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## The Business Vitality Initiative

The Business Vitality Initiative (BVI) helps communities to 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.

The Peace River BVI is sponsored by the Town of Peace River, Community Futures Peace Country, the Peace River Rotary Club, Northern Lakes College, the Sagitawa Friendship Centre, and the Peace River and District Chamber of Commerce. Norma MacQuarrie, the Chief Administrative Officer for the Town of Peace River, is the primary contact person.

Peace River is one of four Alberta communities selected to participate in a pilot of the BVI funded by Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD). ARD has partnered with CIEL to deliver the BVI to assist with economic development in rural Alberta.

Phase 1 used focus groups and a comprehensive survey to assess the community's small business potential.

### Peace River Phase 1 Assessment Results

In the Assessment Session, participants were asked to give three words to describe their community. The majority of responses were positive. According to respondents, Peace River is a *scenically beautiful, friendly, growing, and peaceful* community. When participants were asked to identify key strengths, the top response was *the beautiful river valley location* followed by *the full range of services and friendly, supportive people*. When participants were asked why they live in Peace River the main reasons were *employment and business*.

When participants were asked to provide directions for improvement for their community, the need for *more activities for youth and regional cooperation between municipalities* were mentioned most often.

More detail can be found in the Peace River Phase 1 Assessment Report.

## Section Scores

From highest to lowest, section scores out of 100 were as follows:

- Quality of Life (72)
- Infrastructure & Business Services (66)
- Communication & Connectivity (66)
- Leadership Teamwork & Networking (61)
- Opportunities and Attitudes (59)
- Government & Organizations (53)
- Capital & Funding (52)
- Education & Training (50)
- Markets & Marketing (48)
- Innovation (47)

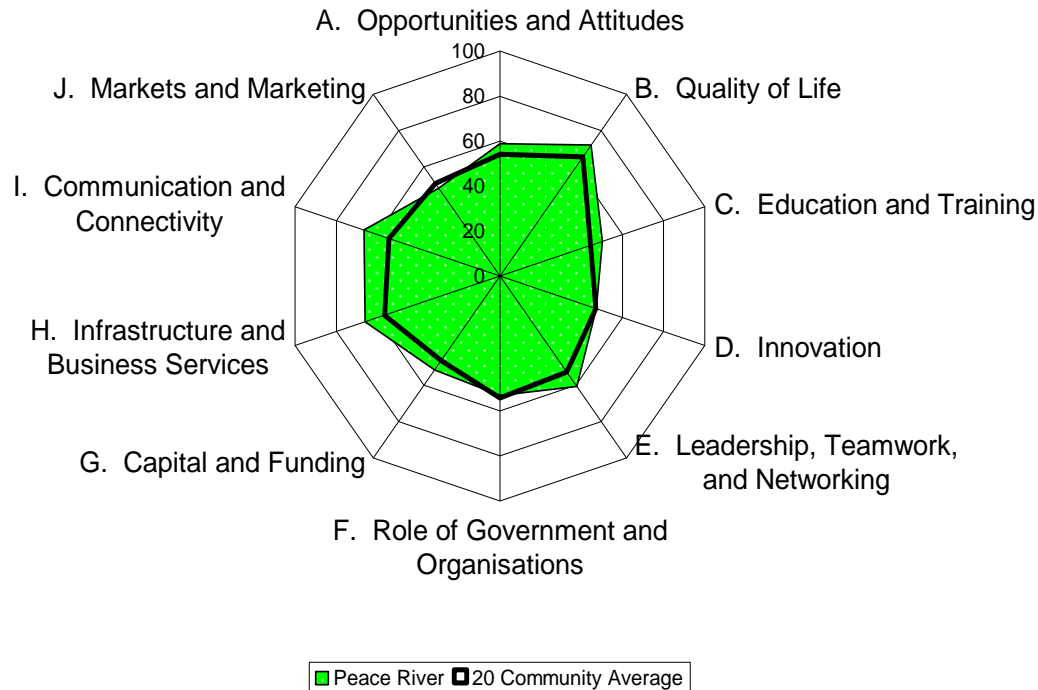
The average score for all sections was 58, a score 10% higher than 20-community (Canadian communities) average of 52.

Peace River scored equal to or above the 20-community average in 8 of 10 sections. Particular strengths for Peace River are its score for the 'Quality of Life' section of 69 out of 100 (10% above the community average), Communications and Connectivity (66, 23% above the community average) and its score of 66 (17% above average) for Infrastructure and Business Services.

The lowest scoring section of the survey was 'Innovation' which had a score of 47 (about equal to the 20-community average).

The radial graph below contrasts Peace River's section scores with the average score for other communities which have done the BVI in Canada. The closer the shaded section is to the outside ring, the higher Peace River's score, and the greater the business friendliness.

## Peace River and All-Community Section Scores



## Peace River Phase 2 Results

The Phase 2, or Focus and Action Session, held on March 30, 2009 at the Belle Petroleum Centre, was open to the entire community with the purpose of setting priorities for improvement and jump-starting the community to action. See Appendix 1 for an attendance list.

During that session, the assessment scores and other results, as described in the Phase 1 Report, were presented. The community was then given a series of possible courses of action, derived from focus groups and questionnaire responses (and the group was asked to add their own suggestions to that list) to improve the community's environment for business. All of the actions were posted on sheets of paper throughout the room, and participants were given 5 votes to identify their priorities and select actions that they were interested in investing their time and energy into. The results are presented below with the

number of votes for each. Each action item is divided into four categories: capacity building, networking, marketing, and research/ administration/ planning.

The top 3 actions are high-lighted in gray.

<b>Possible Short Term Actions</b>		<b>Votes</b>
<i>Shaded items were chosen as priorities and became the subject of action groups.</i>		
<b>Capacity Building</b>	▪ Opportunity identification session(s) for youth/young adults to identify untapped business, recreation and education opportunities – start with identifying affordable/accessible activities, BVI, etc. (Opportunities, Untapped opportunities)	14
	▪ Entrepreneurial program for youth in schools and other supports for young entrepreneurs (Focus groups, Untapped opportunities)	9
	▪ Create a community foundation that harnesses wealth for community building initiatives (Section G)	5
<b>Marketing</b>	▪ Town beautification/revitalization project(s) – begin with reviewing underutilized buildings (Focus groups, Improvements, Section H)	10
	▪ Create a positive 'buy local' program (Opportunities, Section J)	10
	▪ Create Peace River brand that resonates with young families, harnesses community amenities/advantages (e.g. "leader of the North") (Sections A, J)	11
<b>Networking</b>	▪ Leadership program with a regional flavour (e.g. participants from Peace River and some from regional communities) that builds strength in the community and appetite for regional initiatives (Improvements, Section A)	7
	▪ Link in-town and out-of-town investors to businesses in the community needing 'angel' financing (Section G)	2
	▪ Mentoring, training [successful e-commerce, tools for productivity increases, customer service, etc.] program for businesses (Section A)	2
	▪ More communication, collaboration, and networking between leaders, businesses and community – [e.g. possible regular roundtable, forum on infrastructure/highways/town development, innovative practices, e-commerce/e-learning/e-health, etc.] (Section E)	9
<b>Research, Admin, &amp; Planning</b>	▪ Review of post-secondary opportunities with view to offer more college and university level courses to area residents [this initiative would also look to improve communication and promotion of what already exists] (Untapped opportunities, Focus groups, Section C)	1
	▪ Research and survey local R & D issues and opportunities, and publicize them (Section D)	15
	▪ Research and create a place for youth to gather (e.g. youth centre) activities (Opportunities, Untapped opportunities, Section A)	6

## Next Steps

Following the voting, the local organizing committee felt it was prudent to wait before proceeding further. The committee will review options on how best to proceed in consultation with CIEL. This will likely mean another meeting(s) with the business and larger community to form action groups to move results of the BVI (those actions identified in short term possible actions) to action.

## Long-Term Actions

The following long-term actions were proposed in the Phase 1 Assessment Report, but were not voted on at the Focus and Action meeting on March 30.

<b>Possible Long Term Actions (actions taking more than 12 months to complete)</b>	
Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Investigate incentives [e.g. tax credits, etc.] and other encouragement for businesses (Focus groups, Section H)</li> <li>▪ Review public transportation, especially accessibility [e.g. schedule] issues for the young and the elderly (Section I)</li> <li>▪ Affordable housing review with eye to impacts on economic and community development (Improvements, Section B)</li> </ul>
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Town beautification/revitalization strategy (Focus groups, Improvements)</li> <li>▪ Market Peace River brand to target group(s) outside of community (Sections A, F, &amp; J)</li> <li>▪ Investigate appetite for joint marketing &amp; other initiatives amongst businesses [e.g. trade show, joint promotion, trade missions, etc.] (Section J)</li> </ul>
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Business and employee awards [e.g. customer service] program (to showcase businesses and increase employee motivation) (A9, Section A)</li> <li>▪ Continue to build telecommunications infrastructure to build Peace River into a 'leading' telecommunications community [inc. investigate cell phone 'holes', free wi-fi in downtown, businesses/community better using video conferencing opportunities, etc.] (Section I)</li> <li>▪ Better communication between business community and training facilities so courses/training fit business needs (Section C)</li> </ul>
Research, Admin. and Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Review of sport/recreational facilities for current and future needs (Improvements, Section B)</li> <li>▪ Airline affordability review (Opportunities, Focus groups, Sections B &amp; I)</li> <li>▪ Investigate feasibility of facility for arts and culture (Section B)</li> </ul>

## **Appendix 1: Attendance List**

Leslie Ayre-Jaschke  
James Lindsay  
Gayle Walton  
Tracy Zweifel  
Stefan Felsing  
Barry Heinen  
Joanne Lavoie  
Toni Antonietti  
Cole George  
Betty Kruse  
Stephen Woodburn  
Danya Auger  
Eric Anderson  
Maureen Samborski  
Rachel McKenzie  
Dave Matilpi  
Geoff Milligan  
Joan Pullin  
Marcel Ruel  
Beverly Dachuk  
Randy Hodgkinson  
Norma MacQuarrie  
Iris Callioux  
Colin Gosselin (ARD)  
Mike Stolte (CIEL)

## **Appendix 2: Examples of How BVI Communities Have Taken Action**

### *Community 1*

- Marketing Coordinator for the whole valley (to find emphasis/ strengths, facilitate cooperation & networking)
- Make community “Horticultural Centre of B.C.”
- Clean up and develop the downtown area and community core
- “Buy Local” program
- Develop recreational potential (facilities, bike paths)

### *Community 2*

- Formation of a community business group to look at possibilities
- Use community watershed story to create a community “brand”. (Market the story)
- Renovate community hall(s)
- Plan around ideal set-up of community art(isan’s) gallery
- Accommodation and camping facility development

### *Community 3*

- Local economic development organization to offer more business courses in the area around needs of community business
- Opportunity identification session with young people (under 40)
- Customer service training

### *Community 4*

- Create community foundation
- Increase cooperation between business, government, and citizens by working together on a project
- Opportunity Identification Sessions (one for youth and one for broader community)
- Buy local campaign or program

### *Community 5*

- Buy local campaign
- Networking sessions more regularly among community groups and businesses
- “Did you know” citizen ambassador program
- Joint marketing session – best practices - with Chamber as catalyst

### *Community 6*

- Improve cooperation and communication between stakeholders (business, council, residents)
- Promote tourism and cultural assets
- Buy local program

### *Community 7*

- Joint marketing of products and services by business
- Education of community on benefits of new business
- Develop community brand / market the community
- Build community spirit through festivals / projects

### *Community 8*

- Draft some short-term tourism actions & striking a tourism action group specifically around addressing high quality recreational opportunities
- Develop strategy to attract more capital / possibility of cooperative financing for services community identifies as needing / community identifies potential sources of equity in the community/ Meetings between area lenders and businesses to raise awareness of lending options
- Improve telecommunications / develop telecommunications plan (look at cooperative structure for bringing in high speed (fibre optics))
- Develop brand around beauty / work ethic / independent attitude / creativity / seclusion ('find us if you can' where arts & a pioneer spirit meet the mountains)
- Coordinated or cooperative marketing effort for local products or services (i.e. tourism operators, artisans)

### *Community 9*

- Use landfill/methane/waste management as a catalyst for innovation, education & economic development
- Increase presence of night policing
- Work on a beautification/pride project that increases cooperation among business, residents and government
- Create volunteer attraction/retention/recognition and leadership identification program for community to combat burnout
- Improve customer service (training for front-line employees)

### *Community 10*

- Improve the image of the town by revitalizing main areas and entrances starting with beautification and cleanliness.
- Develop a regional event to promote and unify the town.
- Buy local program.

### *Community 11*

- Review and revise promotional strategy and identify local attractions, to increase tourism and population growth.
- Beautify main street (including public toilet improvements), to make the main town centre more attractive to visitors, travellers, and the community.
- Form a committee to consult with major industries to assess what those industries require of the community.

### *Community 12*

- Develop a youth retention and engagement strategy to give youth a reason to return to the community.
- Targeted outreach marketing strategy to attract more people.
- Make the community a commercial hub for the arts, including a dual/multi facility for historical arts precinct and museum and a working space for artists and craftspeople.
- Buy local campaign.

### *Community 13*

- Develop a loyalty shopping program to give consumers a reason and incentive to shop locally.
- Improve town entrance, to encourage highway travellers to visit the community and to create a pride in the town by local residents.
- Develop a marketing package to attract new residents and businesses.
- Revive “heritage river” and “gateway” concepts and provide recreation to the town i.e. fishing, camping, swimming, to get people talking about the town.

### *Community 14*

- Buy local program
- Develop festivals and events, e.g. Italian festival, power boat competition
- Improve streetscape and capital works including parking/roundabout and bridge treatment.

## **Appendix 3: About CIEL**

The Centre for Innovative and Entrepreneurial Leadership (CIEL) strengthens communities by helping them become more business-friendly, more culturally vibrant, and more sustainable. We also assist them in improving leadership and enhancing community involvement.

CIEL is a non-profit organization located in Nelson, British Columbia, in a region featuring many communities that are quickly having to make transitions to survive in a fast-changing global economy.

Our early work assisted small communities in the neighbouring mountain valleys. We developed innovative assessments coupled with strategic processes that helped communities focus, leverage assets and energy and, most importantly, jumpstart action. Then our ideas attracted the attention of communities farther afield, and we began working with communities across the rest of B.C. More recently we have been invited into communities across Canada, the U.S, New Zealand and Australia.

Our Communities Matrix – a one page tool for assessing stages of community readiness – has now been used in many countries across the globe. The Government of Canada contracted CIEL to research, develop and build a collaborative leadership program as an effective means of building capacity for rural communities in Canada.

CIEL continues to develop practical, engaging and innovative tools and processes that strengthen communities. In 2008, CIEL won the award for the region's most innovative organization from the Kootenay Association for Science & Technology.

Our network of facilitators and trainers allows us to be responsive to the needs of communities across the world. CIEL's conference presentations have inspired at the local, regional, state/province and international level. Our work has been featured on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canadian Living Magazine and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Contact us to help build a custom solution to engage your community and move it to action.