

2025 - 2026

Partnership Fund Guidelines





Welcome to the program guidelines for RTO 9's 2025–2026 Partnership Fund program. Included in this guide is information regarding our current program including the following: program rationale, partnership eligibility requirements, funding parameters and the 2025-2026 project initiatives.

We have designed this guide to answer your questions about the Partnership Fund, however, you are still encouraged to contact Meg Dabros, Operations Manager, at mdabros@region9tourism.ca before submitting an application to the program.

Approval of Partnership Funds are dependent upon RTO 9 receiving their 2025–2026 Transfer Payment Agreement from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming (MTCG).

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Program Overview..... | 4 |
| Program Objectives..... | 6 |
| Partner Eligibility..... | 7 |
| Project Categories..... | 9 |
| New Indigenous Tourism Experiences..... | 9 |
| Videography & Photography..... | 9 |
| Marquee & Wayfinding Signage..... | 10 |
| Translation..... | 10 |
| Conditions of Funding..... | 11 |
| Procurement Policy..... | 15 |
| Evaluation & Reporting..... | 16 |



Program Overview

RTO 9's Partnership Fund initiative is designed to collaborate with the region's tourism businesses to grow tourism in South Eastern Ontario. This program's estimated allocation is \$219,000.00 from the MTCG.

The Ministry's and RTO 9's objectives in providing this opportunity:

- Enhance tourism across the Province, especially overnight stays.
- Support the RTO as the leader in regional tourism.
- Maximize support for tourism at a regional level by encouraging strong partnerships, expanding the breadth and diversity of funding partners.
- Encourage RTOs to engage industry partners to broaden their financial base to extend reach.
- Support a coordinated approach that aligns planning, product development, investment attraction and workforce development in the region.
- Assure the transparency and accountability of funding through the transfer payment agreement.
- Increase the economic tourism value to the region.

The Partnership Fund **is not a grant program, it is a Partnership Program that requires a buy-in of 50% of eligible project costs from the applicant.** The program is designed to have partners work with RTO 9 to attain mutual benefits by delivering on partnership project objectives. RTO 9 can only enter into partnerships when projects align with their mandate and goals, target audiences, segments and activities as outlined in RTO 9's current Business Plan. The intent of the Partnership Fund program is to assist new or existing tourism products or experiences, it is not intended to provide year over year funding to operators. Projects are expected to have a sustainability plan in place for continued growth. Higher priority will be placed on new initiatives that show potential to increase tourism receipts for the region.

Partners must be prepared to commit to and follow through on the collection of jointly determined data related to the project undertaken. The data collected from partners in the form of Project Reports may then be aggregated with other data in the longer term to provide a clearer picture of the state of tourism within the region. Final invoice payments may be withheld if you have not submitted your final report.

Quick Facts

1. Eligible businesses may submit **one** application.
2. Partnership Fund projects may receive up to 50% for their eligible project, with a minimum matching contribution of \$1,500.00 and a maximum matching contribution of \$15,000.00. **Costs are inclusive of HST.** Some exceptions may apply.
3. There will be a second intake period for applications in all categories, **opening September 1st, 2025 and closing on September 21st, 2025.**
4. Projects applying to the Partnership Fund Program must take place (and have all invoices submitted for payment) between **October 1st, 2025 - February 13th, 2026.**
5. Eligible business must provide a certificate of insurance stating RTO 9 as additionally insured and must have at least \$2M General Commercial Liability coverage.
6. All recipients of funding must be prepared to contribute 50% of the total budget to RTO 9 electronically - the RTO 9 holds all funds and pays all invoices for the project directly. The RTO 9 **does not** accept cheques, credit cards or cash payments. Payment can only be made via **Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) through your financial institution or through e-mail by E-Transfer.**
7. Project invoices can only be paid via Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT) - **all vendors and/or suppliers of services on the project must be able to accept EFT payments.**
8. All invoices must come from a third-party vendor with no invested interest in the project's completion to avoid any conflict of interest. **Partners cannot be reimbursed by RTO 9 for payments.**

Program Objectives

The Partnership Fund program is an initiative designed with the intent to make the RTO 9 region a premiere travel destination in Ontario. RTO 9 will work with eligible partners that encourage tourism by:

- Extending the reach, breadth and depth of partnerships between RTO 9 and industry partners.
- Expanding Indigenous tourism product within the region and building relationships with Indigenous operators.
- Enhancing market readiness through professional videography and photography assets.
- Designing and installing clear business signage for wayfinding through the region.
- Inclusive participation of travellers from other regions through clear and accurate translations of services and experiences.

Priority will be given to proposals that:

- Have attended an information session or have met on-on-one with the Operations Manager of RTO 9 prior to submission.
- Are submitted from private sector businesses.
- Promote overnight visits, increasing the length of stay.
- Include two or more partners that are financially committed to the project, in addition to RTO 9.
- Have clearly defined and measurable goals.
- Are new to the Partnership Fund Program and have not received funds from RTO 9 within the past three (3) years.

Remember that people create meaning through direct experience! The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in and the memories created. The more you put in to your project and the partnerships you build throughout the project period, the greater the experience will be for your guests and visitors.



Partner Eligibility

2025–2026 Funding will only be provided to legal incorporated tourism businesses, tourism businesses with an active CRA Business Number (BN), or Indigenous operators who are 51%+ Indigenous owned and controlled. Examples include those that are established by or under legislation; are federally or provincially incorporated, or have a CRA Business Number (BN), are Indigenous tourism businesses that are incorporated or have a CRA Business Number (BN), or are able to provide a Certificate of Indian Status Registry number or Métis Registry number.

Eligible partners include:

- For-profit tourism businesses
- First Nations tourism businesses who operate within or are developing tourism products within the RTO 9 geographic boundaries

Ineligible partners include:

- Destination Marketing Organizations/Programs (DMO/DMP)
- Municipalities
- Business Investment Areas (BIA's) or other municipally run committees
- Chambers of Commerce
- Museums
- Membership based organizations or non-profits

For all funding categories, applicant must be prepared to have at least \$2 million General Commercial Liability insurance coverage and will add “Region 9 Regional Tourism Organization” as an additional insured for the full duration of the partnership project.



Partner Eligibility

The project must be located within the region served by RTO 9. See the map [here](#) if you are unsure. Applicants should discuss their project with their local DMO/DMP/DMMO before applying and must submit a letter of support from them along with their application. If you are unsure of who your DMO/ DMP is, check the list of RTO 9 sub-regional partners [here](#), or reach out to Meg Dabros and she can assist in getting you connected with your local partner.

Applications require full disclosure of all other funding granted to the initiative. **Partners are not able to use Ontario grants (Experience Ontario, ReConnect etc.) to fund their portion of the Partnership Fund.** Applicants to the program will only be considered eligible for funding if they have not received RTO 9 funds through the Partnership Fund Program within the last 3-years.

As this program is oversubscribed each year, approved partners will have 30 days from project approval to submit the required documentation and submit their 50% of the project budget, if this time frame is not adhered to, RTO 9 reserves the right to reallocate funding at its discretion.



Project Categories

All applications to the Partnership Fund Program must fit into one of the following four funding categories:

Category 1:

New Indigenous Tourism Experiences

One in every three international visitors to Canada are interested in participating in an authentic Indigenous tourism experience.* This means supporting Indigenous operators in the creation of their tourism business or assisting those who are established showcase an event. Funding in this category may be put towards such things as business planning, branding, website development, artist fees, and more.

- Indigenous lead experiences allow Indigenous people to share their experiences and tell their own story, in their own time.
- Indigenous partners can curate which experiences are for sharing and which are to be kept private to preserve their community's culture.

Category 2:

Videography/Photography

They say a picture is worth a thousand words - and in tourism, that saying couldn't be more true! Professionally done video and photos for your website and social media can create a story telling experience for potential visitors and allow them to make a connection to your location, business or brand through a screen. Having high quality imagery is an essential part of conveying your business' story to the world and helps visitors imagine themselves enjoying your experience.

- All videography/photography must be **experience based**, not product based. Applications for a product catalogue (ex. online retail store) will not be considered.
- RTO 9 requires the use of a RTO 9 vetted photographer/videographer for all asset creation.
- RTO 9 requires rights-free access to all photos/videos created during the project period, which will be shared with Destination Partners and Destination Ontario.

*source: <https://www.northernpolicy.ca/upload/documents/presentations/2020/10.-ito-itac-npi-panel-kevin-2020.pdf>



Project Categories

Category 3:

Marquee & Wayfinding Signage

Signage is an important part of your tourism business. If done right, good signage is clear, concise and a valuable part of your branding. It can cause confusion and frustration if visitors are unable to locate your business due to poor or non-existent signage. Signage should be clear and avoid “cognitive overload” with too much information, excessive text or graphics. Funding under this category includes costs associated with the design and installation of marquee or wayfinding signage for tourism businesses. Design proofs must be submitted to RTO 9 for approval before production.

- Signage can be used to identify your business to existing visitors, or draw in new ones who may be passing through the area.
- Wayfinding and trail signage can help visitors self-guide when exploring your destination.

Category 4:

Translation

Hello! Bonjour! Shé:kon! Hola! Hej! Ciao! A familiar piece of home when travelling is always welcome and seeing content in a first-language can alleviate any confusion when it comes to researching and booking a trip. By offering bilingual or multilingual content on your website, on-site signage or during tours, you can provide a seamless experience for visitors and make it easier for them to find the information they’re looking for so they can feel confident when booking an experience with you.

- All translation must be completed by a third-party professional with no personal relationship to the applicant.
- Proper translation allows for an improved customer experience when navigating your website and can lead to an increase in bookings.



Conditions of Funding

Funding is open to tourism-based businesses only within the RTO 9 region. RTO 9 is bound to the funding guidelines as set forth by the MTCG. First and foremost, the funds are only available to partners that are able to provide matching funds. The Ministry uses the following definition of a Partner:

*“In the context of the funding model, ‘partnership’ is defined as the agreement of the RTO to work with one or more entities on a specific project in support of the RTO’s business plan. The RTO is the project lead and **the partner contributions ‘flow into’ the RTO – they do not ‘flow through’ to the partner(s).**”*

Ineligible expenses through this program include:

- Grants and flow-through to other organizations
- Charitable fundraising
- Advocacy
- Donations to political parties or lobby groups
- Capital costs related to permanent structures or acquisitions (except for wayfinding signage)
- Competition prizes, prize money and monies paid to competition participants
- Previously incurred expenses
- Refundable portion of the HST or other refundable expenses
- Expenses that do not directly relate to the application/delivery of the Partnership Fund project
- In-kind donations
- Funds for operational funding, such as salaries and wages
- Alcohol or food

Partnership Fund projects may receive up to 50% for their eligible project, with a minimum matching contribution of \$1,500.00 and a maximum matching contribution of \$15,000.00. **Costs are inclusive of HST.** Some exceptions may apply.

All projects must be complete with invoices submitted by February 13th, 2026.

*In the context of the funding model, ‘partnership’ is defined as the agreement of the RTO to work with one or more entities on a specific project in support of the RTO’s business plan. The RTO is the project lead and **the partner contributions ‘flow into’ the RTO – they do not ‘flow through’ to the partner(s).***

This means that partners must send their 50% contribution to the RTO 9, and RTO 9 will pay all invoices in full on behalf of the partner. Partners must be prepared to pay their 50% of the budget upon signing into an agreement with RTO 9.

Conditions of Funding

Project expenses/supplier invoice payments:

The Ministry requires that RTO 9 be responsible/accountable for the administration of project funds, meaning that **RTO 9 cannot pay or reimburse the partner directly**. The partner will be invoiced by RTO 9 for their portion of the project. Supplier invoices must be addressed to RTO 9 but sent to the partner for approval before payment by RTO 9. RTO 9 is not required to charge HST on their invoices, however, RTO 9 does reimburse the partner for their share of the HST rebate on project invoices that are received.

Upon receipt of the 50% partnership invoice from RTO 9, partners must submit **electronic payment** to RTO 9 within 30 days. Projects cannot commence until payment has been received from the partner and proper supporting documentation (contract, disclosure and release statement, and Insurance etc.) has been signed and received by RTO 9.

Please note that all paid work must be completed by third parties, and that suppliers are to have a valid HST registration number, as required by Provincial regulations. Partners can contribute in-kind contributions to the project, but cannot be reimbursed for project expenditures and they must provide payment via EFT or e-transfer for their portion of the project budget.

Invoices not addressed to RTO 9 cannot be paid. Invoices must be sent to the partner for approval first and then forwarded by the partner to RTO 9 through the partners Basecamp project folder for payment. Invoices received directly from partner vendors to RTO 9 will be rerouted back to partner for approval. RTO 9 will only process payment for invoices for items agreed to and specified in the approved project budget. Changes to project deliverables or budget must be pre-approved by RTO 9 prior to changes being made.

All partnership fund vendor/supplier invoices must be made out to RTO 9 at the following billing address:

**RTO 9
Re: (Partnership Fund Project Name)
403-829 Norwest Ave.
Kingston, Ont.
K7P 2N3**

Conditions of Funding

Acknowledgments

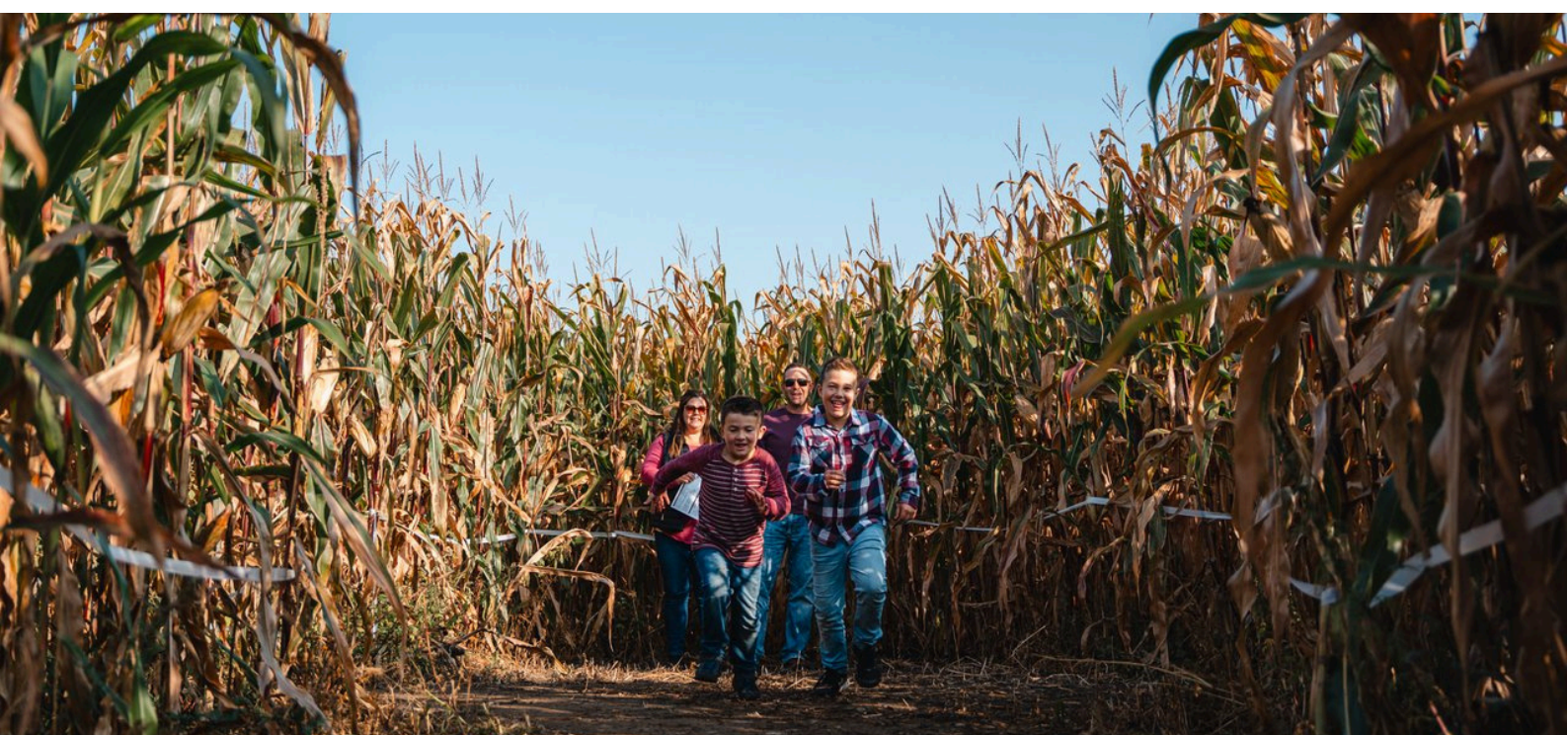
In entering into partnership with RTO 9, all recipients are required to acknowledge the support received by RTO 9 and the Ministry, with the use of:

- The Ontario Yours to Discover logo, on all consumer related materials.
- The Ontario Trillium logo, on all industry related materials.
- RTO 9 reserves the right to approve all logo placements prior to public release or production.
- Any public announcements/media releases require pre-approval of RTO 9.

All logos will be provided to partners through Basecamp upon entering into an agreement with RTO 9.

Documentation Requirements

- Signed contract and supporting payment are required within 30 days after receipt of contract.
- Invoice payments will not be processed until the supporting payment, signed contract and supporting documents are received.
- Notify RTO 9 within 30 days after your project closes if all the funding will/will not be used.
- Only ask for the amount of funding you require.
- All Invoices and documents must be uploaded into the partners Basecamp folder provided by RTO 9.



Procurement Policy

RTO's are expected to meet MTCG procurement guidelines as follows:

- Good value for money spent is a priority for RTO 9.
- The Transfer Payment Agreement with the Ministry requires that RTO 9 must undertake a competitive process for purchases of any value.
- The intent of a good tendering process is to ensure:
 - Value for money;
 - The receipt of appropriate services; and,
 - The use of a transparent competitive process to identify the best person/organization to deliver the services/supplies required.
- In carrying out a competitive process RTO 9 will:
 - Develop a clear description of the product/service sought which includes sufficient information up front; and,
 - Apply consistent and objective evaluation criteria to all quotes.
 - Consider best value criteria including bid/project cost, experience, quality, services, etc. The lowest price does not always mean the best value.
- All processes around any procurement will be documented.
 - Under \$5,000 requires a note to file indicating a 'search' for best value for dollar was completed – i.e.: phone, web, committee review, etc.
 - Where the purchase price exceeds \$5,000, RTO 9 must obtain a minimum of three written quotes.

Request for Proposals (RFP's) should be posted and distributed as widely as possible to ensure multiple submissions by qualified vendors are received by the closing date. RFP closing deadline dates should allow for as much time as possible to encourage qualified vendors to make a submission. RTO 9 considers the RFP period should be no less than 10–14 days and preferably longer.

The partner will permit RTO 9, if required, to verify/audit information submitted (at the discretion of the Province) to ensure that it is complete and accurate and that funds were used for the purpose intended.



Evaluation & Reporting

Mandatory for all projects:

- Partner agrees to compliance with RTO 9 procurement policy.
- Partner agrees to incorporate the provided Ontario Logo into their project where applicable.
- Compliance with acknowledgements.
- Proposal is consistent with RTO 9's Business Plan.
- Compliance with the program accounting, submittal of invoices for payment, documentation and reporting procedures.
- Maximum of one application per business.

The mid-year and final report (where applicable) will follow the guidelines/ templates provided by RTO 9. The reports will include but are not limited to:

- Partner submitting their report by the date indicated by RTO 9.
- Description of the activities linked to the project description as outlined in the application.
- Digital copies of the marketing materials and links to social media marketing /mentions.
- Proof of acknowledgement of RTO 9/MTCG funding support.
- Explanation of any variance between the application and the report.
- Final report for the project is due 30 days after the projects is completed; final invoicing payments will be withheld until the Final Report is received from the partner.
- Budget forecasting by December 1st, 2025 for the remaining expenses of the project until February 13th, 2026. RTO 9 reserves the right to re-allocate remaining funds to other projects.





Regional Tourism
ORGANIZATION

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