

Innovation Centre Supporting Home Grown Tech



BRIGHT IDEAS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

SYNOPSIS

Salmon Arm's Innovation Centre and Makerspace is helping to retain and grow local tech entrepreneurs in a regional setting.

LOCATION

Thompson/
Okanagan

POPULATION

17,464

ECONOMIC BASE

Commerce &
business services,
retail, health,
tourism, agriculture
& manufacturing

INNOVATORS

Salmon Arm
Economic
Development
Society



THE BACKGROUND

With over 80 technology businesses operating in the community and a further 60 in the broader Shuswap region, Salmon Arm breaks the mould with its established tech cluster outside of the urban centres. The city has capitalized on this emergent sector through industry and community partnerships which led to the development of an **Innovation Centre**, designed to support a startup climate and the growth of a local highly skilled workforce.

THE CHALLENGE

Salmon Arm's economy has benefited from its proximity to transportation routes such as the Trans-Canada highway, the Shuswap Regional Airport and the CP Railway, as well as accessibility to many outdoor activities and its relative affordability compared to major centres. These benefits contributed to Salmon Arm's unique tech cluster, and the city saw a need and an opportunity to work with local education institutions and industry to support its ongoing growth. [The Salmon Arm Economic Development Society](#) (SAEDS), a not-for-profit



with a board made up of sector reps and contracted by the city to support economic development, began engaging industry in conversations and surveys to find ways to support and expand the established tech cluster.

What they found was a need for a large pool of skilled workers to allow local tech businesses like Valid Manufacturing, which employs 40 engineers doing high-tech design and manufacturing, to remain and grow in Salmon Arm and the Shuswap. There was also a need for greater support for entrepreneurs and startups to develop their ideas and businesses in the early stages.

THE STRATEGY

Following a consultation with local high-tech firms, the concept of establishing an Innovation Centre was born. Innovation centres are a growing trend in the technology sector, based on the premise of the sharing economy which aims to bring the various knowledge, skills and equipment that exist in an area together in a shared space, allowing people and companies to benefit from their interactions with one another.



The idea was to create a technology hub in the city's downtown core, designed to raise the profile of the existing high-technology sector, ignite interest in technology as a career option for the community's emerging workforce, and support the launch of new high-technology startups.

Community Futures Shuswap supported a feasibility study and business plan that showed strong community and industry demand for such a space, and with Rural Dividend funding, the Innovation centre was launched in early 2018 and now has:

- Office space for lease by the society and companies connected to the tech sector
- A co-working space
- The Shuswap Makerspace
- A Business Accelerator program

These services are designed to benefit the local tech industry and be sustained through partnerships, memberships, and fee-for-service programming. Currently, the Innovation Centre has boardrooms, offices, hot-desks, and a roof-top deck available through short-term lease or ad-hoc booking. These provide high-quality amenities for entrepreneurs and small businesses to hold meetings, use the wi-fi and participate in workshops and networking events that foster a community of collaboration, knowledge sharing, and business sustainability.

With strong support from School District 83, the Shuswap Makerspace opened in December 2018, and offers members access to equipment for 3D printing, coding, virtual reality, electrical, woodworking and robotics. Equipment in the Makerspace is expensive and beyond the financial reach for many people, but through a membership, local startups and entrepreneurs can access the shared equipment to develop their products and grow their businesses in Salmon Arm.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Identify** and bring into the process early on the **eventual users of your project**. By talking with local businesses and residents about their needs, you ensure that what is being produced will provide the highest return on investment back to your community
- **Connect with and leverage strategic partners** – local colleges, school districts and others can provide invaluable advice, equipment and **collaboration on common goals**
- **Work with what you have** – identify your community's existing assets and find ways to help them flourish

Workshops provide training and expertise in the use of the equipment, while other programs are designed to ignite youth interest in technology career options.

The Business Accelerator Program is a partnership initiative supported by Okanagan College and provides developing companies access to mentorship and other support that help them become stable and sustainable businesses. Companies that use business accelerators are typically new businesses that are up and running, but need support to anchor themselves in a market. SAEDS is a founding partner in a similar program, Shuswap Launch-a-preneur, which has successfully helped startups in the area but there was a demand to provide these services on a continuous basis, which the Business Accelerator Program is now meeting.

The Innovation Centre is bringing together the people, companies and ideas that make up this regional tech cluster, achieving the city's goals of fostering partnerships, sharing ideas and expertise and inspiring the next generation of highly skilled workers to live and work in Salmon Arm and the Shuswap.

SUCCESSES

- The Innovation Centre co-working spaces have reached over 80% occupancy by the first quarter of 2019.
- Salmon Arm Savings and Credit Union (SASCU) signed a 10-year naming agreement, launching the Salmon Arm Innovation Centre Powered by SASCU in April of this year, which will enable the centre to broaden its program offerings and provide the highest value back to the community.
- A partnership with Okanagan College has seen a college business professor work out of the Innovation Centre a few days a week – offering advice to member entrepreneurs on growing their businesses.
- The Makerspace has already had over 200 attendees at its workshops and youth programs on topics such as 3D printing and robotics. These generate interest in the technology sector to local youth, as well as provide training to those looking to gain a new skill for their business or hobby.
- The success of the Innovation Centre has generated interest in replicating the model for other sectors with the Economic Development Society looking at whether a similar space could support the agricultural sector in the region.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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