



Centre for Innovative &
Entrepreneurial Leadership

State of Business Vitality in Rural Alberta

**Analysis of Twelve Alberta Business Vitality
Initiatives (BVIs)**

April 2013



State of Business Vitality in Rural Alberta Communities

Analysis of Twelve Alberta Business Vitality Initiatives (BVIs)

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
How the BVI Works	4
1. Analysis and Comparison of Scores	6
A. Overall Average Scores	6
B. Highest Scoring Questions	7
C. Lowest Scoring Questions	8
2. Common Themes	9
3. Recommended Actions	11
4. Chosen Actions	13
5. Follow-through on actions	14
6. Lessons Learned from the BVI Project	15
7. New Research into Trends and Emerging Themes in Rural Business Vitality	18
8. Recommendations to Other Alberta Communities	23
9. Recommendations for Policy Makers and Program Developers	25
Appendix 1 - ONLINE RESOURCES	27

State of Business Vitality in Rural Alberta Communities

Analysis of Twelve Alberta Business Vitality Initiatives (BVIs)

Introduction

The **Business Vitality Initiative (BVI)** helps communities assess their capacity to work with and support entrepreneurs, and to foster small business growth. The BVI measures the perceptions of community leaders, business people and citizens about the current business environment in their community and compares the results to an average of other communities to determine possible short and long-term actions the community can undertake to improve its business friendliness.

Between 2008 and 2012, 12 BVIs were conducted in Alberta, all partially or wholly funded by Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD). Six BVIs were initiated by a partnership between the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) and the Centre for Innovative and Entrepreneurial Leadership (CIEL – www.theCIEL.com) and funded through the Rural Community Adaptation Grant Program (RCAP) of Alberta. Six were funded by ARD directly. More than 300 municipal leaders, business people and community leaders were surveyed and participated in a process that:

- assessed the participating community,
- helped it focus on up to three priority initiatives to increase business vitality, and
- jump-started a community-led process to take action on the initiatives.

The communities that participated in the BVI were communities that self-identified their readiness to participate in the process, ranged in size from 650 – 12,000, and were at least an hour drive from a Central Metropolitan Area (other than Strathmore). The readiness often consisted of:

- having a local organizing committee,
- business participation,
- the right timing, and
- resources (human and/or financial) to follow through with BVI-related priority initiatives.

The participating communities were: Acme, Olds, Castor, Coronation, High Level, Peace River, Smoky Lake, Smoky River MD (as several communities), Strathmore, Vulcan, Hinton and Rocky Mountain House.

This study looks at the results of the BVIs, analyzing average scores, key themes, common recommended actions, key success indicators, and the results of the initiatives, with the hope of improving programming and policy decisions that can improve the state of the economy in rural Alberta communities.

The study is based on analysis of BVI reports, web research, interviews with participating communities, and wisdom extracted from an experienced advisory committee working to build Business Vitality Alberta (BVA), a self-administered tool developed from the learnings of the BVI.

How the BVI Works

The BVI process surveys community members about a wide range of topics related to business vitality. The community sponsors, which typically include city councils and economic development offices, are encouraged to sample communities at certain ratios: 50% business people, 25% local leaders, and 25% citizens representing a wide range of interests, ages, and perspectives in the community. Upon selection, these participants are asked to attend a BVI focus group session (the *Assessment Session*), which typically takes place over two and a half hours on a weekday evening.

A typical BVI Assessment Session begins with an introduction to the BVI process and an introduction of session participants and facilitators. In order to provide some structure for the BVI process and results, participants are then asked to discuss and define the geographical boundaries of their community. This boundary may be just a town's boundaries or it also may encompass nearby surrounding communities that may rely on or are integrated into the central community.

The completion of the BVI questionnaire is the next step in the facilitation process. The first section collects information relating to both the participant and the community, and asks participants to provide their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the community.

The second section of the questionnaire is comprised of 60 multi-choice and short answer questions in ten separate sections. The Assessment Questionnaire (a.k.a. The Index) gathers perceptions on indicators known to affect business health. The indicators are based on an extensive literature review, coupled with expertise gained from years of practice in the field of Community Economic Development. The indicators are broken down into 10 sections, including:

- A. Opportunities and Attitudes
- B. Quality of Life
- C. Education and Training
- D. Innovation

- E. Leadership, Teamwork, and Networking
- F. Role of Government and Organizations
- G. Capital and Funding
- H. Infrastructure and Business Services
- I. Communication and Connectivity
- J. Markets and Marketing

A range of answers are available to the participant for each question (*completely agree, somewhat agree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat disagree, and completely disagree*), and each answer receives a different score. If all participants completely agreed with a question, the question would receive a score of 100. Alternately, if all participants completely disagreed with the question, the overall question score would be zero. In the case of *neither agree nor disagree*, if all participants answered a question with this option the question score would be 50.

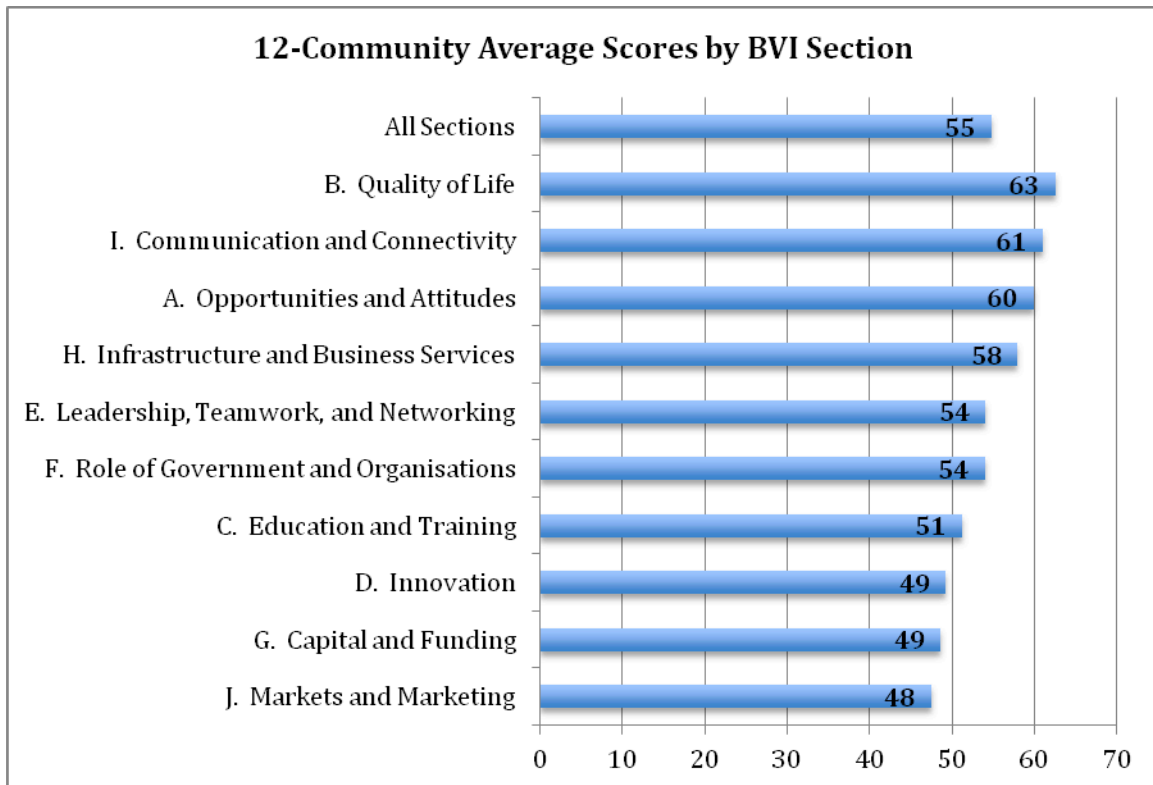
In its calculation of final scores, CIEL weights each question, subsection, and section according to its relative importance in terms of business vitality.

In addition to the questionnaire portion of the BVI, focus groups discuss the factors that make the community a good place to do business and improvements that could be made in order to improve business vitality.

CIEL then takes the results of the focus groups and the data provided by the BVI questionnaire to produce an analysis such as the one contained in this report.

1. Analysis and Comparison of Scores

A. Overall Average Scores



The average score for the BVI for the 12 Alberta communities was 55. The three highest scoring sections were:

- Quality of Life,
- Communications and Connectivity and
- Opportunities and Attitudes (towards small business).

The three lowest scoring sections were:

- Innovation,
- Capital and Funding, and
- Market and Marketing.

B. Highest Scoring Questions

In the BVI report for each community, we created a list of the highest and lowest scoring questions. The questions in the table below appeared the most times in the top five highest scoring questions across the twelve communities.

Question	Number of appearances in top five scores
There are quality elementary and secondary schools in the area.	10
Successful businesses want to remain in the area.	10
Informal business communication (word of mouth) is highly effective.	8
A quality health care facility is accessible, well serviced and within a reasonable distance.	7
Quality communication services (phone, cell phone, high speed internet, etc.) are adequate for business.	4

Most of the areas where communities experienced their greatest strengths were in infrastructure and community services (schools, health care facilities, communication services, etc.). Most communities saw their community as being desirable to live in, especially to the business owner (high sense of commitment to the community). While good formal communications (newspaper, radio, etc.) were often lacking, informal communications (word of mouth) were important and strong in almost all surveyed communities.

C. Lowest Scoring Questions

The questions in the table below appeared the most times in the list of the five lowest scoring questions across the twelve communities.

Question	Number of appearances in bottom five scores
Public transportation within the area is adequate.	8
A pool of skilled labour is available to local businesses in the area.	7
Businesses in the area /region jointly market their products and services as a group, locally and in other regions.	6
There are formal and informal forums (conferences, workshops, association breakfast meetings) on technology and technology applications.	6
Air (commercial) services are available between communities.	4

Public transportation –within and between neighbouring communities - was often cited as an issue. However, no communities selected it as an action item or priority. Most communities cited skilled labour as a critical business issue in their community but felt they could do little to improve. Thematically, Innovation and Markets & Marketing, had low section scores. Specifically, questions relating to the presence of formal and informal innovation/technology forums, and businesses jointly marketing products or services, scored low.

2. Common Themes

In each of the twelve assessment reports we picked out themes for that community that seemed to resonate throughout both the data and the written comments. The themes are often reflected in the scores (quantitative) and the focus groups (qualitative).

Theme	Number of communities
Downtown beautification (need for)	11
Need for better communication between business community and local government (&/or between businesses)	9
Youth opportunities and retention (lack of)	8
Branding and tourism marketing (lack of)	6
Community plan/vision (lack of)	5

- Almost all communities (11/12) felt that their town core was lacking, often as a result of development along a strip or just outside municipal limits. A walkable, beautiful downtown core, where vacant buildings would be brought back into a state of repair and vibrancy, was seen as necessary and desirable in almost every community.

- Most communities (9/12) experienced a lack of good communication between the business community and local government. In fact, many communities saw the BVI as a great opportunity to work together to improve the relationship. Almost all BVIs saw the organizing committee made up of local government, local business development organizations (Chamber, Community Futures and key businesses). In some cases, the issue of communication came down to the need for a yearly or bi-yearly meeting where local government heard the concerns of businesses. In others, more ongoing communication needs were expressed.

- Most communities (8/12) felt their youth populations were disengaged from the community, and worried about retaining these youth after high school. The youth were often characterized in negative terms (e.g. vandalism, the community having to provide opportunities to try to keep them out of trouble). However, almost always, communities recognized them as having incredible creative potential with the communities wondering how to engage them meaningfully in entrepreneurial and other endeavours. Very few communities felt the expertise or capacity to take on a youth entrepreneurship or business development program (e.g. Junior Achievement). Some communities

attempted to engage high school students in the BVI process with varying degrees of success.

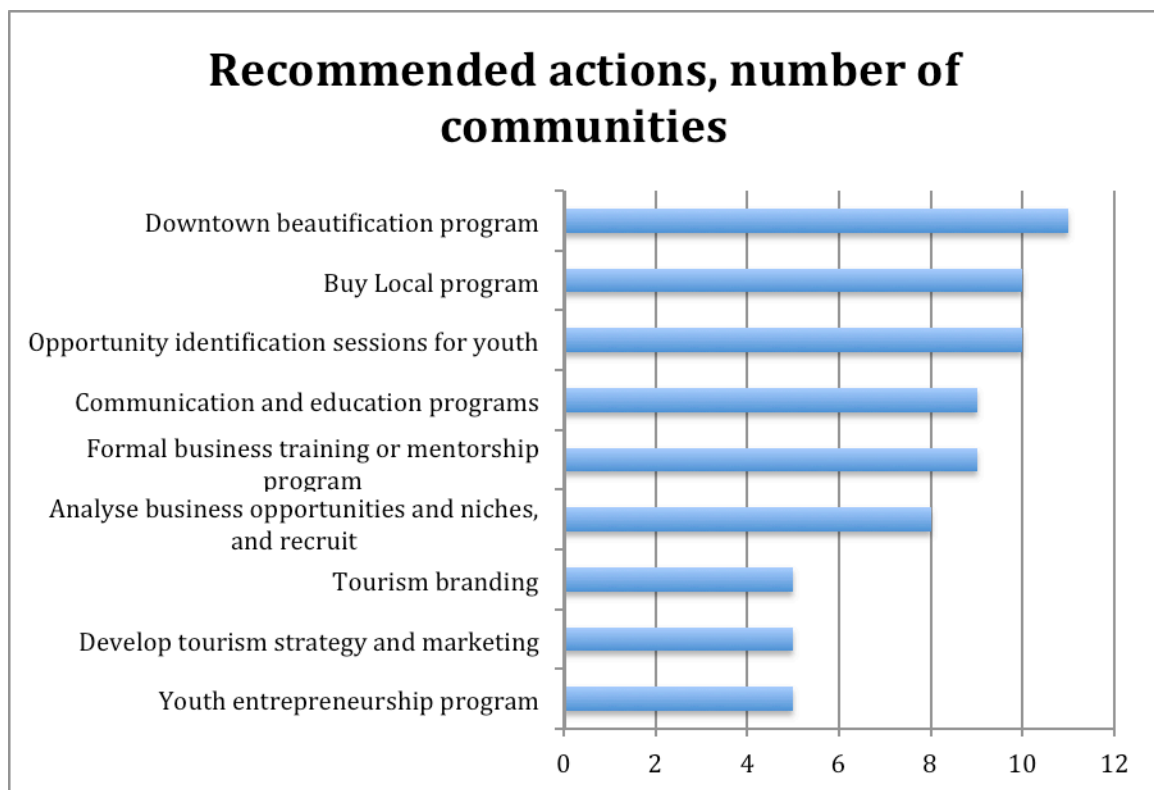
- Half of the communities (6/12) felt they had serious branding issues. Brands were not fully developed, articulated or not uniformly promoted. Branding was seen to be important for not only recruiting and retaining new residents and businesses (seen universally as highly desirable), but also in the development of tourism opportunities. Most communities struggled with harnessing tourism opportunities, not knowing where to start, who might take leadership and knowing what simple cost effective strategies might help to develop opportunities.

- Some communities (5/12) felt that municipal plans were inadequate or out of date, or had not properly considered the needs of the business community.

3. Recommended Actions

Following the *assessment sessions* in the twelve Alberta BVIs, CIEL made recommendations—sometimes up to a dozen of them— on how the community could increase its business vitality, based on issues identified, addressing gaps, or building on strengths identified through the BVI survey and Focus Groups. The recommended actions were presented to the community through a BVI *Focus and Action* session. Community members (including local government, businesses, economic development organizations, etc.) were asked to make decisions on selecting priority actions for the community.

The graph below shows the most commonly recommended actions across the twelve communities.



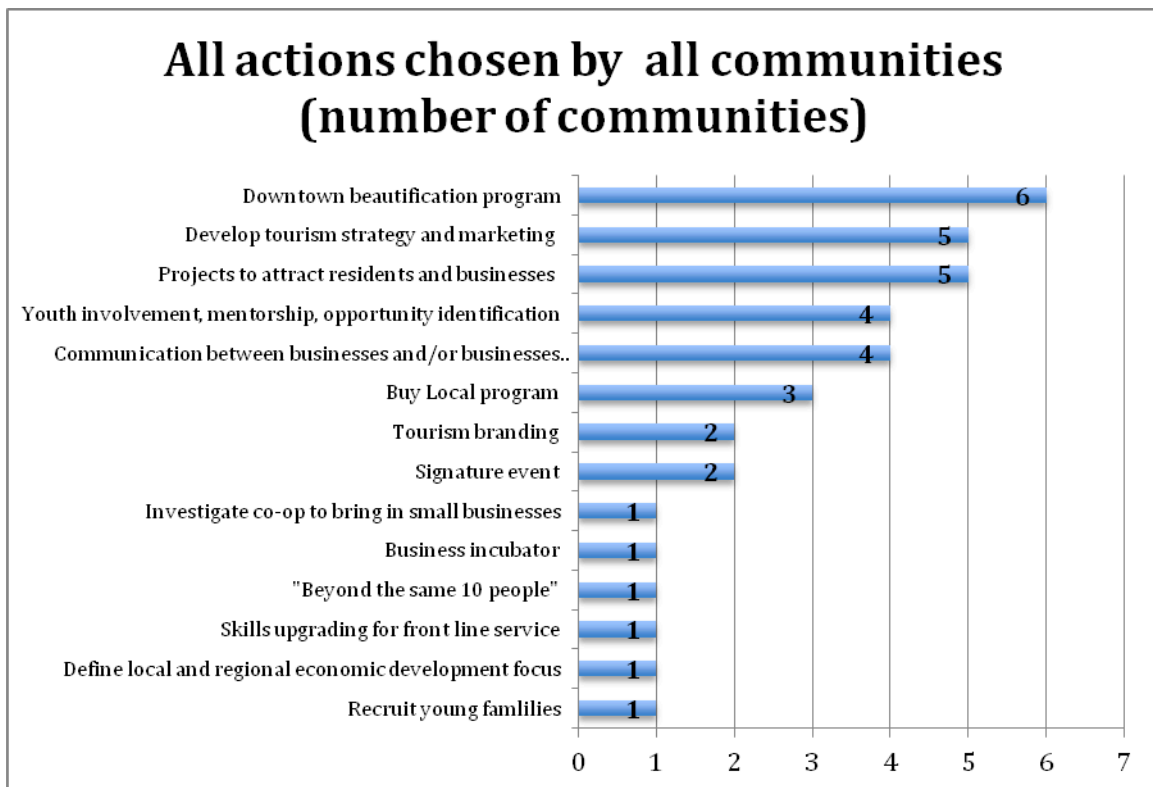
- Almost all communities (11/12) identified issues or problems with their downtowns, or a need to improve the downtowns as a place for community convening and commerce.
- Ten of 12 communities identified leakage of dollars from the community to larger urban neighbours and on-line competitors as a challenging issue. Most

had done very little to measure or strategically address the problem through a “buy local/invest local” type of initiative.

- Most communities felt the youth in the community had few opportunities for learning entrepreneurship or developing entrepreneurial ideas. In ten communities, CIEL recommended a “youth opportunity identification session” where youth would be asked to identify (and possibly create solutions for) promising business ideas and other community opportunities (recreational, educational, etc.).
- Most communities felt there were few opportunities to develop business skills. In 10 of 12 communities, CIEL recommended formal business training courses. The type of course – from starting your business to specific technology to marketing - depended on the needs expressed. In addition, the creation of a formal or informal mentorship program was also identified as a way to increase business capacity in many communities.
- All communities identified untapped business niches and opportunities (an open-ended qualitative question). In many of the communities, the needs expressed were so strong (e.g. a veterinarian) that CIEL recommended further research and/or marketing to fill the niches.
- Other themes expressed in multiple communities were those of branding for tourism, developing a tourism strategy with marketing resources, and developing a specific program to assist youth with entrepreneurship (e.g. introduction in school, mentoring, business/job shadowing, etc.). Although the BVI focused on the needs of existing businesses, tourism was seen to be an important emerging and underdeveloped sector in almost all communities. Most communities did not have a dedicated economic or tourism development officer to assist them in this task and sought assistance to good and easily digestible tourism resources where they might begin to assess their tourism potential, conduct research, formulate a plan and undertake strategic initiatives.

4. Chosen Actions

During the second, or *Focus and Action* session, community members were asked to choose three actions on which they wanted to follow through (one community chose six.) The graph below shows the most commonly chosen actions in the twelve communities.



Interestingly, a number of recommended actions and themes were often ignored or were not picked as priority actions during the community's decision-making despite their being identified as priority issues. On the whole, communities tended to select projects that had highly visible outcomes (downtown beautification, tourism/marketing, promotion to attract new residents) vs. those which would be considered 'less visible' capacity building.

- Of the 9 times a formal training or mentorship was recommended, no communities selected this action
- Of the 8 times an analysis of business opportunities and niches was recommended, no communities selected this action
- Of the 10 times a buy local initiative was recommended, 3 communities selected this action
- Of the 10 times a youth strategy was recommended – in the form of youth opportunity identification sessions, youth mentoring, youth entrepreneurship, etc. – 4 communities selected this action

5. Follow-through on actions

The following chart presents an update on the status of BVI-selected priority projects as of Fall 2012 from 11 of the 12 communities (one community did not respond to numerous requests for information on project status).

It should be noted that the BVI had three intentions:

1. assessing the participating community,
2. helping it focus on up to three priority initiatives to increase business vitality, and
3. jump-starting a community-led process to take action on the initiatives.

Once started, community processes – often led by volunteers – can be unpredictable. In this light, 46% of 35 projects identified, have been done or were in process.

Project status	Number or projects (total 35)
Done	5 (14%)
Done incompletely or in a limited way	5 (14%)
Done but as part of larger already-existing project	6 (17%)
Done, stemmed from BVI but was not one of the recommendations	5 (14%)
Not done	19 (54%)

Key Success Indicators for Actions

The most common success factors for these projects were:

- Having a champion guide them or ensure that they happened (e.g. EDO pushing them forward or assisting group process)
- Having the appropriate resources to complete them (e.g. \$10,000 RCAP grant seed funding)

The most common reason they did not work:

- BVI Action Team (volunteer committees of citizens that were formed at Focus and Action Meeting) did not work well together
- Wrong, not enough, or non-influential community members at second (Focus/Action) BVI meeting

6. Lessons Learned from the BVI Project

People interviewed as part of BVI review focused on the advantages of an outside agency facilitating the entire process, and were leery of a self-administered process for various parts of the BVI. Some of the disadvantages cited in considering whether a community might undertake a BVI-like process by themselves (a self-administered process vs. fully administered process like the BVI):

- Facilitation (many communities do not have specialized facilitators; objectivity of outside facilitator seen as important)
- Follow-through important – need someone to beat bushes to ensure turnout at meetings
- Administration/co-ordination – often difficult for a busy person with many projects going on (traditional BVI offers a compact complete process with beginning and end, an outside contracted organizer [CIEL])
- Analysis/interpretation of data – not a skillset all EDOs or City Staff might have
- BVI organizers loved the BVI's measurement of perceptions and how it forced people to confront issues and perceptions - *"When the old boys were forced to answer specific questions it was a wake up call for them and they could not fall back on their broad grandiose negative statements. They had to think about specifics."* BVI Organizer
- BVI organizers also liked the radial (or spider) graph and how it allowed communities to see themselves in comparison to other communities and see that the issues facing them were common (allowed them not to feel so bad about themselves or that they were not alone)

Strengths of the BVI (from comments of those interviewed)

- The facilitation was very good.
- Helps forge relationships for other initiatives.
- It focuses on business specifically, not on more general things like many processes do.
- It got people thinking.
- Comparing with other communities is useful. It showed us we are not as bad off as we thought.
- The process of BVI in the room was very good.
- The spider graph is good, because people were pleasantly surprised. It started conversations about what's important.
- When the old boys were forced to answer specific questions it was a wake up call for them and they could not fall back on their broad grandiose negative statements. They had to think about specifics.

- It would be a great exercise for a community to go through every 3-5 years. It would give a baseline like a census does.
- It was a good process.
- Happy with the BVI - Mike did a good job of engaging participants. The discussions, once they got going, were hard to stop, because everyone was so engaged.
- The BVI sessions were a shot in the arm. Liked the spider graph comparison. Nice to see how they stacked up. It was a nice holistic look at it all.
- It gets people together to talk.

Problems with the BVI (from comments of those interviewed)

- It depends too much on quality of leadership and the ability of that person to shepherd it.
- It needs to come from bottom up, not from top down.
- It depends on leader's ability to work with strengths and get everyone beyond just wanting their own slice of the pie.
- It is too much to expect to get the right people all in the same room, especially twice. The opinions are skewed by who happens to show up. People should be approached (and fill out the questionnaire) individually—it would be more convenient, numbers would be better and they would be more honest.
- It is a document on a shelf, not a living document
- It is too much to expect the EDO to shepherd all those people, without a powerful key champion among the volunteers. "People care about their communities, and then again they don't."
- Great to have meetings but in the end we are the ones who do all the work. At the time they mean well but you have to wait for funding and by that time they have moved on to something else. It loses momentum.
- Should have done a better job of managing who was in the room. There were people who should have been there. She would have made sure the second session had the same people as the first. She would not leave this to chance.
- Without the seed money, the funding, we might not have done it at all.
- Session 1 a bit too long, not enough of them went to number 2, different people. Hard to get momentum.
- Wished people had a better idea what to expect before they arrived because it takes too long to bring them up to speed. It is hard to get people out because they are so busy. There is a problem with getting the in people to the second meeting.
- It was downloaded from the EDO to a volunteer committee, and this is not good. Hard to get buy in or participation. Town did not take ownership.

- It is too dependent on the quality of local leadership, on the engagement of the local municipal council, and on the commitment of the people in the room.

7. New Research into Trends and Emerging Themes in Rural Business Vitality

The original BVI was created from a literature review from more than 60 studies on business vitality. For this project:

- These sources (updated) were reviewed.
- Internet searches were conducted on six themes related to the project including business vitality, rural economic development and rural entrepreneurship
- The research team followed up on sources of information identified by members of the advisory committee (AC) of Business Vitality Alberta - a concurrent business vitality project in Alberta
- The original BVI was reviewed by the research team

The new research validated the 10 key areas and 65 themes (indicators) of the original BVI. In addition, it suggested 10 new themes to consider incorporating into the BVI. The four most significant themes identified were:

- The growth of “buy local, invest local” as a means to stabilize rural communities and ensure strong local economic development
- The growth of the need for aging-friendly communities and the need for businesses to serve them.
- The increasing reliance on social media as a business tool
- The increase in the importance of regionalism vs. community-specific initiatives

The following section summarizes the ten themes. See *Appendix 1* for links to web resources on each of the Trends or Emerging Themes.

1. Buy Local Continues To Get Bigger

Local food

Generally speaking, “buy local” tends to mean local food. As the concept becomes better known, it is snowballing. Related to this is a trend toward planning regional food systems. The buy local movement in rural areas is related to a desire not to be dependent on oil prices and on an otherwise increasingly unreliable outside world, and on a desire to support local enterprise by keeping money in the community.

Buy local has its detractors and there is some debate these days about whether encouraging local food is the boon its supporters say it is (see the *Macleans* article cited in *Appendix 1*).

Local businesses

Getting people to shop at a local stationer or bookstore rather than ordering from Staples or Amazon or travelling south of the border is a bigger challenge than promoting local food, and some communities are tackling it. Some say it involves improving local businesses so they can better meet people's needs, improving downtowns, and carefully thinking through whether or not to welcome big box stores.

Local travel

People will travel locally if they can get a memorable experience rather than just a commodity, and a good meal while they are there. This is related to tourism development, below.

Mobile and local

More and more people are using smartphones to find and comment on businesses and good deals. This is happening even in small towns, whose businesses are beginning take advantage of this. Again this comes up in the tourism section below.

2. Buy local is not enough. *Invest local and bank local* are the next stage

With tight lending standards for small businesses at big banks, and with a trend toward distrust of those banks, many small businesses are turning to alternative financing methods, especially credit unions (although credit unions are not *necessarily* easier to get credit from). Cooperatives may become a more viable form of business. People are talking about local stock exchanges. This is related to developing concepts of developing rural wealth, with an emphasis on the difference between wealth and income.

3. The processes of attracting newcomers and attracting tourists continue to evolve, and they are converging.

Attracting tourists

It has taken a while for some communities get over the perception that embracing tourism means resorting to work that is low-paying, seasonal, and part-time. They are realizing that tourism employs not only service personnel but a range of occupations such as pilots, website developers, accountants, tour operators, fishing guides, resort operators, and golf and ski sector positions, in a range of sectors including transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, recreation and entertainment, and travel services.

For greater success, tourism operators need to make sure they are good at internet marketing, branding, and creating unique *experiences* rather than sightseeing. Municipal and regional tourism agencies need to make sure they are thinking and operating regionally.

Attracting new residents

The convergence of tourist and resident attraction is summed up in this quote: “If people think it's a nice place to visit, they think it's a nice place to live.”

The term *liveability* has become current and popular because of world city liveability indices, and it is in the same ballpark as *community vitality*.

“Livability means being able to take your kids to school, go to work, see a doctor, drop by the grocery or post office, go out to dinner and a movie, and play with your kids at the park, all without having to get into your car. Livability means building the communities that help Americans live the lives they want to live—whether those communities are urban centers, small towns, or rural areas.”— Secretary Ray LaHood, U.S. Department of Transportation

4. The infrastructure deficit is a huge municipal issue in Canada.

Local elected officials who attended the 2012 Federation of Municipalities Conference reported that the biggest issue was the infrastructure deficit and the associated revenue imbalance. Municipalities own 53% of the country's infrastructure but collect just eight cents of every tax dollar paid in Canada, with the other 92 cents going to federal, provincial and territorial governments.

Municipalities are in limbo at the moment because the federal government is ending its current program (which municipalities say has been inadequate) and starting another, the nature of which is unknown.

This is an issue for businesses because poor infrastructure limits them in a variety of practical ways. It siphons municipal tax dollars that could contribute to other ways of enhancing business vitality. Outdated infrastructure probably discourages businesses looking for a place to locate.

5. Use of social media in business is becoming more common, but most small businesses (and politicians) understand social media poorly and use it ineffectively.

Many businesses know they should get on board with social media. But often they think social media is a new way of pushing their message and disseminating information. Actually social media is about interactivity, and it's about wanting to hear what your customers have to say. Ideally, it is a customer-driven conversation. And it includes mobile internet.

Effective business use of social media takes study, practice, time, and resources.

6. There is a growing emphasis on regional, rather than single town, economies and planning.

Provincial and federal governments and agencies know, better than municipal governments and small businesses do, that regional thinking works best. It is a matter of getting out of the individual silo mentality.

For small businesses this means such things as joint marketing and regional business associations and, especially for tourism, collaborative regional strategies and itineraries.

Regional public transit is good for business because it enhances commuting options for employees.

7. Broadband is still an issue.

A business is stuck if it cannot take advantage of such things as electronic invoicing, internet conferencing and large digital file transfers. In Canada, large thinly populated areas make broadband provision very expensive. Governments have been falling short of their promises in this area for years. Now there is the possibility of satellite and wireless technologies making broadband infrastructure unnecessary, but those technologies are not catching on fast in rural areas because they have their own limitations and problems.

In the meantime, some frustrated towns have been paying for broadband cable themselves, realizing that they can't attract new residents or businesses without it.

8. Big box or not

The question of whether to welcome big box stores still comes up often. There are complex arguments on both sides of the issue, and municipal politicians and small businesses are advised to be familiar with them.

9. There is a slowly growing movement toward making communities age-friendly, as a response to the aging population.

The concept of age-friendliness cuts across a number of areas including housing, transportation, health services, social participation, outdoor spaces, public buildings, and civic participation opportunities. These may sound like civic planning and local government issues. But can seniors easily access your business, not just from the sidewalk but from their homes? Are you in a part of town that is age-friendly? Will your town attract retirees?

This clearly has implications for tourism. What kinds of activities and access would attract seniors to your tourism business?

10. Increasing reliance on immigration

Are small communities getting more reliant on immigration to supply their workforces? In some parts of Canada this may be true because of the aging workforce and youth out-migration. What strategies are required in order to attract people not just from the next province but from another country?

8. Recommendations to Other Alberta Communities wishing to Improve their Business Vitality

The following list of recommendations is made to assist Alberta rural communities improve business vitality and economic self-sufficiency:

Principles

- Undertake processes like the BVI (or the free self-administered Business Vitality Alberta [BVA] found in the toolkit section of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association's web-site: www.auma.ca) with a long-term commitment to regularly assess the community's business friendliness, focus on short-term initiatives, and bring these to action (ASSESS – FOCUS – ACT), with a long-term view of developing strategic capacity, sound planning and policy in this area.
- Undertake small (or short-term) projects to get small successes and get momentum.
- Encourage joint leadership from local government, the business community and community/economic development organizations.
- Build capacity of young people through mentorship, entrepreneurship programs, and other forms of dynamic engagement which encourage youth to be involved in their creation.
- Work towards the development of capacity in these three key areas:

Opportunities

The ability of the community to recognize, take action on, and follow through on available opportunities. Areas addressed: employees, investment, infrastructure, and services.

Attitudes

The mindset that fosters the development of businesses and innovative community solutions. Areas addressed: motivation, attitudes toward learning, innovation, and foresight.

Networks

The ability of citizens to connect with each other and with outside markets. Areas addressed: connection, collaboration, and networks.

Specific Initiatives

Communities might want to consider undertaking initiatives that have been frequently cited as important by their rural Alberta neighbours. These initiatives include:

- Downtown revitalization and beautification
- Improving communication between business and local government
- Tourism assessment and marketing
- Enhancing youth opportunities (including engagement, opportunity identification, entrepreneurship)
- Branding communities and regions
- Buy local, invest local
- New business and resident attraction

9. Recommendations for Policy Makers and Program Developers

The following list of recommendations is made to assist Alberta policy makers and program developers assist rural communities improve business vitality and economic self-sufficiency:

Policy

- Continue to emphasize the importance of an entrepreneurial culture in rural Alberta communities (e.g. encourage use of Business Vitality Alberta (BVA), and other tools and processes, etc.)
- Take a long-term community capacity building approach to rural communities favouring:
 - long-term commitment (vs. intermittent “one off” funding)
 - resources for follow-through and action (vs. only funding an assessment process)
 - support processes that allow communities to build capacity (have short-term successes in actions while encouraging communities to be strategic, plan, and think in the long-term).
- Find resources for communities that demonstrate readiness to move forward. Profile these communities to incent other communities.

Program

Provide assistance to build program capacity in rural Alberta communities that specifically:

- Build a culture of innovation (e.g. provide opportunities and incentives for innovation and technology forums, profile and promote innovative thinking, etc.)
- Incent regional and local collaboration and the ability to work together
 - Amongst regional and community stakeholders (e.g. local government and other organizations)
 - From local government to business community

- Amongst business community (e.g. to jointly market goods and services)
- Work towards the development of capacity in these three key areas:

Opportunities

The ability of the community to recognize, take action on, and follow through on available opportunities. Areas addressed: employees, investment, infrastructure, and services.

Attitudes

The mindset that fosters the development of businesses and innovative community solutions. Areas addressed: motivation, attitudes toward learning, innovation, and foresight.

Networks

The ability of citizens to connect with each other and with outside markets. Areas addressed: connection, collaboration, and networks.

Support for Specific Initiatives

Because these initiatives were frequently chosen for action or cited as solutions by Alberta communities in the BVI, program support should be considered for the following. This could include research into best practices, instructional guides, workshops/training, video support, focused assessment tools, mentoring and/or financial support. The initiatives include:

- Downtown revitalization and beautification
- Improving communication between business and local government
- Tourism assessment and marketing
- Enhancing youth opportunities (including engagement, opportunity identification, entrepreneurship)
- Branding communities and regions
- Buy local, invest local
- New business and resident attraction

Appendix 1 - ONLINE RESOURCES

1. Buy Local

Institute for Local Self-Reliance

Top Ten Reasons to Support Locally Owned Businesses

<http://www.ilsr.org/why-support-locally-owned-businesses/>

Institute for Local Self-Reliance

Study Finds Buy Local Message Benefitting Independent Business

<http://www.ilsr.org/retail/news/survey-finds-buy-local-message-benefitting-independent-businesses/>

Small Business Trends

2011 Trends Driving Rural Small Business

<http://smallbiztrends.com/2011/01/2011-trends-driving-rural-small-business.html>

Small Biz Survival

Shop Local Campaigns for Small Towns ebook

<http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2009/05/shop-local-campaigns-for-small-towns.html>

The Rurban Fringe

Do 'Buy Local' Campaigns Work?

<http://www.therurbanfringe.com/do-buy-local-campaigns-work/>

Macleans

Is Local Food Bad For The Economy?

<http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/07/09/is-local-food-bad-for-the-economy/>

2. Bank Local

Yahoo Finance

More Canadians making the switch from big banks to credit unions?

<http://ca.finance.yahoo.com/blogs/insight/more-canadians-making-switch-big-banks-credit-unions-165715983.html>

Canada Newswire

Canadian Credit Unions Continuing Solid Growth

<http://www.newswire.ca/en/story/987345/canadian-credit-unions-continuing-solid-growth>

Amy Corese

Locavesting

http://locavesting.com/Locavesting_homepage.html

Michael Schuman

Local Dollars, Local Sense

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1603583432/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=levitchron-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1603583432

Small Business Trends

Top 9 Small Business Trends for 2012

<http://smallbiztrends.com/2011/12/9-rural-small-business-trends-2012.html>

Small Biz Survival

Local investing will change the face of small towns

<http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2012/03/local-investing-will-change-face-of.html>

Small Biz Survival

Local investing could solve several rural business problems

<http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2011/10/local-investing-could-solve-several.html>

Yellow Wood Associates

Wealth Creation in Rural Communities: A New Approach

<http://www.yellowwood.org/WCRC%20Short%20Description.pdf>

3. Attracting newcomers and tourists

Rural Tourism Marketing

Are Rural Tourism and the Internet Small Towns' Last Best Hope?

<http://ruraltourismmarketing.com/2011/10/are-rural-tourism-and-the-internet-small-towns%E2%80%99-last-best-hope/>

Small Biz Survival

Tourism and economic development are linked

<http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2012/02/tourism-and-economic-development-are.html>

Alberta Urban Municipalities Association

Welcoming communities toolkit

http://www.auma.ca/live/digitalAssets/25/25953_WICT_booklet_10232008.pdf

Re-Imagine Rural

Ten Reasons "Third Places" Matter to Rural Communities

<http://reimaginerural.com/10-reasons-third-places-matter-to-rural-communities/>

Centre for Innovative and Entrepreneurial Leadership

Tourism 360

<http://www.theciel.com/publications/tourism360guidecielv1.0oct2011.pdf>

U.S. Department of Transportation

The Role of Transit in Rural Liveability

http://www.planning.dot.gov/documents/TransPlanning/TAT_III_ch4.pdf

U.S. Departments of Transportation and Agriculture

Supporting Sustainable Rural Communities

http://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/pdf/Supporting_Sustainable_Rural_Communities_FINAL.PDF

4. Infrastructure deficit

Federation of Canadian Municipalities

Infrastructure: About the Issue

<http://www.fcm.ca/home/issues/infrastructure/about-the-issue.htm>

Federation of Canadian Municipalities

Danger Ahead: The Coming Collapse Of Canada's Municipal Infrastructure

http://www.fcm.ca/Documents/reports/Danger Ahead The coming collapse of Canadas_municipal_infrastructure_EN.pdf

The Rurban Fringe

New Survey Shows Canadians Want Federal Infrastructure Funding Protected

<http://www.therurbanfringe.com/new-survey-shows-canadians-want-federal-infrastructure-funding-protected/>

Smart Growth B.C.

Innovative Infrastructure Financing Mechanisms for Smart Growth

<http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/Portals/0/Downloads/sgbc-infrastructure-report-web.pdf>

5. Social media

Rural Tourism Marketing

Are Rural Tourism and the Internet Small Towns' Last Best Hope?

<http://ruraltourismmarketing.com/2011/10/are-rural-tourism-and-the-internet-small-towns%E2%80%99-last-best-hope/>

Digital Journal

Small Business Keeps Screwing Up Social Media

<http://digitaljournal.com/pr/794277>

Mashable

5 Ways Small Businesses Get Social Media Wrong

<http://mashable.com/2012/06/25/small-businesses-social-media-tips/>

Small Biz Survival

Talk Less About You, More about Them

<http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2011/12/talk-less-about-you-more-about-them.html>

6. Regional thinking

Smart Growth B.C.

Regional Economies

<http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/AboutUs/Issues/EconomicDevelopment/RegionalEconomies/tabid/100/Default.aspx>

7. Broadband

Federation of Canadian Municipalities

Closing the Digital Divide in Rural and Remote Canada

<http://www.fcm.ca/home/events/past-events/2012/2012-annual-conference-and-trade-show/closing-the-digital-divide-in-rural-and-remote-canada.htm>

Globe and Mail

Canada's Digital Divide

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/canadas-digital-divide/article4313761/?page=all>

8. Big box

Institute for Self-Reliance

Key Studies on Big Box Stores and Independent Business

<http://www.ilsr.org/key-studies-walmart-and-bigbox-retail/>

Small Biz Survival

Local stores worth more than big boxes

<http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2008/05/local-stores-worth-3-times-more-than.html>

9. Age-Friendly

Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors

Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities-- A Guide

http://www.health.gov.nl.ca/health/publications/afrc_en.pdf

Osprey Community Foundation

Creating an Age-Friendly Community

<http://ospreycommunityfoundation.ca/docs/CaringForSeniorsReport2011Final.pdf>

10. Immigration

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs

Community Attractiveness Indicators for Newcomers Tool

<http://www.crrf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CS5-P13-Paper-M-EIDakiky.pdf>