

Haida Gwaii

Business Walks: Post-Event Report



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Executive Summary:

During the week of October 5th, 2015 the Misty Isles Economic Development Society (MIEDS) conducted Business Walks on Haida Gwaii with assistance from Northern Development Initiative Trust and other organizations. Almost 90 businesses were visited by representatives from MIEDS, Community Futures, Old Masset Village Council, Village of Masset, Village of Port Clements, Gwaalagaa Naay/Skidegate Band Council, Village of Queen Charlotte, Skeena-Queen Charlotte Regional District, and Northern Development Initiative Trust. The “Walkers” asked five short questions to improve the understanding of successes, challenges, and opportunities in Haida Gwaii’s economy.

More than half of the businesses contacted reported that their business is growing, while a third are steady and 12% are shrinking. Clientele and location were highly cited as their favourite thing about doing business in their community. Common challenges include BC Ferries and employee recruitment and retention. Many respondents felt that increased advertising, population, tourist visitation, training opportunities, and internet improvements could help their businesses thrive. Several businesses expressed interest in receiving more information about the Business Façade Improvement program, MIEDS and Community Futures initiatives, training courses, and other funding programs.

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Overall, participants felt positive about the first Business Walk. MIEDS will follow-up with a number of business to address specific concerns and needs, and continue to work with other organizations to address the broader needs and opportunities identified. Each business was given a booklet including contact information, information on Northern Development funding programs, and the current MIEDS newsletter. We hope that the inaugural Business Walks provide valuable information and momentum for ongoing engagement with local businesses.

Business Walks Overview

Business Walks provide an informal way for community leaders to get in touch with the pulse of the business community, build relationships over time, and gather the business information needed to support and stimulate the economy. Teams of two or three staff and elected officials visited a number of retail and service based businesses in each community to ask the owner or manager a few questions about their business and the local economy.



Cameron Bell, MIEDS Economic Development Officer, speaks with artist and carver Jim Hart in Old Massett

The current draft of the Business Directory includes over 500 businesses. This initiative primarily targeted the retail and service-based businesses in the downtown or core of each community. Information was gathered from 89 businesses through conversations with over 70 individuals, many of whom own or manage multiple enterprises. The information collected can guide the operations of municipalities and economic/business development agencies, while the relationships built contribute to ongoing communication and collaboration in the community.

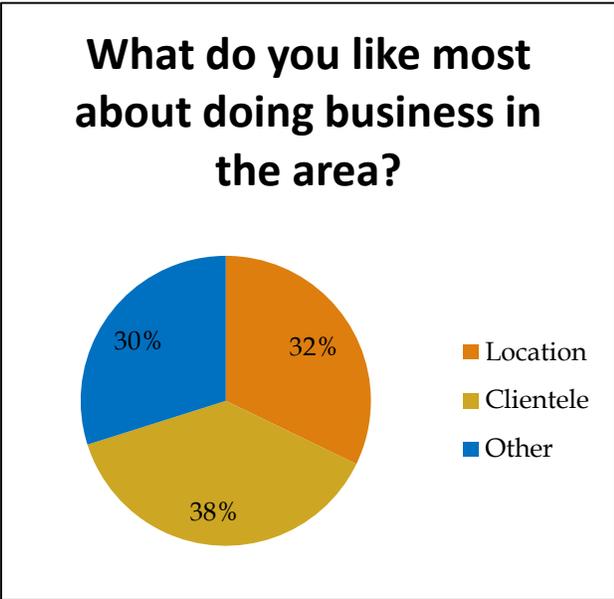
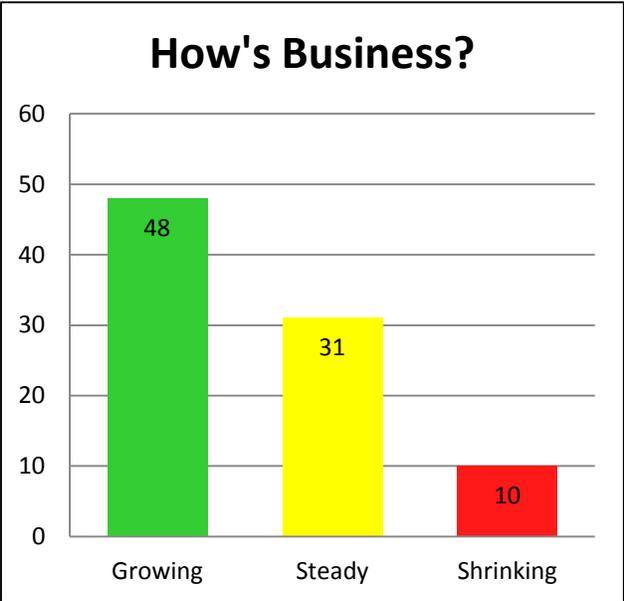
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Results

Question 1: How's business?

This question provided a general status of business across the islands. The responses present a very positive outlook on small business. More than half reported growth, with a total of 88% of businesses either growing or steady. Many service and retail businesses credit this to increased tourist traffic in 2015. Some of the steady and shrinking businesses do not advertise consistently, while others are planning to sell their business.



Question 2: What do you like most about doing business in the area?

Many business owners/managers identified their customers and colleagues as their favourite aspect of doing business here. Others mentioned the location as a highlight, including both their community and Haida Gwaii as a whole. A number of "other" reasons were also mentioned, including being close to family and attachment to home.



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Question 3: What is the greatest challenge your business faces today?

Answers to this question covered a wide range of challenges that small business owners face on Haida Gwaii. The most common themes were:

- 1) BC Ferries: The frequency, cost, and capacity of the ferry routes were the greatest challenges faced by business owners. This relates to tourist traffic, supplies, and operating costs for businesses in practically all sectors of the economy.
- 2) Employees: This theme was common across all businesses regardless of the sector they are in, from restaurants to labour jobs. Finding and retaining competent staff is difficult, while finding employees with specific skills is also a significant challenge.

Other challenges mentioned include: online competition, taxes, maintaining business during the winter months, availability of land, cost of advertising and internet, and bandwidth capabilities.

Question 4: What can be done to help your business thrive?

A primary goal of the Business Walks is to identify ways that MIEDS, the municipalities, regional district, and other organizations can assist local businesses. Businesses identified a wide range of opportunities, including these common themes:

Advertising: Some businesses recognize the need to increase advertising of their business to both local residents and visitors. Several businesses provided positive feedback on the advertising presence created through Love Haida Gwaii and Go Haida Gwaii. Suggestions for updated content on both of these websites were also made.



Mayor Andrew Merilees of Masset visiting Driftech Automotive owner Lawrence Lemire

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Tourism: The summer months provide significant revenue for many local businesses, and increased traffic would help them grow. The 2015 season was busy, and several businesses recognized and appreciated the value of events in attracting visitors to the islands. Ongoing destination marketing will continue to attract visitors, and increased “shoulder season” tourism would help sustain revenues throughout the year.

Year-round residents: Most businesses would like to see their communities grow, to increase both the potential customer base and the pool of available labour. In addition to marketing tourism, MIEDS could consider new initiatives to attract more year-round residents to the islands.

Other suggestions:

- Reducing internet costs
- Training for students
- Cleaning up downtown/core areas
- Accounting/bookkeeping courses
- Long-term contracts (forestry)
- “Buy local” programs and incentives
- Improved recreation trails (tourism)

Question 5: What specific information would you like to have access to locally?

This question was intended to identify research and information needs in the business community. Many businesses were unable to identify exactly what type of information would be useful to their business. However, some businesses did express interest in receiving information on:

- Grants for training and apprenticeships
- Business Façade Improvement Program
- Community Futures and MIEDS initiatives
- Calendar of events
- Lists of things to do for guests
- Computer courses and other training opportunities

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Recommendations

Overall, participants felt positive about the first Business Walks, and both the “walkers” and businesses appreciated the opportunity to interact. Maintaining these relationships with local businesses is essential, as they are the foundation of any local economy. Improving awareness of services offered by MIEDS, Community Futures, and other organizations is another benefit of the Business Walks.

MIEDS plans to make these findings available to any interested parties. The recommendations arising from the 2015 Business Walks are as follows. MIEDS will act on these items as directed, and work with the appropriate organizations to address the needs of our economy.

Short Term:

- Follow up with businesses to provide the additional information they require
- Provide information on programs from Northern Development and Community Futures
- Publish a comprehensive Haida Gwaii Business Directory
- Present these findings to each Village and Band Council, and the Skeena-Queen Charlotte Regional District Board
- Engage BC Ferries in ongoing dialogue about service levels, costs, and capacity

Long Term:

- Continue to work with local governments, First Nations organizations, and businesses to promote economic development on the island and help grow businesses
- Organize Business Walks annually
 - o Consider allocating more time to each community to interact with more businesses
 - o Review questions list and identify priorities
- Consider creating a new resident attraction program
- Continue developing and implementing relevant training and employment initiatives with organizations like Hecate Strait Employment Development Society, School District 50, Northwest Community College, etc.