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The Regional Municipality of Durham Report

To: Community Growth and Economic Development Committee
From: Commissioner of Community Development and Economic Development
Report: #2025-EDT-12
Date: June 3, 2025

Subject:

Spark Centre Annual Update and Metrics Report 2024

Recommendation:

That the Community Growth and Economic Development Committee recommends:

That this report be received for information.

Report:

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Committee with an update on the activities of Spark Centre and supply the performance metrics received from Spark Centre in their 2024 Annual General Meeting. Metrics and results in this report noted as “to date” are up to and inclusive of March 31, 2024.
- 1.2 This report will be accompanied by a delegation from Gary Jarosz, Interim CEO and Kristy Sansom, Spark Centre Director of Operations and Client Success, to provide an update to Committee.

2. Background

- 2.1 Spark Centre was founded in 2014. Located in Downtown Oshawa, Spark Centre is Durham Region’s local Regional Innovation Centre (RIC). The mandate of RICs is to help Ontario's entrepreneurs and innovators succeed in international markets by helping them work through the challenges of developing their ideas to make them marketable, and attract talent, capital and customers. Spark Centre is mandated to

provide these services to technology entrepreneurs in both Durham Region and Northumberland County.

- 2.2 Spark Centre is funded primarily by the Province of Ontario through the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation, and Trade (MEDJCT) and is additionally supported through annual core funding by the City of Oshawa and Durham Region Economic Development and Tourism.
- 2.3 In 2019, Spark Centre established itself as a designate of Canada's Startup Visa Program (SUV) through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). This allows Spark Centre to support the immigration of business founders to establish their companies in Durham Region, which attracts capital, creates jobs, and generates additional gross domestic product (GDP) through the immigration of founders and their families. To date, Spark Centre has landed 118 newcomer businesses and attracted more than \$37 million in capital funds to the region.
- 2.4 In 2022, Spark Centre was awarded \$2.5 million dollars over three years to lead the Durham Regional Technology Development Site (Durham RTDS). This initiative is done in partnership with the Region of Durham, Durham College, and Ontario Tech University. The Durham RTDS advances Durham Region as a centre of excellence for electrification and smart city innovation. This program, which has sites across Ontario, is called the Ontario Vehicle Innovation Network (OVIN) and is funded by the Ontario Centre of Innovation (OCI).
- 2.5 In early 2023, Spark Centre became one of only four delivery partners of the ElevateIP Program, a federally funded program to advance the commercialization of intellectual property (IP). This program will support Spark clients as they build their IP portfolios and will provide \$266,632 in funding over a period of three years.
- 2.6 In June 2024 Spark Centre was awarded a \$2 million dollar investment from the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario to support the Landing Pad Accelerator Program for Newcomer and Female Entrepreneurs in the Energy, Engineering, and Environment (EN3) sector. This four-year initiative (2024-2028) is designed to support 80 startups (founded by newcomers or females) establishing in eastern Ontario, fostering the creation of 80 jobs, supporting the development of 80 IP assets and will deliver millions in direct investment to eastern Ontario.
- 2.7 Durham Region Economic Development and Tourism has been providing core funding to Spark Centre annually since 2014 through the Region's Annual Business Plan and Budget. Durham Region Economic Development and Tourism provided

\$50,000 in funding to Spark Centre in 2024, and \$50,000 has been included in the 2025 Annual Business Plan and Budget.

- 2.8 The Region of Durham and Spark Centre are parties to a funding agreement, and regular reporting on the activities of Spark Centre to Committee and Council is a requirement of that funding agreement. Spark will appear before Committee to report on inquiries and referrals, affected sectors, investment, employment impact, patents pending and issued, and more generally on Spark's business plans, work plans, and achievements.

3. Previous Reports and Decisions

- 3.1 A Spark Centre update is typically provided annually. The last update was provided in January of 2024 on Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023 (FY22, FY23) under report [#2024-EDT-1](#).

4. Full Year 2024 Annual Metrics

- 4.1 Spark Centre reports on their activities through an Annual General Meeting. Durham Region Economic Development and Tourism collects, tracks, and reports the metrics provided by Spark Centre on an annual basis. These annual metrics are below:

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Jobs Created	29	38	51	24	67	57	34	33	36	24	36
Student Placements	37	30	34	0	86	19	15	0	33	17	7
Client Equity Investments	0	27	34	0	23	88	17	23	31	23	10
Active High Potential Clients	20	20	20	66	63	99	32	29	30	33	58
Clients Served (local)	161	184	187	139	124	99	110	86	85	84	61
New Clients	128	164	142	85	205	50	43	21	38	40	35
Clients Helped Since Inception	524	546	785	1001	1027	1077	1120	1141	1179	1219	1254
In-transit Clients (not landed-LOSs issued)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	7	19	68	107	85	123

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Actual Landed Permanent Residency	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	4	2	2	3	7	22
Actual Landed Work Permit	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	0	14	14	22	38

- 4.2 In FY24 Spark and Synergy Lab had a staff complement of 19 Full Time Employees (FTEs), as well as engagements with external advisors specializing in marketing, finance, commercialization, sales and investment. Spark Centre functions include: Marketing (4 FTEs) – showcasing client products and accomplishments and Eastern Ontario as an innovation destination; delivering the Start-Up Visa Program (2 FTEs) – a program that expedites visas for foreign technology entrepreneurs seeking to relocate to Canada; an Eastern Ontario Innovation Corridor Project (2 FTEs) – an initiative to coordinate programming delivery across eastern Ontario including Kingston and Ottawa; and, delivering client services for Durham-based technology entrepreneurs (6 FTE + external advisors/mentors) – to provide clients with the tools, skills and knowledge necessary to secure venture capital and reach commercialization.
- 4.3 Spark and Synergy Lab are tenants of 2 Simcoe Street in downtown Oshawa. Spark Centre currently has multiple clients renting offices and desk space.
- 4.4 In FY24, Spark Centre added funding programs for commercialization of intellectual property to their services, with funding support from the Federal government dispersed through their collaboration partner Invest Ottawa.
- 4.5 In January 2025, long-time Spark Centre CEO Sherry Colbourne retired from her roles with both Spark Centre and Synergy Lab Inc. As of the date this report was authored, the Board of Directors is currently undertaking a recruitment process for a new Executive Director.
- 4.6 Considerable time and effort has been dedicated to growing the Synergy Lab business, with a mandate to provide market-entry services for a fee to international technology entrepreneurs looking to establish themselves in Canada, in advancement of innovation in Durham and across Eastern Ontario.
- 4.7 The Region has ensured that the Spark Centre funding agreement contains sufficient protections to ensure the Region's core funding will only be used to

support the core activities of the Spark Centre, and not those of Synergy Lab Inc, and that the terms shall be to the satisfaction of the Regional Solicitor.

5. Relationship to Strategic Plan

5.1 This report aligns with/addresses the following Strategic Direction(s) and Pathway(s) in Durham Region's 2025-2035 Strategic Plan:

a. Connected and Vibrant Communities

- C6. Continue to revitalize and transform downtowns into hubs of economic, social, and cultural connection.

b. Resilient Local Economies

- R1. Attract and retain quality employers that strengthen key economic sectors, including energy and technology.
- R2. Support the growth of new business startups and small to medium local businesses.
- R3. Develop, attract, and support a skilled and qualified workforce, including youth and newcomers.

c. Strong Relationships

- S3. Collaborate across local area municipalities, with agencies, non-profits, and community partners to deliver co-ordinated and efficient services.

5.2 This report aligns with/addresses the following Foundation(s) in Durham Region's 2025-2035 Strategic Plan:

- a. People: Making the Region of Durham a great place to work, attracting, and retaining talent.

6. Conclusion

6.1 The Economic Development and Tourism Division partners with organizations in Durham Region that support, engage, and mentor start-up and innovative businesses to support and facilitate the growth of our innovation community.

6.2 Spark Centre, as Durham Region's Regional Innovation Centre, has a mandate to support local, Durham Region-based technology entrepreneurs in reaching commercialization, and to play a central role in Durham's innovation ecosystem.

Respectfully submitted,

Original signed by

Simon Gill, Director of Economic
Development and Tourism

Recommended for Presentation to Committee

Original signed by

Nancy Taylor BBA, CPA, CA for
Elaine C. Baxter-Trahair
Chief Administrative Officer