



2013 Economic Development Forum Summary Report March 1, 2013

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Economic Development Forum 2013



Executive Summary

Over 60 people generated approximately 65 ideas that comprised eight major areas of economic interest. The people of the Town of Gibsons, as represented by the forum attendees, do not lack for enthusiasm, vision and will to effect change for the benefit of all. With so many ideas how then to move forward? The purpose of the forum was to give opportunity to those wishing to bring forward their ideas, hear the ideas of others, recognize that many ideas are similar if not exactly the same, and to explore the possibility of combining the ideas into feasible projects.

The eight major areas identified at the forum can be further refined into four key issues: the image of the Town of Gibsons, the business sector, the physical infrastructure, and transportation and access. The attendees identified clearly where their interests lie through such engagement strategies as developing an idea further at 7-8 tables, "pitching" the idea to the other tables, then a fun exercise of "ranking" what caught their attention the most. The Town of Gibsons along with the new Economic Development Select Committee can utilize that information to assist them in developing do-able projects that will engage community interest.

Introduction

Mayor Wayne Rowe determined that a forum was required in recognition that there are a number of initiatives taking place and many people have ideas that they wish to air.

Invitations were distributed to approximately 90 individuals and over 60 were present. Participants included business people, those from not-for-profit groups, and individuals who are simply interested in growing the town while retaining its character and community spirit. Also present were members of staff and council, the new Economic Development Select Committee, and team members from Best Coast Initiatives.

In opening, the Mayor acknowledged the individual and collective experience and capability that was gathered in the room, and the potential that this offers the Town, especially when working cooperatively. The forum offered the opportunity for people to share ideas, and to identify how they can collaborate to develop current opportunities and create new ones.

The theme of the day was set to be creative, open-minded and positive.

Setting Context

Two speakers, Emmanuel Machado, Chief Administrative Officer of the Town of Gibsons, and Dr. Dorothy Riddle, an economist, provided the economic context of Gibsons.

The CAO stressed that the primary role of the Town of Gibsons is to build, maintain and operate the municipal infrastructure. The Town operates with very limited funds and, while it is keenly

interested in stimulating local economic development, its modus operandi is to find ways to work with others in leveraging its resources. Increased economic activity, rather than simply building new homes, increases the Town's potential tax base.

Dr. Dorothy Riddle provided an overview of the current economy of the town. The local economy is far from moribund, but 80% comprises business-to-business transactions and is largely invisible. By far the largest portion of economic activity, at 18%, is business and professional services, followed by construction and retail. Contrary to the views of many, tourism represents less than 6% of economic activity and 7% of employment (2009 data). Tourism is greatly impacted by external factors and is highly seasonal.

Dr. Riddle listed the town's assets as a solid base for new growth:

- dynamic business-to-business sector
- educated population
- strong community networks and involvement
- spectacular natural setting, and
- potential for unique branding.

Format & Outcome

Following the initial presentations, the event was planned as an open forum to allow those present to bring forward concepts, plans or well-formed initiatives that could stimulate economic activity. *The main criterion was that proposals/concepts should be capable of being implemented in the near-term and come to fruition within 24 months.*

The resulting list was extensive (see Appendix – Catch-all list at end of report). However, in many cases, proposals were similar or could be combined for greater effect.

To narrow the focus, champions for eight 'focus areas' were identified (A to H below), and attendees were asked to align themselves with those topics they felt most strongly about. Their task was to develop the core ideas and create a 'marketing pitch' that would be then delivered to every other table. The conclusion of the day allowed those present to rank the options.

Project Summaries

- A. Business & resource broker** (Strengthening the business community network)
- a. encourage more B2B connections through a culture of buying locally
 - b. build a business brokerage associated with Chamber of Commerce which actively links with business support services
 - c. online directory of business services
 - d. enhance local transportation through a business supported shuttle (commuters to ferry / connecting upper and lower / evening shuttle to restaurant area)

- B. High visibility “discard management” conference on waste as a resource**
 - a. build on GRRC’s recent “#1 green business in BC” award
 - b. create environmental learning centre
 - c. opportunity to stimulate new artisan businesses using recovered material

- C. Develop and market car free tourism**
 - a. “leave the car behind in Vancouver ... it’s an easy journey to Gibsons”
 - b. align with a Gibsons shuttle service
 - c. investigate car share service in Langdale/Gibsons
 - d. explore electric bike rental opportunity
 - e. webcam(s) of town
 - f. links with D below

- D. Multimedia walking tour to reinforce the arts and culture sector**
 - a. provide information on the ferries
 - b. improve and link the pathways
 - c. position smart phone readable icons that inform and direct

- E. Activities to attract IT and other knowledge professionals to the region**
 - a. reassurance of reliable high speed internet
 - b. market the town as an ideal location for young families

- F. Promote Gibsons as a stop on the north-south “marine highway”**
 - a. raise profile of Howe Sound and Gibsons as a marine attraction
 - b. marine science and services centre
 - c. servicing of marine research vessels
 - d. marine education centre
 - e. marine activity centre at Armour’s Beach – storage, launch ramps and dock
 - f. articles in yachting magazines and website
 - g. provide town mooring buoys for visitors
 - h. new dinghy dock should allow free access for, say, 3 hours
 - i. proposed Gibsons Market will allow boats to provision, but needs improved access from the main harbour wharf
 - j. propane supply must also be addressed

- G. Develop an on-shore boat storage/maintenance/repair facility**
 - a. addresses the critical lack of haul out and boat maintenance facilities on southern Coast ... will retain and grow economic activity on the Coast
 - b. location at Hillside Industrial Park
 - c. potential for substantial new business ... will need investors

- H. Information and communications hub for small businesses**
 - a. building sense of collaboration between small businesses
 - b. opportunity to identify/create cooperative clusters
 - c. link with A & E above

Analysis of the event

The event was originally conceived as a gathering of about 30 people known to be engaged in various initiatives that would have a positive economic impact. The objective was to identify how these initiatives may be enhanced, aligned or combined by sharing information. It was to be a fairly tightly focused format strongly focused on economic development. The concept grew to be far more inclusive of the community in general with invitations going out to over 90, and over 60 eventually in attendance.

This was very positive and allowed all who wished to contribute to do so. There was a positive energy in the room and no reluctance in proposing ideas, and many more concepts came forward than anticipated. It was important to allow this to happen, and to develop the cordial relationship that is building between entrepreneurial group and Town.

The objective of the forum – to identify projects that would serve to boost the local economy and which could realistically be implemented in the near term – was met, though there will be much more work required to consolidate, refine and clarify some of the proposals before they can be advanced.

Some attendees, who had come to detail specific initiatives that are already in the planning stages, felt the format did not allow them to do this, and held back on their presentations. They have subsequently expressed frustration that their projects were sometimes not registered or not fully appreciated by the attendees. They also felt discouraged by the ranking of concepts at the end of the day which did not account for their projects.

Ranking the projects was a means of engaging the attendees and bringing the event to a close. While this was merely a straw poll, which represents nothing more than the immediate response of those present, it may generate an expectation that it is an official ranking of priority. The Town must manage this expectation and also be clear on its continued role. It is not the Town's role to take all the ideas and run with them but to encourage others to pursue them, facilitating where it can and keeping people on track. The Town must also indicate to those with projects already underway, and which were not highlighted, that the output of the forum does not discount their efforts.

The event achieved its objective of identifying realistic initiatives that can be implemented in the near term. It was a highly positive networking opportunity showing that the community is highly supportive of the Town's efforts. It also demonstrated that different players – the Town, not-for-profit groups, business groups and citizens – form a collaborative group that can work together on the initiatives.

Most of the ideas proposed – and those that were most supported by the group – relate to the issues below. While these are identified separately, the reality is that they are closely interconnected.

The image that the Town projects

While tourism is not the key economic driver, it was inevitable that the discussion repeatedly returned to what can be done to attract more visitors to the town. Image obviously affects the tourism industry, but also how Gibsons is perceived as a place in which to live and prosper by building or joining a dynamic business. The objective is clearly to present an attractive, dynamic, diverse, responsible and welcoming community.

Image is shaped not only by obvious aesthetics, facilities and attractions (which are discussed below) but also by how the Town creates its own marketing message, and how the community at large feels about itself.

Building pride in the community is important, and the lower town, with the harbour and folksy character is clearly the primary marketing focus. There appears to be strong support for environmental responsibility, and appreciation of the town's juxtaposition between the natural beauty of Howe Sound and its surrounding mountains.

Gibsons has had past successes to celebrate – most liveable community and the world's best drinking water – and also a recent one, the GRRC's recent #1 green business award, all powerful factors in helping shape the town's image and raise its profile. The concept of hosting a major conference/workshop on waste as an economic resource would demonstrate the spirit of social entrepreneurship seen here.

The Business Sector

While the local business-to-business sector is strong, businesses located in or near Gibsons that sell products or services off the Coast bring new money into the region. The forum recognized that encouraging the growth and success of this sector is the most direct way of enhancing local economic activity.

The town's image, and indeed its reality, is an important factor in attracting young, mobile professionals, and particularly those who value lifestyle, an eco-conscious culture and an affordable location in which to raise a family.

While there was much discussion of the knowledge-based businesses, there are many other small manufacturing, artisan, agriculture, etc. operations and opportunities. Local food production, and craft brewery were mentioned at the forum but no details came forward of plans that are known to be shaping up.

Physical Infrastructure

The streets, pathways, buildings and recreation areas as well as the harbour provide the physical basis of the town's economy, and how these look is a reflection of the care that the Town and residents provide. There are some neglected areas, which need work. These areas may not be the direct the responsibility of the Town, but working together with the

community these could be addressed. The upper town suffers from past planning neglect and will evolve positively over time with careful planning oversight.

The municipality is responsible for maintaining basic services – water, sewers, street lighting and road maintenance – and also many elements such as flower beds, bus stops and performance stages. However, other levels of government, institutions, businesses and individuals each have a role in shaping the town’s physical infrastructure.

The waterfront is literally where the marine crowd meets the town. Not only is moorage and access currently very restricted, but also the lower town has little to offer for those who need to provision their boats.

Identifying Gibsons a worthwhile stop on the ‘marine highway’ will bring in much more marine traffic provided the services that can be offered meet their needs – fuel, provision, ATMs, cafes and restaurants, arts and cultural attractions as well as chandlery and boat repair.

The community itself has a need for

- shoreline boat storage and much better access for launching dinghies, kayaks and other trailerable boats
- on-shore boat storage and service centre

Transportation and Access

The Sunshine Coast is close to the 2.5 million people in Lower Mainland and all their economic activity, and yet prides itself on being culturally separate. This close proximity – Gibsons is merely 30 km from downtown Vancouver – is little realized by those on the other side of Howe Sound, who may be ferry-averse.

While ferry timetables are clearly a significant issue impacting the local economy, these are not a factor that the Town can address in the short term. Transportation this side is different. Better linkages between the lower and upper town, and between Langdale, Gibsons, and Sechelt are needed, and would benefit from creative approaches.

Follow up

The forum can be viewed as a catalyst that initiated action. There is much more to be done, developed concepts to come forward for discussion with the Town and with the community at large. Each initiative requires champions and then a plan of action identifying what resources are needed, where they can be found, what the milestones are towards completion, and who will manage the work.

The new Economic Development Select Committee has a role in communicating with the various champions and looking for synergistic or cross-fertilization opportunities that work in everyone’s favour. The Committee can also advise the Mayor and Council on how best to deploy the Town’s own resources for maximum economic return.

APPENDIX

Catch-all list:

- Wheelchair accessibility / general accessibility
- Centre of learning for science and sociological topics (adapting to climate change)
- How Sound regional part / recreation area (tourism)
- Young professional employment
- Increase potential for tax base
- Promote "Gibsons as open for business"
- Transportation challenges for business
- Micro-brewery
- Maker movement / Makers Fair
- Optimize community (Hillside Industrial) park for local entrepreneurs
- Safety and accessibility (pedestrian friendly) – sea wall
- Public market at the old yacht club site
- Actively supporting networking and collaboration (collaboration culture)
- Murals / maps at the ferry terminal
- Entertainment festival (Beachcombers)
- Gibsons as a "creative community" – marketing existing assets
- Coordinated welcome program for new residents (mine resource of newcomers)
- Training (upcoming skills gap; trades, tech, etc)
- Ashland, Oregon – tourism, cultural event downtown
- Marine science and service centre (dry dock, ecological retreats, oceanographic institute)
- Community work hub (for entrepreneurs and city staff – "lifestyle")
- Local currencies linked to local government
- Most walkable seaside village
- Local organics marketing
- Eco-tourism (diving)
- Mountain biking (trails)
- Private school
- Convention centre
- Destination medicine
- Marine ecology exploration centre
- Bike lane connecting ferry and town
- Connecting lower / upper town
- Capture cultural / town history (murals)
- Hillside industrial site
- School of fine arts
- Zero waste / waste as a resource
- Daytrips (transit) / car free tourism
- Connect Gibsons to the Marine highway (recreation boating)
- Home-based business network
- Branding Gibsons
- Paddle Club / recreation
- Mini-retreats (themed)
- Local government – "open for business"
- Become the "cultural capital of Canada"
- Affordable childcare / community childcare
- Transportation alternatives
- Support arts community with infrastructure)
- Totem trail
- Marina market
- Short excursion destination
- Webcams
- Trail development with vistas
- Armour's beach marine facilities (kayaks & dinghies)
- Create a wellness destination
- Senior services / age in place
- Local certification (local directory – online?)
- True sustainability
- Attract mobile workers / industries
- Commuting to lower mainland – improved bus transport
- Brand Gibsons people
- Leverage sister city relationships
- Event coordinator to support festivals
- Quality hotel and convention centre
- Welcome diversity