



BUSINESS INNOVATION PROJECT

January - August 2020

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Introduction

This report showcases the impacts that emerged from a partnership between two local organizations, Ecotrust Canada and the Prince Rupert and District Chamber of Commerce, that gave a graduate student the opportunity to build initiatives to spur social and economic prosperity over an eight-month internship.

Ecotrust Canada is a non-profit working to support resilient, local, economies in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities

across Canada. The Project Coordinator, Janet Song, was hired through Ecotrust Canada's place-based initiative, the North Coast Innovation Lab (NCIL), in Prince Rupert, British Columbia.

A key component of the NCIL's work is to connect graduate students' to work with community partners and organizations as Project Coordinators to increase capacity and to make more impact in the Prince Rupert community.

Context



Supporting the business community in Prince Rupert

Two past Project Coordinators laid key foundational work for Janet's internship as they had focused on developing local capacity to support the Prince Rupert business community. In the first cohort, Kara Herbert worked with the local economy to identify opportunities to build an entrepreneurial and information sharing community. In the second cohort, Jordan MacDonald worked with Hecate Strait Employment Development Society, a government agency devoted to helping fill vacant entry-level positions.



In 2020, the Project Coordinator continued to develop surveys and facilitate dialogue among businesses. She found opportunities to partner with the Chamber's 250 members (businesses, non-profits, and government service organizations) to build a more resilient local economy through developing weekly conference calls that united businesses during the unprecedented pandemic.

About the Chamber

The Prince Rupert and District Chamber of Commerce is a not-for-profit organization that has been connecting, supporting, and advocating for the region's business community since 1908. They serve 250+ members and offer support in areas of policy advocacy to different levels of government,

local business communication, networking event coordination, youth empowerment, business retention, expansion and succession support.

The Chamber's mandate is to be a leader and champion for an inclusive, resilient, and informed business community.

About the project

The Business Innovation Project Coordinator was involved in assessing the business community to advise new initiatives for the Chamber to bolster

and diversify Prince Rupert's business community. These initiatives fostered a culture of collaboration, innovation, and entrepreneurial thinking.

Key projects:

Survey of Prince Rupert business community

- Facilitated a city-wide survey, which involved interviewing business leaders, city staff, and active community members to find ways to better support the Chamber's 250+ business members.

Chamber digital communication plan:

- Planned a communication strategy and an implementation plan that uses social media, newsletters, and the Chamber's website as mediums to share local business news, events, and support resources.

Chamber's weekly conference calls:

- Organized Zoom meetings for business community members to share resources

weekly. Connected community partner organizations and government representatives from all levels with businesses to collaborate together on how to operate following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key topics:

COVID-19 updates for small businesses

Roundtable discussions on relevant topics:

- Navigating Government Funding Programs for Businesses
- Digital Marketing Webinar
- Financial Guidance in Times of Uncertainty
- Rise of Entrepreneurship in Rupert
- Business-to-Business Partnerships in Rupert

Project road map



Phase 1: Understanding Prince Rupert businesses (January - March 2020)

The beginning of the project involved understanding the local economy. The Project Coordinator designed and facilitated city-wide surveys and interviews with business leaders, city staff, and active community members to find ways that the Chamber could better support its members.

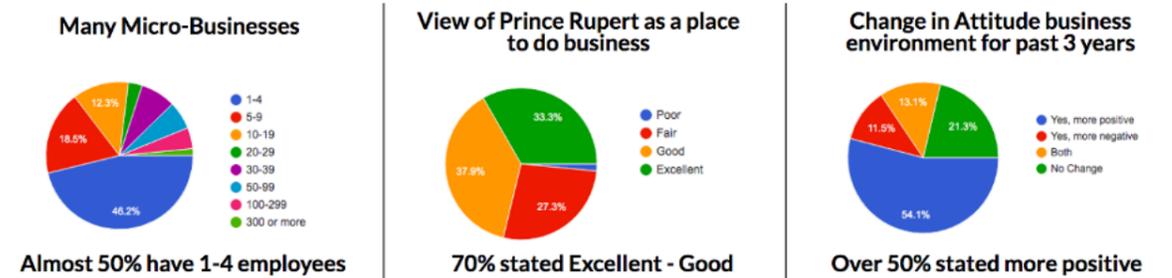
profits, and government service organizations connected with the Chamber in the Prince Rupert, Port Edward, and Terrace locations.

Three key open-ended questions asked:

- What are your key business challenges?
- What is the current view of the chamber?
- How can the chamber support the challenges to better serve your business?

To get an overview of the state of businesses in Prince Rupert, over 60 interviews were conducted from 14 industry sectors, non-

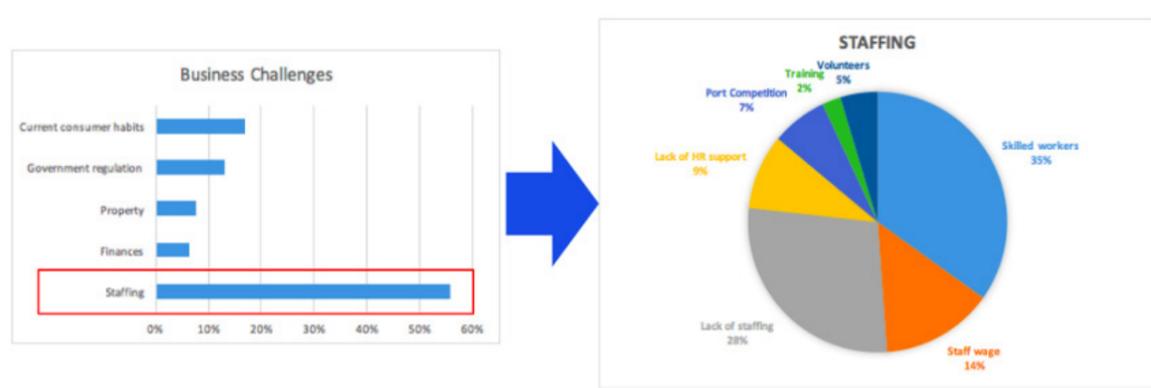
Outcome — Overview of the survey results:



Insights of how Prince Rupert Businesses are ready for change:



The main challenge identified for businesses was “staffing”



This term was broken down into different categories, based on how “staffing” was used in the interviews:

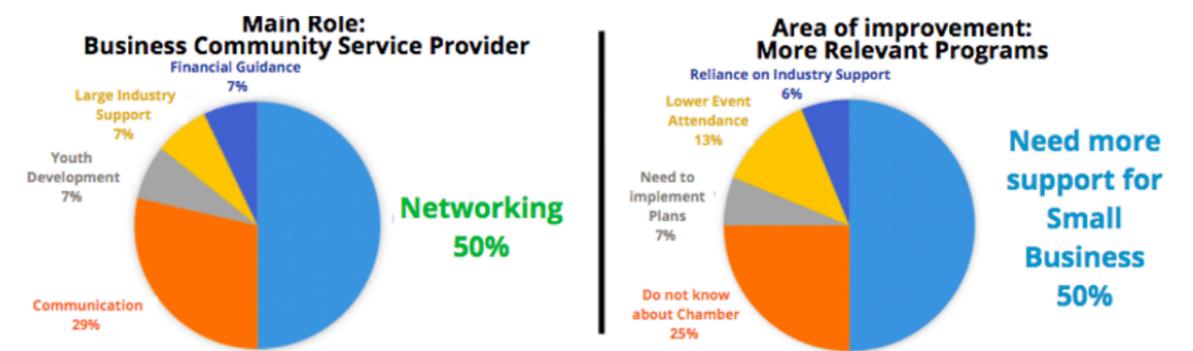
1. Lack of skilled workers that matched job openings
2. Competitive wages between large industries and small businesses
3. General lack of people to fill vacant jobs in the labour pool

Other key challenges for businesses:

- a. Lack of retail traffic due to increased online shopping habits
- b. High rental costs preventing businesses from expanding into the downtown core area
- c. Policy tensions and confusion between businesses and different levels of government
- d. Navigating ways for businesses to finance their expansion plans



Key role for Chamber to serve its business community:



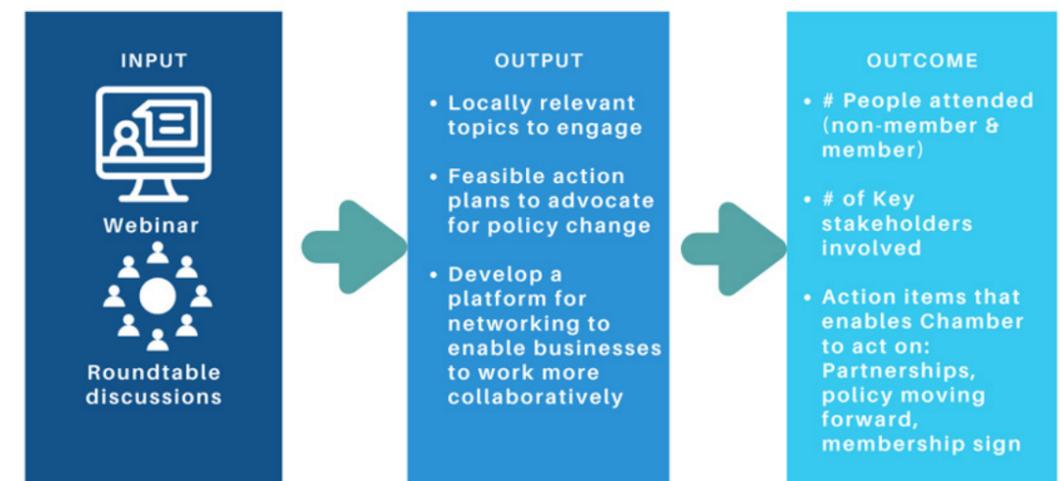
Phase 2: Response to Uncertainty (January – March 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the downturn of the local economy following the government’s mandate that only essential services would operate, required an “all hands on deck” approach to support Prince Rupert’s businesses.

The Chamber adapted its role to be a business community connector by initiating weekly conference calls in response to pandemic closures.

The project focused on changing the way the Chamber delivered local news and events to its members by communicating through conference calls, social media, and weekly newsletters, previously it had focused on in-person networking events. These touchpoints connected community partner organizations and government representatives with businesses to discuss challenges and solutions.

Key Project Components



The key challenge for businesses was how to restrict their regular operational capacity while still paying overhead costs, such as rent and salaries. Business owners were also uncertain how to open their stores in a way that would make customers feel safe,

especially in tourism-focused businesses like restaurants, and downtown retail stores. These owners needed guidance in navigating government resources to help remain afloat, and to develop strategies to recover from cash flow shortages.

Outcome

Revitalized Chamber's communication plan

The Chamber's communication committee used its social media channels, weekly newsletters, website, and weekly conference calls to reach the business community with its mission: *the Prince Rupert & District Chamber of Commerce supports, connects, and advocates for our business community.*

The plan provided the Chamber direction:

- to **support** its members by sharing resources and local business news;
- to **connect** with its members by providing a place to share their updates to the

business community; and,

- to **advocate** for its members by getting feedback and sharing concerns to local community partners, and different levels of government.

Chamber's social media boost in engagement

- The Chamber released a #SupportLocalPR weekly social media schedule to encourage local purchases. These posts collected **16,737 views**, and had **1,826 engagements** of Facebook members who clicked "like", "share", or "comment."



Weekly Social Media Calendar #SupportLocalPR



 #Make A Difference Monday	 #Takeout Tuesday	 #WayToGo Wednesday	 #TTYL Thursday	 #FollowOn Friday	 #Spotlight Saturday
Make today a day of helping others (eg. Call an elderly or neighbour)	Share pictures of meals offered & Visit list of restaurants opened for take out on website	Let a business you know that you appreciate them and write them a positive review	Purchase a gift card now from a business retailer and use it later (eg. birthdays)	Does your favourite business have a Facebook page? Take a few minutes to follow & like their page	Chamber can bring up retailers and their hours and delivery service

Phase 3: Strengthening Partnerships (April – August 2020)

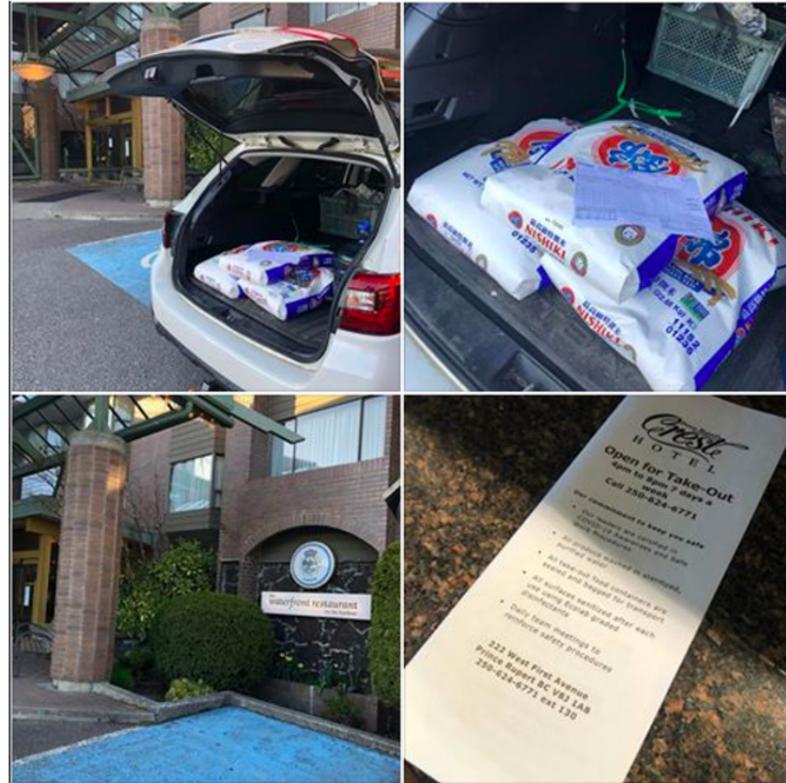
The Chamber team partnered with Tourism Prince Rupert and the City of Prince Rupert to form a Small Business Economic Recovery Taskforce to look for ways to increase cash flow for small businesses. One key initiative of the taskforce was to support local purchases through a sweepstakes program. This was a month-long contest where customers shared their local purchases on social media with the hashtag "#SupportLocalPR", for a weekly chance to win a \$150 gift card from the business they supported. The goal was to incentivize the whole community to support

their local businesses. This campaign injected \$600 into the economy, supported four businesses, and reached 3,000+ views on social media.

Stronger bonds were formed between Chamber members through a weekly schedule of roundtable events and webinars, presented by local experts in the business community. Prince Rupert's provincial and federal government representatives had the space to give updates, share resources, and answer questions live, while experts in insurance, finance, and digital marketing had the chance to share their services.

Success story

During one of the Prince Rupert and District Chamber of Commerce weekly conference calls, a local hotel manager lent a hand to a sushi restaurant owner after hearing about a distribution challenge he was facing.



 **Fukasaku of Prince Rupert is at Crest Hotel.** April 17 · Prince Rupert · 🌐

@cresthote! thank you soooo much!!
 Last 4 weeks, we couldn't find any "sushi quality" rice in Northwest. We were almost out of it without knowing when we can find some in town next.
 Then, they kindly added our rice order to their order to a supplier in the South. We now have 150lbs of "sushi quality" rice!! We will survive! Super appreciate it!!

Phase 4: Ideas to Action (April – August 2020)

The weekly chamber calls were a platform for conversations to occur as the Chamber developed action plans to support businesses based on ideas from the calls.

One call discussed the topic of local procurement, and the challenges of high costs and long wait times to ship items up to the North Coast. Business owners discussed

ideas on cost savings through sharing space on shipping trucks, and making a common shipping route between businesses in Prince Rupert. The Chamber had the opportunity to streamline shipping processes by sharing news about available truck space in its newsletter as a way to connect local businesses.

Overall outcomes of the Chamber weekly conference calls

- 12 conference calls
- Average of 25 participants
- Partnered with 18+ government and non-profit organizations
- Posted five videos with 300+ views
- Small business engagement: received seven sponsorships for conference calls from small businesses



Key learnings



1. Collaboration is key to building a resilient local economy

When the Chamber conducted the city-wide survey, the Project Coordinator identified how Prince Rupert's "assets" were operating in silos instead of supporting each other. These assets include large industry and small businesses, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and housing support systems. For example, small businesses have trouble retaining employees because many locals are drawn to high paying jobs with the larger industries.

Another challenge for businesses, big and small, are the limited rental housing options and lack of available child care spaces, which is a deterrent for potential skilled employees

looking to move to the North Coast for work.

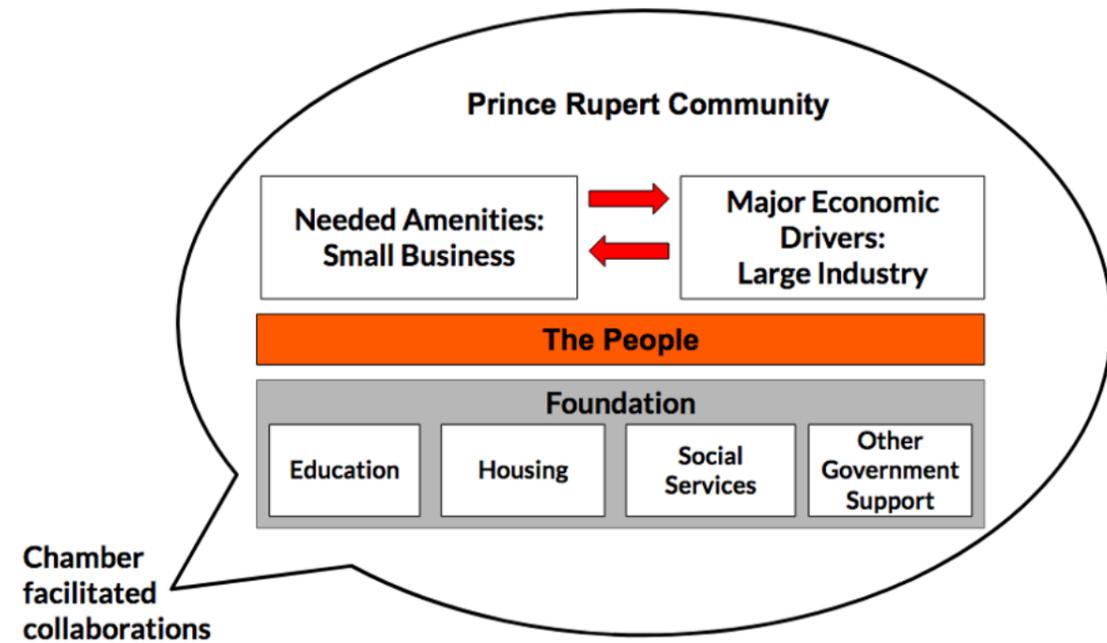
When the pandemic was announced, the Chamber formed partnerships between different organizations, including large industries, to support small businesses that were more financially impacted from the COVID-19 restrictions. In the first conference call, 50 participants discussed updates, challenges, and ways to problem solve through this uncertainty.

The Chamber strengthened its role as a community networking resource and information hub that was needed to build a **resilient local economy**.



Moving forward

Implications for Prince Rupert & District Chamber of Commerce and the Prince Rupert community



2. Encouraging active engagement

After a significant drop in attendance in the Chamber's conference calls, the organization learned that attendees in its conference calls became more selective in what online conversations to participate in. The drop in attendance was also due to business owners re-opening after the lockdown. The Chamber pivoted by planning discussions on topics to support business operations,

and invited participants to problem solve together. These topics included entrepreneurship, local procurement, and insurance. Local experts were invited to lead the conversation.

The result was increased engagement in the calls, as it empowered attendees to take action in sharing their ideas to support their business community.

3. Bringing back the human-element to impersonal online surveys

In order to deliver a better service, the Chamber team recognized the importance of understanding its members through surveys. However, community members have been overloaded with surveys and have felt like the outcomes do not lead to meaningful action. As a result, they often ignore them.

The survey that the Chamber conducted was accomplished through planning 15-20 minute interviews with Chamber members. Interviews were made known to the business community through the Chamber's luncheon

of 80+ attendees and the local newspaper, and the Project Coordinator volunteered to help host the Chamber's Business Excellence Awards, which interviewed businesses that were nominated for a prize.

When the time came to ask for participation in the Chamber's survey, businesses were more open to completing the interview. As a result, periodic interactions between the members and the Chamber have become an important piece for members to see the value of being part of the business network.

1. Engagement with industry partners:

The Chamber will continue to provide a platform for networking and knowledge sharing. The Chamber aims to launch a series of virtual luncheons, similar to the monthly in-person luncheons held pre-pandemic. The luncheons offer space for an industry partner to share updates about current projects and economic contributions to the business community. Chamber members who are restaurant owners will be given the opportunity to supply a voucher for a meal to encourage attendees to visit their local businesses. The first event started in September 2020.

2. Planning with the Chamber Board of Directors:

The Chamber team, made up of staff and

the Board of Directors, will discuss key ideas to support Chamber members. The next step will involve action plans for the Chamber's committees, made up of community and Chamber members, to work together to support the needs of the business community.

3. Continuing the Small Business Economic Recovery Taskforce collaboration:

The Small Business Economic Recovery Taskforce, Tourism Prince Rupert, and the City of Prince Rupert, will continue to support the economic recovery of the local economy in the fall and winter season to spur more local purchases in the community. They will meet on a monthly basis to update each other on their work, plan initiatives, and pool their resources to support small businesses in Prince Rupert.



Project Coordinator

Janet Song

Master of Economic Development and Innovation Candidate, University of Waterloo



Janet Song became intrigued with working in Northern Canada after learning about the economic and social disparities between Canada's north and south in her Master's research on economic development in case studies on rural, remote, and northern communities. During this internship with Ecotrust Canada, she became deeply rooted into the Prince Rupert community and found the passion to invest into making a meaningful difference alongside businesses. She will continue her work with the Prince Rupert and District Chamber of Commerce in the role of Executive Director.



Please visit the ecotrust.ca/innovation/north-coast-innovation-lab for updates

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Ecotrust Canada is an enterprising charity that works with rural, remote, and Indigenous communities toward building an economy that provides for a healthy and resilient natural environment; sustainable and abundant energy, food, and housing; prosperous and meaningful livelihoods; and vibrant cultures and inclusive societies. We call this approach, building an economy that provides for life. Our on-the-ground work and systems approach is entrepreneurial, partnership-based and relentlessly practical.

Learn more at ecotrust.ca
