded from findings.
- **Small numbers, read honestly.** With 24 business interviews conducted and 81 survey responses received, the results provide a structured evidence base that reflects the business community closely, though not a statistically representative sample of it. Counts and percentages are reported transparently, and findings resting on thin segments are flagged.

Severe storms and power outages during the engagement window reduced attendance at some sessions, including the town hall; the survey and written channels help balance the in-person numbers.

- **Divergence is data.** Where participants disagreed - and on several questions they genuinely did - the disagreement is reported faithfully in Chapter 6, not smoothed away. A strategy that names its trade-offs honestly will be more durable than one that pretends there are none.
- **Ideas are recorded, not endorsed.** The inventory of participant ideas in Chapter 6 records that an idea was raised. Inclusion is not a commitment, and the Strategy will assess feasibility against the Township's fiscal and capacity limits.
- **Community effort. The preparation** of this Economic Development Strategy has been heavily informed by the feedback received from Bonfield's diverse business community. The implementation of the Strategy will be a community-wide effort - supported by a culture shift - as the community strives to both understand which businesses are local, and demonstrate their support by acquiring local goods and services.
- **A living document. This Economic Development Strategy** is a 'living' document; the implementation of which will be an 'ongoing process' that requires Council buy-in, plus the allocation of staff, budgets, and other resources.

2. The Community in Numbers

The Community Economic Profile (June 2026) establishes the statistical backdrop against which every engagement finding should be read. Bonfield is a rural municipality of 206 square kilometres in Nipissing District, on the Mattawa River roughly 30 kilometres east of North Bay, comprising the Hamlets of Bonfield and Rutherglen and the wider rural area. First settled in 1882 as a Canadian Pacific Railway station, its economy was built on logging, forestry and agriculture, later joined by cottage-country recreation - an identity formalized in the Mattawa Voyageur Country tourism brand.

2.1 A growing - and aging - community

After decades of drift, Bonfield turned a corner: the 2021 Census recorded 2,146 residents, growth of 7.8% over 2016 - faster than Ontario (5.8%) and among the strongest in Nipissing District. The growth reflects two reinforcing currents: bedroom-community attraction of working families priced out of larger markets, and lifestyle and remote-work migration accelerated by the pandemic. The dwelling count (1,080 total, 889 occupied by usual residents) confirms a significant seasonal and recreational component.

Indicator	Bonfield	Ontario	Signal
Population growth, 2016-2021	+7.8%	+5.8%	Momentum
Average age (2021)	44.2 yrs	40.4 yrs	Aging profile
Residents aged 55+	41.2%	31.9%	Succession pressure
Median household income	$77,000	$91,000	-15% gap
Commute to North Bay (of employed residents with usual workplace)	78%	-	Bedroom community
Work within Bonfield	9%	-	Thin local employment
Owner-occupied dwellings	88.8%	~69%	Rental deficit
Rental share of stock	11.2%	~31%	Rental deficit
Unemployment rate (2021)	7.3%	~7.4%	At par

Sources: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2021; Community Economic Profile, June 2026.

Two structural facts deserve emphasis. First, more than two-fifths of residents are at or near retirement age, and the prime working and family-formation cohorts (15-44) are under-represented by five to seven percentage points against the provincial average - without sustained in-migration of working-age households, the labour force will contract over the coming decade. Second, the income gap against Ontario (roughly 15%) is structural: Bonfield’s occupational mix leans to trades, transport, services and health rather than the professional and knowledge sectors that drive provincial averages. Both facts point the same way the engagement did - toward attracting working-age households and remote workers, and toward higher-value local employment.

2.2 An economy of micro-enterprises, integrated with North Bay

Bonfield has no dominant anchor employer. Columbia Forest Products' hardwood veneer plant in neighbouring Calvin Township is the most significant private-sector manufacturer in the immediate area and the most direct living link to the areas' forestry heritage. Beyond it, employment is distributed across construction and trades contractors, municipal services, tourism and recreation operators, and agriculture - overwhelmingly micro-scale. Across the Nipissing Economic Region, roughly 47% of businesses have no employees at all and a further 27% employ one to four people. That structure argues for a smaller-scale, diversified path rather than dependence on any single large project - the direction the engagement itself favoured.

The commuting data quantifies the structural leakage the community described in every session: of roughly 565 employed residents with a usual place of work, 440 (78%) commute to North Bay and only 50 (9%) work within the township. Income earned by commuters supports spending in both places - but the multipliers, business activity and much of the vitality are captured by the city. The strategic responses are the ones participants themselves named: grow local employment modestly, and bring work home through remote-work-compatible residential attraction.

2.3 Housing and affordability

Bonfield's affordability is a genuine competitive advantage - Nipissing District average sale prices (roughly $391,000-$485,000 in 2024-25) sit far below provincial averages - but appreciation, including waterfront listings above $639,000, is compressing it. The 11.2% rental share, well under the provincial ~31%, limits access for younger workers, seniors seeking to downsize, newcomers and seasonal employees, and surfaces repeatedly in Chapters 3-5 as a hiring barrier and a service gap. Housing supply diversification - purpose-built rentals, additional dwelling units, small homes, gentle densification in the Hamlet of Bonfield - is an emerging precondition for nearly everything else the community said it wants.

2.4 Where regional labour demand is heading

Job-posting data for Nipissing District (roughly 3,000 unique postings in the 12 months to April 2026) shows demand concentrated in health care (nursing and allied health +26.6% year over year; home care +21.3%), retail and service, transportation, and - growing fastest - administrative and analytical roles (accounting and investment +42.1%; supply chain +36.8%). Credential demand favours health certifications, Red Seal trades and commercial driving; digital skills (Power BI +60.9%, AutoCAD +52.7%) and bilingualism (310 postings) carry a premium. For a township whose workforce largely commutes into that market, connecting residents to in-demand credentials through Nipissing University and Canadore College is a low-cost, high-return play - and Bonfield's francophone workforce is an asset other communities actively recruit.

What the profile hands the Strategy

- **Momentum to build on:** top-tier population growth in the district, a healthy business tenure mix, and a proven affordability draw.
- **Constraints to design around:** an aging labour force, a 15% income gap, a rental housing deficit, no municipal water or sewer, and near-total spending leakage to North Bay.
- **Partnership imperatives:** Indigenous residents are approximately 13.6% of Bonfield’s population - nearly seven times the provincial share. The township also sits in the traditional territory of the Algonquin First Nation peoples, so economic reconciliation and genuine partnership belong in the Strategy’s foundations, not its margins.

3. What Businesses Told Us: The BR+E Survey

The Business Retention + Expansion survey - conducted under the Growing Bonfield Together initiative between October 2025 and January 2026, with volunteer interviewers and regional partners - produced 24 structured, confidential business interviews: the Strategy's deepest evidence on how it actually feels to operate, build, hire and grow in Bonfield. The full results are summarized in the BR+E Survey Report (June 2026). A separate-but-related action plan has been produced based upon the business survey results, which feeds into this Economic Development Strategy.

3.1 A loyal, rooted, expansion-minded base

The respondent profile is the finding: 20 of 23 businesses are locally owned and operated, 15 of 17 own their premises, and in 16 of 20 at least one owner lives in the community. Three-quarters employ four people or fewer - many operate alongside a job, a farm, or a household. A third have operated for more than a quarter-century while another third started within the past decade: Bonfield retains its anchors and still attracts entrants. These are not footloose firms weighing locations; they are households invested in the community's future. Frustrated local owners rarely leave - they stop investing - which raises the stakes on every irritant reported below.

Half of all respondents (12 of 24) plan to expand within 18 months; none plan to downsize or close. Expansion plans are concrete and organic - new product lines, added floor space, on-farm infrastructure, a bake shop, guest accommodation - mostly self-financed, which means modest enablers (a permit that moves quickly, a grant navigated successfully) can be decisive. The risk to the Township of Bonfield is not businesses drifting away, but expansions quietly foregone.

3.2 The bottleneck: from intention to premises

Businesses rated Bonfield's locational strengths near the top of the scale - highway access (2.95 of 4), proximity to rail and airports (2.93) - and its "soft" climate as moderately good (support from the municipality 2.67, other businesses 2.62, residents 2.57). But every path from intention to action runs through the bottom of the table:

Lowest-rated factors of doing business	Avg (1-4)	Reading
Availability of space for rent or lease	1.50	#1 hard constraint
Availability of adequate housing	1.69	Hiring barrier
Municipal fees	1.79	Cost friction
Development / building permit process	2.00	Process friction
Availability of adequate electricity	2.00	Servicing limit
Municipal property taxes	2.10	Value-for-money
Cellular service / internet service	2.12 / 2.24	Mixed, real constraint for some

Source: BR+E Survey Report, Appendix A. Averages exclude "not applicable" responses; n up to 24.

These are not independent problems; they are a single bottleneck - the path from intention to premises - described several ways. It is compounded by invisibility: established businesses own their buildings and are insulated from the space shortage, while the businesses it deters - would-be entrants and expanders - are by definition not in the room. The full cost is larger than the count suggests. The businesses trending positive in the Township of Bonfield are largely newer and consumer-facing - they experience the township as a welcoming market; those trending negative have tried to build or expand something - they experience it as a process. The community is winning on warmth and losing on transactions - and process problems are among the most fixable problems a municipality can have.

3.3 Workforce: the constraint that arrives with success

Most respondents are owner-operators, but every employer large enough to hire reported difficulty hiring: too few applicants, skills gaps, and - notably - housing and transportation as recruitment barriers. Hard-to-fill roles span skilled trades, customer service, administration and food service. Child care availability and local workforce training were flagged as weak; bilingual staff are recruited away by other communities. Co-op, internship and apprenticeship programs show the survey’s clearest brokering gap: one current participant, high satisfaction among past participants, and eleven businesses wanting information - a pattern that only fits if the barrier is information, not appetite.

3.4 What businesses asked for

Asked for the single most significant change to support growth, two dozen businesses across a dozen sectors - interviewed separately - converged on substantially one agenda: a commercial hub or zone with leasable space and shovel-ready serviced land; revitalization of the Church/Mark Street waterfront core; everyday anchors (a grocery store and gas station, named independently by several); streamlined, predictable approvals; visibility and promotion (a maintained business directory, events that draw outsiders, resident attraction); and housing, including options for an aging population. From the structured support list, the most-selected items were continuation of the BR+E initiative itself (13), a Township-maintained business directory (13), e-marketing and social media workshops (13), access to capital (12), Township branding and communications (11), and trade show participation (11) - visibility and connection more than money.

Documented local supply gaps double as an attraction shortlist: building supplies and lumber, hardware, fuel, wholesale groceries, produce and meats, garden stock, packaging inputs, and local farm products. Each is spending that leaves the community weekly - and market-tested demand an investor or an existing supplier could capture. Communication may be the cheapest finding of all: familiarity with the Township’s plans and with regional support providers is low across the board, experiences are positive where contact exists, and nearly every respondent asked to join the Township’s newsletter list. Businesses are not disengaged - they are looking for more ways to be informed.

BR+E signals carried into the synthesis (Chapter 6)

- Space, servicing and process are the binding constraints on a base that wants to grow in place.
- Housing and workforce are linked constraints - and they bind at the moment a business succeeds.
- Demand is for simple, brokered, high-trust supports: directory, networking, funding navigation, program information.
- A grocery store and gas station are business priorities, not just resident wishes - one anchor investment serves both.
- Sector energy sits in agri-food, construction/trades, and hospitality/tourism.
- The 1.92 rating for municipal economic development is a mandate for this Strategy - and its baseline for measurement.

4. What the Community Survey Found

The multi-media community survey ran from May to July 2026 and drew 81 valid responses - within reach of the Engagement Plan's target range for a community of Bonfield's size, though self-selected and to be read alongside, not in place of, the Census baseline. Respondents are overwhelmingly the township's settled core: 75% live in Bonfield year-round, half have been connected to the community for 16 years or more, and 53% identify most with the Hamlet of Bonfield (15% with the Hamlet of Rutherglen, 25% with the wider rural area). The largest age cohort is 35-49 (41%), and families with children and couples without children at home are the most common household types. Seasonal owners and very recent newcomers are under-represented - a caution the Engagement Plan anticipated - so findings should be read as the voice of the year-round community above all. Full tables are in the companion survey report.

4.1 What residents value - and how they rate the township

Asked what they value most, respondents chose the natural setting (72%), peace and quiet (61%), and small-town character (41%) - a clear statement that Bonfield's brand is its landscape and its scale. Ratings of the township's current strength split sharply along the same line: the lived environment scores well - recreation and trails (3.71 of 5), quality of life (3.50), sense of community (3.26) - while the economic basics score poorly: local job opportunities (1.55), local shopping and services (1.65), and roads and infrastructure (2.10) occupy the bottom. The community's self-assessment, in short: a wonderful place to live that is hard to make a living in, or drive around.

4.2 Commuting, spending, and the remote-work signal

The survey confirms the Census picture from the inside. North Bay is the single largest workplace (36% of respondents), a quarter are retired - and 17% already work fully remotely from home, the clearest evidence yet that the remote-work window the profile identified is real and already open. Spending leakage is near total: 85% report spending mostly or almost entirely outside Bonfield. Among commuters, 57% are interested in working locally were it viable, and the enabler they name first is simply more local job openings (60%), followed by better internet (27%) and childcare (20%).

4.3 Priorities: three questions, one answer

The survey tested priorities three ways - a 1-5 importance rating, a forced-choice top three ranking, and a 100-point budget allocation - deliberately forcing trade-offs rather than letting everything be "important." The same top tier emerged every time:

Priority direction	Avg rating (1-5)	Times in top 3 (n=73)	Avg points (of 100)
Better internet & infrastructure	3.97	34 (most #1 votes: 20)	26.7
Attracting / keeping small businesses	3.93	62 (24 ranked #1)	22.5
Agri-food & local food	3.61	42	23.4

Priority direction	Avg rating (1-5)	Times in top 3 (n=73)	Avg points (of 100)
Tourism & the visitor economy	3.33	40	18.8
Housing options	3.16	15	18.0
Trades & construction	3.09	6	-
Highway-corridor commercial	2.87	13	-
Remote workers & new residents	2.78	7	12.3

Sources: Community Survey Tables 15-17. Allocation averages are among respondents who assigned any points to that area.

Small business is the breadth priority - named in the top three by 62 of 73 respondents, more than any other direction. Internet and infrastructure is the intensity priority - the most outright first-place votes and the highest average allocation. Agri-food, third on both measures and consistently ahead of tourism and housing, is the survey's quiet surprise and corroborates the sector energy visible in the BR+E and around the engagement tables. The low rating for attracting remote workers and new residents deserves careful reading: residents rank the direction low even though remote workers are demonstrably arriving - the community wants growth's benefits more than it wants growth marketing, a nuance the Strategy's positioning should respect.

4.4 The wanted list - and the roads verdict

Asked which businesses they most want, respondents answered with the same list heard in every other channel: a gas station (71%), a grocery or general store (70%), a restaurant or café (47%), and a farm and food producers' market (33%). The open-ended questions added the survey's most emphatic single message: roads. Road maintenance is the most-cited theme for improving daily life (29% of responses) and the most common marker of five-year success (40%) - "roads paved and maintained" is, for many residents, what a successful Bonfield literally looks like. Taxes and value-for-money (18%), and municipal governance and communication (13%), follow - threads picked up in Chapter 6.

4.5 Growth on community terms - and the connectivity divide

Growth attitudes are decisive and nuanced at once: 38% would actively encourage growth and a further 39% welcome it if rural character is protected - 77% open to growth - while only 7% would limit it. What must be protected is equally clear: lakes and water quality (61%), affordability (52%), and quiet (41%). Support for tourism investment follows the same conditional pattern: 75% say yes, but most (54%) only "if it benefits residents too." On connectivity, the community is split down the middle: 46% call their internet adequate, 51% report service that is slow, inconsistent or poor - and 55% say connectivity limits their household's ability to work, run a business or study from home. Several respondents noted Starlink as a costly workaround. Connectivity is not an amenity complaint; it is the infrastructure form of economic opportunity.

Survey signals carried into the synthesis (Chapter 6)

- One priority agenda across three question formats: connectivity, small business, agri-food.
- Gas and grocery are urgent, near-universal wants - and roads are the daily measure of progress.
- 77% openness to growth, conditioned on lakes, affordability and character - a mandate with guardrails.
- A visible minority thread of skepticism toward Council, taxes and consultation - trust must be earned in implementation.
- 17% already work from home: the remote-work economy is not a projection; it is a present fact.

5. What We Heard in the Room

Between June 29 and July 17, 2026, the engagement program moved from numbers to voices: a working session with the project steering group; focus groups including representatives from the agri-food sector, larger scale businesses and investors, community life (recreation & tourism) and regional partners; plus, key informant interviews with other community leaders, and a senior regional figure; a regional partner roundtable; a public town hall with facilitated table exercises; plus written submissions from a business owner, and a member of Council. Sessions were candid by design - confidentiality was promised and is preserved here through role-only attribution. Eleven themes capture what participants said; the quotations are their own words.

5.1 A bedroom community deciding what it wants to be

Nearly everyone accepted the description of Bonfield as a bedroom community of North Bay; the debate was over what follows. Some argued the township should embrace the role and excel at it - grow the residential base modestly, protect affordability and character, and let services follow population. Others resisted the ceiling, pointing to assets and arguing that stagnation, not overreach, has been Bonfield's historical problem. Participants converged on realism about scale: large single employers, big-box retail, warehouses and data centres were raised and rejected in multiple sessions - for want of water, power and labour, and for poor community fit. What fits is small: micro and home-based businesses, trades, small-scale industrial, agri-food and everyday services.

> *"If you are a bedroom community, that's okay too. So how do you make it a better bedroom community?"*
>
> - a provincial partner

> *"We actually have to grow our residential base a little bit... to make it viable for a restaurant or a small grocery store - to make it a true, better bedroom community."*
>
> - a member of Council

5.2 Fuel, food and places to gather

Asked what Bonfield needs, every session named the same short list: somewhere to buy gas, somewhere to eat, somewhere to gather. Fuel was the most frequently cited single gap of the entire program. Practical paths surfaced repeatedly: the planned restoration of pumps at the Rutherglen general store; a low-overhead, unstaffed card-lock station - a proponent has already scoped an operator - paired with EV charging; and, on food, realism about a full grocery store alongside genuine conviction about a good restaurant that doubles as the community's social anchor, takeaway formats serving commuters and contractors, and co-op or satellite grocery models. The "nowhere to gather" problem ran deeper than commerce: hall costs and ownership constraints, the loss of the lakeside gathering place, and the absence of any taxi service - a quiet blocker of any evening economy - all featured.

> *"What holds a community together is a grocery store, a restaurant and a little bar... Here we have nowhere to congregate."*
>
> - a member of Council

> *"From the immediate area, I hear it every day - when are you getting fuel? It's very much needed."*
> - a business owner

5.3 Housing as the economic engine

The nearest thing to a strategic consensus: modest residential growth is Bonfield's realistic engine - sharing the tax burden, sustaining services, and eventually making small commerce viable. The conditions mattered as much as the growth: diversity of builders and designs rather than one uniform product; the housing mix the district study supports - one- and two-bedroom units and rentals; small homes for singles and seniors; and seniors' housing, where the community's 20-unit non-profit complex - built over nine years without government funding - was cited with pride as both proof of local capability and a warning about volunteer-board fragility. Tools raised included community improvement plan incentives, the additional dwelling unit subsidy (roughly $50,000, without income criteria - seen as under-promoted), land-condominium small-home models, employer-built rental housing for recruited tradespeople, and an anchor community hub/medical centre on a neighbouring township's lease-back model - tempered by a written caution that multi-million-dollar facilities exceed today's tax base.

> *"The more homes we build, the better it is, because then your property tax won't go up as high."*
> - a developer

> *"Our elders don't want to leave. They're in my office crying - 'this is where I grew up.' So we need to do something."*
> - a community leader

5.4 Start with the businesses already here

Named explicitly as the town hall's clearest consensus - and starred on its priority boards - was supporting existing businesses before recruiting new ones. The most actionable finding was visibility: Bonfield's businesses are largely invisible online and on the ground; residents of several years reported not knowing what exists, and participants demonstrated live that web searches return almost nothing for the township. A directory, signage, welcome packages, newsletter advertising and event vendor space were proposed independently by multiple participants - echoing the BR+E's most-selected supports. Participants also disagreed markedly about how many businesses Bonfield has - from over one hundred (counting informal and home-based activity) to roughly a dozen registered employers. Participants concluded that the Strategy must provide better ways to share information about the businesses that already exist. Barriers named matched the BR+E: no commercial space, construction costs (a written submission cited a $360,000 quote for a basic steel building that ended an expansion plan), permit fees, insurance, and grant criteria that exclude the businesses most in need. A comparatively flexible bylaw environment was credited by one trades business as the reason it located in Bonfield - an advantage participants implied should be protected.

> *"Support the ones that already exist. We don't need more if we're not keeping the ones we have."*
> - a resident

> *"I re-Googled it tonight. There is nothing listed in Bonfield - not the pharmacy, not a medical centre."*
>
> \- a resident

5.5 Agri-food and the co-operative idea

Agri-food produced the engagement's highest-energy discussions: an active small-farm community - farm stands, beekeepers, meat birds, market gardens, a new orchard - constrained by missing infrastructure at every turn: no local abattoir or butcher (bookings run a year ahead), no aggregation point, no wholesale supply relationships (local food businesses truck produce from southern Ontario auctions because local producers sell only at retail), and processing rules that push small producers underground. The co-operative emerged as the connective answer, raised independently in at least five forms: purchasing and feed (with the Verner co-op the repeatedly cited model, including a possible Bonfield delivery-route depot), equipment and services, freight, rotating student labour shared across member farms and businesses, and forestry. Regional partners endorsed the pattern with a governance caution: the municipality convenes and facilitates for a period, then steps back into membership. One immediately actionable discovery: a standing Council resolution already permits free, permit-less Saturday vending in the municipal lot - and almost nobody knows.

> *"I would like to see farm owners get together and have an auction here, instead of us having to drive to Elmira and Lucknow. I'd love to buy from local farmers."*
>
> \- a business owner

> *"The federal inspections really slam small businesses... we have to have local outlets for entrepreneurs."*
>
> \- a farmer and forestry professional

5.6 Forestry and value-added wood

Two independent expert voices - a forestry professional resident in the township and a senior regional key informant - converged, unprompted, on the same conclusion: forestry and value-added wood products are Bonfield's most credible sector opportunity. The region is ringed by private woodlots (roughly a quarter of Canadian production comes from private woodlots), the workforce understands the industry, and the veneer plant in neighbouring Calvin Township, near Rutherglen proves value-added manufacturing works here. The opportunity described was deliberately not a mega-mill - the withdrawn sawmill project and closing commodity mills across the North were cited as cautionary - but small and nimble: a forestry co-operative aggregating woodlots for properly managed harvests, small hardwood sawmills, and small-scale manufacturing of modular homes and housing components, explicitly linked to federal housing-supply programs, the national lumber gap, and the rail line through the township. Concrete first steps were offered: talk to the forestry associations, scan Northern Ontario's mills for value-added gaps, and meet regional forest-licence holders.

> *"I think there should be something forestry-related and forestry value-added related. That's where our benefits are. That's where we have our pluses."*
>
> \- a regional key informant

Almost every business conversation arrived at labour. A restaurant owner cannot find a second cook and has cut operating days; a builder loses half of newly licensed trades to out-of-town unions despite pensions, benefits and staged-wage retention agreements; a poultry processing venture failed for want of workers; staff relayed that restaurant-attraction conversations die on labour. Yet the region carries real under-employment, local jobs go unposted, and returning graduates assume they must commute. Responses proposed were practical: the rotating labour co-op, a central local "who's hiring" listing, employment-services drop-ins in free municipal space at commuter-friendly hours, mentorship from the township's retired entrepreneurs (offered personally by several participants), and closer links to the colleges. One counter-example proved local labour exists when the employer fits: the rebuilt general store reported a surplus of local applicants.

> *"Ideas are plenty. You won't run out of ideas. What you do run out of is time and energy - and you need the labour."*
> \- a farmer and forestry professional

5.8 Enabling infrastructure: broadband, energy, water, the highway

Participants drew careful distinctions between the different infrastructure constraints the Township faces. Six were raised repeatedly, and each carries a different remedy.

- **Broadband and cellular.** The carrier holding the fibre contract has stalled the build - "they've laid a few wires, that's it" - with no substantive update in over a year despite monthly follow-ups. A Council member's written submission identified sustained advocacy on connections as a priority.
- **Natural gas.** Distribution reaches only one pocket of the Township. Households and businesses on the gas line therefore heat at a materially lower cost than those relying on oil, propane or electricity, and that cost difference varies from one part of the Township to another. Participants asked that the gap be quantified and that the case for extending service be tested.
- **Water and wastewater.** There is no municipal water or sewer service anywhere in the Township. Every new development therefore depends on appropriately scaled on-site sewage systems and private wells, and that constraint enters every development conversation - in the rural settlement areas and the wider rural area alike.
- **Lake capacity.** The Province and the conservation authority have classified several local lakes and tributaries as being at capacity for development purposes. Because so much of the Township's economy rests on housing, tourism and recreation, responsible and proactive lake stewardship is a precondition of the Strategy rather than an addition to it.
- **Highway 17.** The potential four-laning produced the engagement's sharpest three-way split - safety imperative, existential bypass threat, or industrial opportunity - with unanimity on one point: decades of ministry silence have frozen land decisions, and MTO needs to be at the table.
- **Climate resilience.** This entered through lived experience: repeated microbursts and storm damage, including during the engagement program itself.

> *"I dropped calls non-stop - and often drive to the end of my driveway for a phone call."*
> \- a member of Council (written submission)

5.9 Tourism, recreation and community life

Participants were measured about tourism: natural beauty is a quality-of-life asset and residential draw more than a standalone driver - one key informant was blunt that a beautiful rest stop "is not economic development." Within that realism sit genuine opportunities: the snowmobile trail economy already passing through (needing "gas, food and a place to warm up"), lake access and waterfront improvements, a boardwalk and viewing platform at the township gateway, the Rutherglen park as combined local recreation and highway rest-stop destination paired with EV charging, and modest accommodation so visitors can stay. Events are Bonfield's proven draw - the Halloween parade brings 2,000-3,000 visitors, which is more than the township's population - and participants urged building a signature festival around proven successes while consolidating smaller competing events. Beneath it all ran a worry voiced in near-identical terms across four sessions: the volunteer base that produces community life is aging out, with no succession behind the small group of stalwarts described as "the glue that holds this community together."

5.10 One township, several communities: cohesion, reputation, pride

The strategy's hardest material may be social. A long-standing rift between the Hamlet of Bonfield and the Hamlet of Rutherglen - rooted in language history and amalgamation - was described as unchanged in over a decade: Rutherglen residents feel overlooked in programming, spending and identity. Notably, the township's most significant current private reinvestment story - the general store rebuild, a planned subdivision, a proposed heritage project - is happening in Rutherglen, giving the Strategy concrete material for deliberate inclusion. Participants also spoke openly about reputation: a stigma they connect to visible property standards, a corrosive local social-media culture described as a real deterrent to prospective residents, and a deficit of community pride - alongside evidence of change as newcomers arrive. And they described a strained relationship between a vocal segment of the public and the municipality: distrust of past processes, hostility toward staff, a complaint culture set against a thinning bench of doers. Multiple participants - including some who arrived critical - acknowledged the current administration is more organized and grant-ready than in memory; the advice, repeated across sessions, was to bank trust deliberately: quick visible wins, plain-language communication, and a standing community economic development committee open to any resident with energy.

> *"There's a rift there. You could feel it when I first moved here thirteen years ago… Nothing's changed. The people in Rutherglen need to feel special or needed - they feel left out."*
>
> - a community leader

> *"There's a lot of potential in Bonfield. People just have to get up and do it."*
>
> - a community leader

5.11 The municipality's role - and the regional question

Participants and partners converged on a clear division of labour: the municipality as facilitator, convener, information conduit and matchmaker - not operator. "We're not opening up a gas station," staff told one session; "we're going to bring the people together." Business owners asked the Township to broker connections between investors and under-used commercial land; partners cautioned that municipally led business structures breed apprehension and should be championed by business owners with the municipality as secretariat. The regional question drew the engagement’s starkest warning: a previous multi-municipality economic development body produced real assets but collapsed under personality conflict, closed governance, unquantifiable returns and four-year political turnover - recounted independently, in strikingly similar terms, by regional partners and a senior key informant who called it “a bellwether of what to expect” while insisting Bonfield cannot afford to act alone. The advice: recover the predecessor body’s research, interview its principals, study models that work elsewhere, and design any new partnership deliberately around the known failure modes. Partners added institutional guidance: economic development training for each incoming council, continuity planning across this fall’s election, early quick wins against shelf-document skepticism, and celebration of housing and business successes as they occur.

> *“They were all part of an economic development group at one time, and they just couldn’t get along… all those years of wasted time. They’re better off together with partners.”*
>
> - a regional key informant

> *“Having a few quick wins right away might demonstrate we actually are doing some things.”*
>
> - a regional partner

6. Reading the Evidence Together: Cross-Cutting Themes

This chapter is the report's centre of gravity. It asks the synthesis question the BR+E report posed months ago: do the other lines of evidence tell the same story businesses told? Overwhelmingly, they do. Eight cross-cutting themes emerge where profile data, business interviews, the community survey, and the engagement sessions independently converge - followed by an honest account of where views genuinely diverge, the community's consolidated priority signal, and what both mean for the Strategy.

6.1 Where the evidence converges

Cross-cutting theme	Profile (Ch. 2)	BR+E (Ch. 3)	Survey (Ch. 4)	Sessions (Ch. 5)
1. Everyday anchors: fuel, food, gathering place	Near-total retail leakage to North Bay	Grocery & gas named independently; supply-gap list	Gas 71%, grocery 70%, restaurant 47%	Raised in every session; card-lock, co-op & restaurant models
2. Modest residential growth is the engine	+7.8% growth; bedroom-community structure	Population growth is the recurring business growth driver	77% open to growth, with conditions	Consensus: households → tax base → services
3. Support existing businesses first; visibility is step one	Micro-enterprise economy (~74% ≤4 employees)	Directory, networking, e-marketing top support asks	Small business ranked top 3 by 62 of 73	Town hall's starred priority; "nothing listed online"
4. Space, servicing & process bottleneck	No municipal water/sewer; no serviced commercial land	Space lowest-rated factor (1.50); permits 2.00	Local shopping/services rated 1.65	"No space" echoed; $360k build quote; red-tape accounts
5. Connectivity is foundational - and failing half the community	Remote-work window; 78% commute	Internet 2.24, cellular 2.12; IT training demand	Top priority (3.97); 55% limited by service	Stalled fibre build; advocacy = priority one (written)
6. Agri-food & value-added forestry are the sector bets	Forestry heritage; veneer plant in Calvin Twp; trades base	Sector energy in agri-food & trades; info requests	Agri-food 3rd priority, 2nd allocation	Co-op movement; abattoir gap; two experts on value-added wood
7. Housing diversity is a workforce precondition	11.2% rental vs ~31% ON; affordability compressing	Housing 1.69; named hiring barrier	Affordability 2nd protect item (52%)	One- and two-bedroom shortfall; seniors' units; additional dwelling unit (ADU) subsidy under-used
8. Trust, communication & visible delivery	-	ED service rated 1.92; "informed, not disengaged"	"Listen to residents" top closing theme	Quick-wins advice; consultation skepticism voiced and answered

Convergence across independent methods is the strongest signal engagement can produce; each theme above appears in at least three of four evidence lines.

6.2 Where views genuinely diverge

Divergence is data, and five fault lines deserve honest treatment in the Strategy rather than quiet omission:

- **Ambition versus acceptance.** Is "best bedroom community in the North" the strategy or a ceiling to push past? Related: whether small-scale local activity (farm stands, home businesses) counts as economic development at all. The survey's low rating for resident attraction - alongside its enthusiasm for growth's benefits - captures the same ambivalence in numbers.
- **Highway 17 four-laning.** Safety imperative, existential bypass threat, or industrial opportunity - a genuine three-way split in the sessions, unresolved by any other evidence line. The unifying ask is information: MTO at the table, timelines clarified, land decisions unfrozen.
- **Rental and assisted housing.** Documented shortfall of rentals and small units (profile, housing study, BR+E hiring barriers) versus vocal resistance from some participants to subsidized housing. Several voices distinguished market rentals and seniors' rentals from social housing - a distinction the Strategy can use.
- **The municipality's role in commercial space.** Incubator stepping-stone for micro-businesses, or crowding out of the private investment case? Partners themselves split. The BR+E's evidence that space is the #1 constraint raises the stakes on getting this design question right.
- **Taxes, value and pace.** A visible survey minority wants lower taxes, less regulation and slower change; a written Council submission urged fiscal realism about large capital projects. The Strategy's answer is sequencing: start small, prove value, and let evidence carry the argument for bigger steps.

6.3 The community's consolidated priority signal

Layering the survey's three priority exercises, the BR+E's "one change" question, the town hall's dot-voting and starred worksheets, and the weight of session discussion produces a remarkably stable consolidated signal. Tier one - named first, most often, everywhere: connectivity and enabling infrastructure; support and visibility for existing small businesses; and the everyday anchors (fuel, food, gathering place). Tier two - strong and consistent: agri-food development and the co-operative infrastructure behind it; housing diversity (rentals, small units, seniors' options); and roads as the community's baseline expectation of its municipality. Tier three - real but conditional: tourism and recreation (75% support, mostly "if it benefits residents too"); value-added forestry and small-scale industry (expert-endorsed, publicly untested); and resident and remote-worker attraction (happening regardless; to be enabled more than marketed).

6.4 Quick wins the community handed the project

Session participants and partners repeatedly counselled early, visible delivery - and the engagement itself surfaced a set of near-zero-cost actions, each traceable to a documented ask:

- Publicize the existing Council resolution permitting free Saturday vending in the municipal lot, and anchor a consistent weekly farmers' market around it (sessions; survey's farm-market demand).

- Stand up the Township-maintained business directory and fix Bonfield's online presence (BR+E top-three support; town hall demonstration; written submission).
- Promote the additional dwelling unit subsidy and celebrate each completed unit (sessions; partner advice; profile's rental deficit).
- Bring Business Centre workshops and employment-services drop-ins to Bonfield on a standing schedule, at commuter-friendly hours (BR+E brokering gap; sessions).
- Launch the recurring business networking event businesses independently invented (BR+E Section 5.4; chamber-style, business-champion-led with the Township as secretariat).
- Route the BR+E's recorded assistance requests (funding information, program referrals, directory listings) to the right partners, and add every willing business to the welcome package - closing the loop that was promised.
- Connect co-op, internship and apprenticeship information to the eleven businesses that asked for it (BR+E Section 6.3).

6.5 What the evidence means for the Strategy

Without prejudging the Draft Strategy, the evidence organizes naturally into a five-layer logic that nearly every finding and idea supports.

- **First, enable.** Connectivity advocacy, roads, approvals process improvement, and a deliberate answer on serviced commercial space - the conditions everything else depends on.
- **Second, retain and reveal.** Visibility, directory, networking, brokering and communication for the businesses already here - the cheapest, fastest, most-asked-for layer.
- **Third, anchor.** A small number of catalytic investments the community itself specified - fuel service, a gathering place, market infrastructure - pursued through private and co-operative models with the Township as matchmaker.
- **Fourth, grow the bets.** Agri-food co-operative infrastructure and value-added wood, with housing diversity as the workforce precondition.
- **Fifth, and throughout, govern for trust.** Quick wins, honest trade-offs, closed loops, deliberate Rutherglen inclusion, Indigenous partnership, and regional co-operation designed around the documented failure modes of the past.

The BR+E's baseline ratings - business climate impression, economic development satisfaction (1.92), space availability (1.50) - and the survey's strength ratings give the Strategy ready-made measures against which Council and the community can hold implementation to account.

7. How Your Input Will Be Used

This report is a waypoint, not an endpoint. Every theme, number and idea documented here now flows into the next phase of the Strategy on a defined path:

- **Weighted SWOT.** The convergent themes of Chapter 6 - weighted by the strength and independence of their evidence - become the backbone of the Strategy's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats assessment.
- **Draft Strategy.** The five-layer logic in Section 6.5, the consolidated priority signal, and the quick-win inventory shape the Draft Strategy's goals, actions and sequencing - built within the Township's fiscal and capacity limits, and honest about the trade-offs in Section 6.2. The strategy horizon is five years; completion is targeted for fall 2026, with the final report presented to Council.
- **Community Profile.** Business-reported strengths and constraints join the statistical baseline in an investment-ready Community Profile that answers prospective investors' questions candidly - including documented gaps that are, read from the other direction, market opportunities.
- **Closing the loop.** This report will be circulated to every participant who left contact information and posted publicly, before the Draft Strategy - so participants see their input reflected first. Focus-group participants will be shown how their input shaped the draft before it is finalized. That was the promise; this is its first instalment.

To every resident, business owner, community leader and partner who gave their time - in an interview chair, at a focus-group table, through a survey, at the town hall in the middle of a storm, or in writing - thank you. The consistency of what you told us is this Strategy's greatest asset: it means the direction is not a consultant's guess or a Council preference, but the community's own, documented four different ways. The next document you see will show you what we built with it.

To stay involved, watch the Township's website, newsletter and social channels for the Draft Strategy and the opportunity to comment before it goes to Council. Inquiries: ecdev@bonfieldtownship.com.

Appendix A - Engagement Activities Analyzed

Date	Activity	Participants (roles)
Oct 2025 - Jan 2026	BR+E Community Business Survey (Growing Bonfield Together) - structured interviews by volunteer teams with regional partner support	24 businesses
May - Jul 2026	Community Survey (online)	81 valid responses
Jun 29, 2026	Steering-group working session (structured discussion with informal continuation)	Council members, CAO, economic development/planning staff
Jun 30, 2026	Agri-food & business focus group	Farmer/forestry professional, restaurant & motel owner, CAO, planner
Jun 30, 2026	Key informant interview	Community/institutional leader
Jun 30, 2026	Business & development focus group (held through a storm and power outage)	General store owner, developer/builder, councillor, CAO, planner
Jul 1, 2026	Tourism & recreation focus group	Snowmobile club leadership, long-time community volunteer, senior staff
Jul 2, 2026	Regional partner roundtable	Provincial ministry representatives, Business Centre, employment/BR+E partner, conservation authority, CAO, planner
Jul 2, 2026	Public town hall with facilitated table worksheets and dot-voting	Mayor, CAO, planner, residents, business owners
Jul 17, 2026	Key informant interview (virtual)	Senior regional figure and entrepreneur
Jul 2026	Written submissions	A trades business owner; a member of Council

Prior evidence built upon: 2023 community satisfaction survey (100+ responses); agri-food and developers' forums (2025); district housing study. The Strategy is supported by the Rural Ontario Development (ROD) program. All engagement input was anonymized in accordance with the consent commitments in the Engagement Plan (Appendix G); politically sensitive and personal material was excluded from public reporting and, where relevant to the project team, handled separately under the Plan's sensitivity protocol.