



Community Business Visitations Survey results

Fall 2020

On September 21st, 22nd, 29th and October 1st and 30th, 2020 Community Futures West Yellowhead (CFWY) staff, its Board of Directors, and with various partnerships within its member municipalities, held business visitation walks in the Municipality of Jasper, Towns of Edson and Hinton, the Hamlet of Grande Cache in the MD of Greenview and the east side of Yellowhead County (Peers, Niton Junction, Wildwood, Evansburg).

Purpose

The purpose of these walks was to visit local businesses and to have a casual conversation about the local economy with business owners. They could communicate their successes, challenges, and opportunities during the economic challenges of COVID-19 and any impacts it was having on their business.

Business Identification and Criteria

There are numerous ventures and businesses within CFWY boundaries, ranging from small mom and pop shops to larger hotel chains. Visiting everyone on these lists in one day was challenging, so we focused on small, locally owned storefront business (approximately 10 or less employees). Homebased business, financial institutions and accommodations were not included in this visitation.

CFWY recognizes that each member community is unique in their needs and as such, the criteria for each community's planned walk varied slightly. Discretion was used when evaluating businesses based on location and needs. As such, there may be several survey participants that while they may have differed between each community's criteria, were valuable contributors to the overall results.

While there are numerous businesses in each community that may have benefited from our visits, CFWY staff felt that while all business deserve our attention, we realized that it could be the smaller business who may be suffering more from the immediate impacts of the current economic crisis and who could use our help and guidance in the immediate short term.

Visitation Locations

Overall, CFWY staff identified 372 businesses within Jasper, Hinton, Edson, Grande Cache and Yellowhead County that fit within the above criteria.

Volunteers

Our volunteers consisted of small groups comprised of CFWY staff, municipal Councilors, EDO's, Jasper Employment and Education Center, Parks Canada, Alberta Labour and Immigration, Jasper, Hinton and Edson Chambers of Commerce, ATB, and MLA.

Volunteers were encouraged to practice distancing, wear face masks, use sanitizer as well as follow additional and/or specific business measures also in place.

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Survey Participation

Our overall participation rates in the five (5) business visitations was 63% of the total of identified businesses. This rate of participation may be contributed to several factors.

- COVID-19 has created higher than normal financial strains on the business.
- COVID-19 has created strains on employee retentions/hiring and owners are now having a more physical presence in their business.
- COVID-19 has created higher personal stress for business owners, and many are rethinking their options should a potential second wave hit and /or a lockdown situation again.
- Owners had more time to speak to us as the usual busy fall experiences such as back to school and fundraising opportunities/events were either cancelled or were considered very low key this year. Many of these events moved to a virtual presence.
- CFWY did these community walks as a one-day event and found that this did not provide us with enough time to visit all businesses. These walks provided the CFWY staff with a learning opportunity and we have already debriefed and discussed ways of improving our future events.

Results

A total of 372 businesses (Jasper- 99, Hinton- 90, Grand Cache- 37, Edson- 99 and Yellowhead County- 47) were initially identified on the visitation lists using previously identified criteria.

- Two hundred and thirty-five (235) businesses participated in the survey. (Jasper- 51, Hinton- 59, Grande Cache- 32, Edson- 58 and Yellowhead County- 35)
- One hundred and ten (110) businesses were not available to speak to us during our visit. This includes those that were determined to be permanent closures, had reduced hours due to COVID-19 and were not open at the time of a visit, or those that it was a regularly scheduled closure day for this business.
- Twenty-seven (27) businesses did not participate in the survey. This includes the appropriate person (i.e. owner and/or manager) was not available currently, or they did not wish to participate in our survey currently.

Overall Themes

During the informal conversations with businesses, our volunteers asked three questions:

1. How have you adapted your business under COVID-19 measures?
2. What do you feel your business needs to move forward?
3. What types of support does your business need to succeed within the next six months?

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Not surprisingly, many of the comments and discussions throughout the region had very similar undertones. Common statements revolved around financial implications of closure, shop local initiatives, financial assistance, and various marketing strategies. Many businesses were struggling prior to the pandemic with the economic uncertainty that has plagued our region in recent years, and the pandemic is now adding another layer to that uncertainty. Businesses are wondering how to keep their doors open and what efforts that will take.

To simplify survey statements, we broke them down into the most common themes. Because questions two and three were similar in nature, respondents answered both quite similarly. Therefore, we have combined these questions in the overall themes. Business may have indicated one or more of the following themes.

Business adaptations to COVID-19 since pandemic began in March 2020

2020 has been a difficult year for our local economies. Perhaps the hardest hits in the CFWY boundaries have been felt in the energy sectors and tourism industries. These hits have trickled down to our local businesses. While businesses have been affected in similar ways, not all have been affected to the same degree. Decreases in revenue and a yearning for the local economy to improve was echoed throughout all surveys.

Some of the businesses surveyed were deemed as essential, therefore stayed open and adapted with several factors such as enhanced cleaning measures and appointment only visits. Others reduced their operational hours and/or laid off staff to offset the reduction in sales/business.

Other businesses were deemed as non-essential and were forced to close in March 2020 as the province called for a mandatory shutdown. We noticed that a portion of these businesses adapted in several ways, with the most common adaptations being curbside pickup/take away orders, and/or enhanced cleaning. Some of the businesses created and/or increased their social media presence; using this to communicate more effectively with their customers. Some of the SME's took this time to revisit their business plans and discovered how to pivot their operations.

Within both groups of business (essential and non-essential), there were observations regarding difficulty in finding up-to-date information regarding guidelines, financial aid qualifications, and PPE requirements.

Business visitations indicated many had felt effects of the pandemic and as such were required to deal with layoffs and/or shortened operational hours. While various businesses were successful in obtaining financial aid through Government of Canada programs such as the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), Canadian Emergency Business Assistance (CEBA) or through the rent subsidy in conjunction with their landlords; many others did not qualify for any type of assistance.

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Success in the short term

Answers varied amongst the businesses on what was most needed for their business to survive. However, despite each community's unique economic situations and drivers, locations and services, several common themes were prevalent during our conversations.

The first common theme across communities was the need of a shop local initiative. This support not only involved the creation of and awareness to local consumers for their everyday needs, but also included business supporting business, and for corporations/projects to support local procurements.

The second common theme revolved around advertising and marketing assistance. This subject tied in with the shop local campaign ideas. For some, this meant the creation and/or increased use of their social media accounts to adapt with curbside pick-up. While the majority of the surveys indicated this adaptation increased during the initial days of the pandemic, all communities had businesses where this was implemented.

The third common theme was financial assistance. This support was varied amongst business and included financial programs for the self employed, increased financial support through the wage and rent subsidies.

Other noteworthy supports mentioned during our business visitations (in all communities) included labour force attraction and retention, and municipal supports such as standardized healthcare guidelines and bylaws, lower taxes, customer parking issues (lack of), and in the case of Jasper, sidewalk open seating.

Community Futures West Yellowhead also offered individual follow up on specific topics if the business was interested. The majority indicated their interests were in marketing, financial, HR related topics, and business planning and networking.

Additional Observations

While all member community businesses expressed similar concerns, we recognize that each community is distinctive in their needs, and the identified common themes may be more/less prevalent within each business group and community.

All surveys revealed that having a shop local campaign and an improved marketing strategy would have a greater contribution towards their businesses' revenue. As small businesses get back on their feet and continue with new safety measures in place, consumers can lend a hand by supporting local companies and jobs. Having a strong marketing presence supporting this initiative will increase consumer traffic and thus increase small business viability.

In Jasper we found the leading concern amongst business was related to financial assistance, specifically related to rent relief. Additionally, municipal support for sidewalk open seating and the mask by laws were frequently brought up in discussion with business owners. It is important to note that the Municipality of Jasper's economy, more so than our other member communities, is reliant on international tourists and the revenue tourism brings to the town.



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Next Steps

At Community Futures West Yellowhead our mission is to help small business grow and to connect them with the skills, financing, and resources they need to succeed. We will continue to offer our business community with financing options, training courses, personal coaching and networking opportunities.

The West Yellowhead Shop Local initiative is in the concept stages, with a goal to roll out to our member communities in early 2021.