

Rural Islands Join Forces to 'Keep the Island Vibe Alive'



BRIGHT IDEAS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

SYNOPSIS

The islands off the West Coast of B.C. are home to an inspired group of people eager to preserve and protect the unique culture of the area. With pressure placed on businesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rural Islands Economic Partnership Society knew they could put their heads together to support local organizations and help to 'keep the island vibe alive'!

LOCATION

B.C. West Coast

INNOVATORS

Rural Islands
Economic
Partnership
Society

POPULATION

25,000

ECONOMIC BASE

Sales and
Services, Tourism,
Arts and Culture



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had undeniable effects on economies throughout B.C. Of those impacted include a number of rural island communities, including Bowen, Cormorant, Cortes, Denman, Gabriola, Galiano, Gambier, Hornby, Lasqueti, Malcolm, Mayne, Pender, Quadra, Salt Spring, Saturna, Texada, Thetis, and the Broughton Archipelago, situated off the West Coast of B.C.

With the motto 'keep the island vibe alive', the [Rural Islands Economic Partnership Society](#) set out on a mission to inject cash flow to these communities and keep the unique culture that makes them so special.



THE OPPORTUNITY

Many rural islands in B.C. are remote in their location and have different challenges than mainland communities. As a result, their local economies have been extremely hard hit by COVID-19.

Supply-chain disruptions, ferry transportation constraints and limited health-care resources brought economic and social hardship to

the small businesses, artisans, farms and non-profits that serve these communities and the society knew they had an immediate way to inject cash back into these economies, fast.

THE STRATEGY

To benefit all of the rural islands, the society reached out to the economic commissions of [Salt Spring](#), [Galiano](#), [Mayne](#), [Pender](#) and [Saturna Islands](#)

to secure seed money for an e-commerce platform that accepted donations and sold local gift certificates for future use, and could support small businesses in scaling up their online market.

These commissions, along with a cross-section of rural island volunteers, came together to form a project team to address pandemic response and recovery through a rural island lens.



The seed funding helped the project team hire contractors to create their vision: [Island Comeback](#). They brought on contractors for web development, design, social media, graphics and administration.

Timelines were tight with the pressure of the pandemic, requiring that the team complete seven months of work in a short seven weeks.

The project team delivered a customized web platform featuring a variety of rural island businesses and non-profit organizations that can accept direct donations as well as sell gift certificates for future use.

The membership was set up as a pay-to-play structure, so each island that wants to join pays a set fee of between \$300 and \$500, depending on how many people live on the island.

The one-time fee covers the cost to build the platform, to host the island pages and photos, and to pay for marketing and promotion. Each community can register an unlimited number of not-for-profits or businesses to benefit from the service.

The unique feature of the Island Comeback site is that it allows anyone to donate to a business directly or

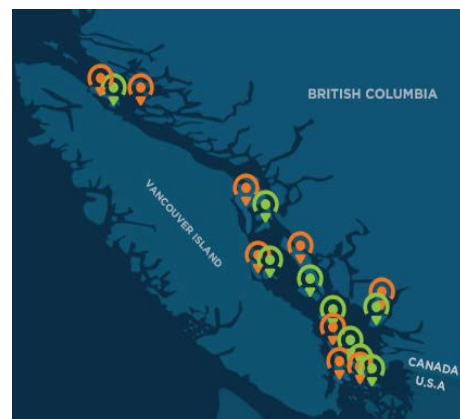
to buy gift certificates. This allows individuals who may not live on or be visiting an island in the near future to still support small organizations and ensure they stay afloat.

A great example of this is how the Pender Island community promoted and used Island Comeback to save a small local restaurant from having to shut down permanently.

The project team is planning to expand the brand and the platform into a permanent initiative. Sponsorships coming in from [BC Ferries](#), [Vancity](#), [First Credit Union](#), [Coastal Community Credit Union](#), [Union Bay Credit Union](#), and Mount Waddington Regional District's [Vancouver Island North Training & Attraction Society](#) are helping to make this dream a reality.

In future, they would like to build an online service delivery model where small island businesses can receive advice and coaching to begin selling their products online and/or use the existing Island Comeback website to host their products all in one place.

Their goal is to create a virtual community, leveraging the momentum they've built during the pandemic and growing to be able to support their communities in a new, digital way.



SUCCESSES

- More than 160 businesses and non-profits are registered and receiving income through the Island Comeback website to date.
- By being collaborative, the society was able to quickly get volunteers and local contractors, to build the website and bring on businesses all within seven weeks.
- Engaging corporate sponsors to support initial startup costs has enabled Island Comeback to build out its offerings and become sustainable.
- In helping neighbouring islands, each community was able to help itself. The saying 'a rising tide lifts all ships' describes the Island Comeback initiative perfectly.

LESSONS LEARNED

- The timing is never going to be perfect: there will always be competing priorities, so if you are passionate about an initiative, you should start now.
- Treat it like a startup: brand-new initiatives will need as much care and attention as a new business would, so treat it as such.
- Keep looking forward: be community and customer focused, adjust to the market, be innovative, take risks, and continue to build your enterprise to add value in meaningful ways.

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For more information, visit gov.bc.ca/economicdevelopment

