

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release: March 19, 2015

First Annual Merritt Business Walk a Success!

Merritt, BC - Survey Results from the **Business Walk** initiative that began the last week of January and into early February, have been compiled! Volunteers from *Community Futures Nicola Valley*, the *Merritt and District Chamber of Commerce*, and, the *City of Merritt*, canvassed local businesses to learn about the business community's perceptions on local economic conditions and issues.

Results / Insights:

- ✓ 86 Responses were received
- ✓ 56% of the businesses have been operating for more than 10 years
- ✓ 30% felt their business was "Good / Increasing Sales"
- ✓ 65% choose Merritt for their business venture because of "Location"
- ✓ 28% choose Merritt for their business venture because of "Affordability"
- ✓ 52% viewed Consumer Leakage as either a "Medium" or "High Threat"
- ✓ The top 3 Challenges / Threats were identified as: *Consumer Leakage; Lack of Local Government Support; and, In-adequate Signage*
- ✓ The top 3 Suggestions to Help Business Thrive were noted as:
 - *Improved Local Government Support* (effective Economic Development, Improved Signage, Reduced Red-Tape, Lower Taxes) at 62%;
 - *Improved Marketing / Promotions (of the Community) and Increased Partnerships* – at 25.5%;
 - *Signage* (Downtown, Highway and on the "Bench" - creating awareness of the downtown businesses and attractions) – at 17.5%.

Additional mentions fell into the category of *Beautification / Increased Bylaw Enforcement* of "aesthetics" (litter / unsightly premises / snow removal).

- ✓ 26 open-ended responses were received as "Final Comment"

Next Step(s):

The City of Merritt, The Chamber of Commerce and Community Futures Nicola Valley are reviewing the results with an eye to developing individual and collaborative responses, according to their mandates.

One potential outcome to be considered is a **Shop-Local Campaign**. Similar successful initiatives have been created in Okotoks, Alberta and another great example is from Portland, Oregon. "If there is sufficient support within the local business community, a "Merritt Mercantile" shop-local campaign could be rolled out in advance of the summer tourist season" says Rob Miller – Manager of CFNV. Etelka Gillespie – Manger of the Chamber of Chamber supports the notion of a shop-local initiative and reports that, "the Chamber is already working with special event organizers such as Rockin' River – Merritt, and, the Bass Coast Music Festival, to create added value shop-Merritt incentives for visitors!"

Mayor Menard said that this exercise provides valuable insight into business vitality and needs: "The feedback confirms that the City is on track in its efforts to promote economic development, help businesses grow, keep taxes affordable and encourage local shopping. Plans to enhance community signage, beautify Nicola Avenue in partnership with the Ministry of Transportation and a continued focus on bylaw enforcement targeting unsightly properties align well with business owners wants and needs" he said.

MERRITT BUSINESS WALK 2015

INITIAL SUMMARY OF RESULTS

(March 17, 2015)

Overview:

- 86 Surveys completed
- As profiled on the attached "survey instrument", 7 (seven) questions were posed to business owner / operators to determine perceptions of: the state of their business; key issues that they perceive need to be addressed / shared...
- Three distinct areas of the City were canvassed:
(downtown commercial; downtown core –Quilchena; and, the "Bench")
- A final, key category of business stakeholders that remains outstanding is the largest employers (eg. the "Mills") which are anticipated to be canvassed by joint representation (CFNV, City of Merritt and Chamber of Commerce) asap.

Key Findings:

1. How many years have you been operating the business in Merritt?
13 <3yrs 8 <5 8 <10 48 >10 yrs (77 responses out of 86 possible)
2. Please rate the current state of your business (*circle answer below*)
 - o Poor/Slower than normal 15 (17%)
 - o Fair/Steady as ever 28 (32%)
 - o Good/Increasing sales 26 (30%)
 - o Excellent 4 (5%)
3. From the following **six** options, what are your TOP **three** reasons for doing business in Merritt and the Nicola Valley? (*read entire list first ... mark the three choices with an 'x' or circle*)
 - o Location 56 (65%)
 - o Affordability 24 (28%)
 - o Clientele 30 (35%)
 - o Cost of doing business 7 (8%)
 - o Business friendly local government 4 (4.5%)
 - o Availability of talented labour 8
 - o Other

("Need for Business (3)"; "Limited Local Competition"; "Family from here; "Born Here"; "Creation of Jobs / Business to Stay in the Community", "Home Sweet Home")

4. How much impact does **consumer leakage** (spending by customers outside of the community), have on your business?

- Low 16 (18.5%)
- Medium 28 (32.5%)
- High 17 (20%)

(Comments include: "Online Shopping" (growing threats – 4); Leakage is up "750%" in one business case from 5 yrs earlier; At least two businesses are finding more out-of-town customers patronizing them over prior years)

5. What are the **three** most significant challenges or threats to your business?

Category of Response:

- Consumer Leakage 23 (27%)
- Lack of Local Government Support 22 (distinct from Signage) (23%)
- Poor or No Progress on "Signage" 16 (18%)
- Availability of Skilled Labour / Employees 14 (16%)
- Local Competition 7 (8%)
- Poor / Uncertain Economic Climate 7 (8%)
- High Gas Prices (encourages Leakage) 5 (6%)

(Comments include: "Not enough people come to the downtown"; "Vandalism"; "Loitering"; "Garbage throughout downtown – rundown look"; "Drunk People")

6. What **three** suggestions do you have to help your business thrive?

Category of Response:

- Improved Local Government Support (effective economic development, signage, reduced red-tape; lower taxes ...) 53 (62%)
- Improved Marketing / Promotions (partnerships) 22 (25.5%)
- Signage ("Bench / Gasoline Alley", Downtown) 15 (17.5%)
- Beautification / Enforcement of Aesthetics / ByLaws 12 (14%)
- Building Better Internal Relationships/Partnerships 5 (6%)

(Comments include: "Less spending on projects the City can do without"; "Need lower taxes"; "Quit trying to make money from Fines"; "Signage"; "RCMP need to do evening patrols / higher visibility"; "Reduced fuel prices; Create Partnerships (eg. Downtown Business Association)

7. Any Other Comments? [the following are all the general comments provided for #7]

" In (the last) 10 years, what is the incentive for owners of buildings to improve the exterior - Higher taxes... Grant to reduce taxes for one year by amount invested in upgrade of the exterior, more incentives ... City rejected design upgrade, guidelines too difficult"

"It was better in the 1980s"

"Absentee Landlords are a problem"

"I contacted the economic development manager twice last year and heard nothing (about my signage questions)"

"Snow removal an issue"

"Loitering, drug deals, vandalism, broken windows. Spirit Square underutilized ... Improvements all 'appear' to be up the hill"

"Beautiful City that needs more people to move here"

"Small businesses are over-taxed"

"That 'Country with Attitude' boondoggle was a huge disappointment. Losing the support and leverage of TOTA was inexcusable. That relationship needs to be re-established pronto"

"Bad media (public image)"

"Larger Hospital would help"

"Good relations with the City when starting the business"

"Deal with skateboarders, alleys and Spirit Square (drugs, drinking, vandalism)"

"BC Visitor Centre sends lots of referrals to downtown"

"Streamlining of business startup process..."

"Public washrooms at Spirit Square"

"Tourists are saying town is very dirty and un-inviting / Snow removal an issue / City implementation of regulations (a problem); Disconnect between city departments"

"Business up to ("Bench") is doing well"

"Shop Local"

"Discuss 'Senior Friendly' Community"

"Taxes on Businesses are too High"

"Feel that the City needs steady growth of jobs and good promotion of good news..."

"Tax break please... more transparency and more open door policy (City); RCMP not available when you need them; absentee landlords; up-keep of businesses"

"No progress on Nicola Avenue since the mid-1960s; Online shopping too popular"

"Long time owners complacent; Need more work with First Nations (leakage)

"Pot holes not repaired... as of today it's been two weeks and nothing done."

"Giving it two more years for improvement, I am done ... I don't think Council cares about downtown, I have seen a Council member other than Kurt Christopherson downtown in many, many years. As much as I try to be optimistic and non-judgmental, the downtown atmosphere has to change"

MERRITT BUSINESS WALK 2015

WHAT IS BUSINESS WALK 2015?

The concept of a "Business Walk" originated in the US about a decade ago and has been adopted by communities, both large and small, throughout North America. In BC, the Central Okanagan Economic Development Corp facilitated a multi-community, regional approach in 2012:

(<http://www.jtst.gov.bc.ca/BusinessAttractionToolkit/docs/COEDC%20Business%20Walks%20Pilot%20Project.pdf>)

The province, through Small Business BC, is a promoter of Business Walks and has dedicated resources to help with organization and delivery of local initiatives:

(http://www.jtst.gov.bc.ca/BusinessAttractionToolkit/section5/business_walks_toolkit.html)

The Business Walk is an informal way for community champions and influencers to get in touch with the pulse of the business community, to build deeper relationships, and, to gather the business intelligence needed to stimulate the economy. After advance media notice / stakeholder communications, designated surveyors walk from business to business on the appointed day, speaking with business owners about their successes, their barriers and asking about solutions that might improve business. A consistent set of pre-determined questions is asked of each business (survey attached).

Those businesses experiencing troubles can be red-flagged for responsive follow up. Once the overall information is gathered, collated and analyzed, response strategies and tactics can be identified to support and stimulate the health of local businesses.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Working together with partners and local businesses, the program is intended to:

- Identify and provide opportunity to assist businesses at risk (leaving/downsizing);
- Identify opportunities to help businesses expand in the community;
- Identify problems that could cause employers to leave a community or restrict new business startups
- Build relationships with individual business owners
- Increase business sector awareness of available resources (small business counseling, lending/access to capital, networking and partnerships) through the agencies involved (CFNV, Merritt and District Chamber of Commerce, City of Merritt)

We Care About Your Business...

That's Why We're Out Walking!

What Is **Business Walk** All About?

*The **Business Walk 2015** is a face-to-face survey consisting of only 5 questions that will take only 3-5 minutes, of your time, to complete. Initially, businesses in the downtown core and DeWolfe Way will be contacted on:*

Thursday, January 29, 2015

Why Walk?

We want to show our businesses that we care, so three agencies have partnered and are walking to meet you! Business is one of the most important parts of a successful community and we want to hear first-hand what your needs, concerns and praises are so that we know how to better support you!

Who Are We Visiting?

*Our **Business Walk** will take place throughout the City of Merritt, canvassing a wide variety of businesses.*

All businesses will have the opportunity to participate in the survey by personal visit

(or, by downloading the printable questionnaire at www.cfdcnv.com and dropping off your completed questionnaire at the Community Futures Nicola Valley office

(2185B Voght St, Merritt Monday thru Friday 8:30 to 4pm; fax to: 250 378 3924)

Email to: mae@cfdcnv.com

Who's Doing The Walking?

Representatives from: Community Futures Nicola Valley; Merritt and District Chamber of Commerce; and, the City of Merritt are collaborating – including Staff, Board Members and Councilors.

Need just a little more info, or would you like to volunteer?

Phone 250 378 3923 or email: mae@cfdcnv.com

We look forward to meeting you and hearing your thoughts on:

Thursday, January 29, 2015

MERRITT BUSINESS WALK 2015 SURVEY

Name of Business: _____

Person Interviewed/Position: _____

1. How many years have you been operating the business in Merritt? __ <3 __ <5 __ <10 __ >10

2. Please rate the current state of your business (*circle answer below*)

- Poor/Slower than normal Fair/Steady as ever Good/Increasing sales Excellent

3. From the following **six** options, what are your TOP **three** reasons for doing business in Merritt and the Nicola Valley? (*read entire list first ... mark the three choices with an 'x' or circle*)

- Location
- Affordability
- Clientele
- Cost of doing business
- Business friendly local government
- Availability of talented labour
- Other

(please specify _____)

4. How much impact does **consumer leakage** (spending by customers outside of the community), have on your business?

- Low
- Medium
- High

5. What are the **three** most significant challenges or threats to your business?

(i) _____

(ii) _____

(iii) _____

6. What **three** suggestions do you have to help your business thrive?

(i) _____

(ii) _____

(iii) _____

7. Any Other Comments?

Internal: Does this business need a call-back within: __ 30 days; __ 60 days; __ 90 days

Immediate Issue: _____

Completed by: _____