

Attracting Young Urban Creatives to Small Town B.C.



BRIGHT IDEAS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

SYNOPSIS

Are there any young urban creatives interested in moving to small-town B.C.? The BC Rural Centre decided to find out, inviting urban dwellers to explain why they'd like to escape the city for a chance to win a trip, in an innovative social media campaign.

LOCATION

Kootenays

POPULATION

938

ECONOMIC BASE

Tourism, services

INNOVATORS

BC Rural Centre
Village of Kaslo



rural communities, Kaslo lacked the marketing capacity to reach out to urban markets and promote itself, even though it has much to offer busy young city dwellers who may struggle with expensive real estate, traffic woes and big-city stress.

THE IDEA

Enter the [BC Rural Centre](#), a non-profit organization born out of the Southern Interior Beetle Action Coalition, with a mission of assisting B.C.'s rural communities and First Nations identify ways of tackling their most vexing challenges and seize their opportunities.

Gordon Borgstrom, executive director of the BC Rural Centre, was curious to see if an innovative social media campaign and contest could answer the question on the minds of many small towns: Are there any big-city Millennials interested in moving to a small, remote community like Kaslo, a white-knuckle hour's drive north of Nelson? It turns out the answer was a resounding yes!

THE CHALLENGE

Small towns in rural B.C. are facing a population drain, as young people move to urban areas to seek education and career opportunities that they perceive as being unavailable in their hometowns. Population projections for 2011-2025 indicate that B.C.'s rural population will

decline approximately 12%, presenting a real sustainability challenge for these communities.

The village of [Kaslo](#) (pop. 938) looks like a movie set, with its charming Victorian architecture and spectacular setting on the western shore of fjord-like Kootenay Lake. But like many





“ Right now we live with our two young daughters and our giant dog in Victoria. We’d love to come see what Kaslo has to offer and what we can bring to the community. Our dream is to figure out how to move to the Kootenays.”

– Contest Winners

THE STRATEGY

Randy Morse, BC Rural Centre’s communications director, brought together an advisory committee that included Kaslo mayor Suzan Hewat and Chamber of Commerce president John Addison. The school principal, other NGO leaders and community activists also got involved, with the BC Rural Centre providing vision and the missing capacity to run the social media campaign and contest.

BC Rural Centre put the money forward for the prize: winners would receive a travel stipend, four nights at the lovely Kaslo Hotel, meals, and would be immersed in the local scene. Morse worked with the community of Kaslo to create the kickoff materials for the contest, inviting young urbanites to explain why they were interested in a move from the big city to a small town like Kaslo. The contest went viral, reaching audiences across Canada and all the way to San Diego.

“ This is a world-class destination. World-class people, world-class artisans, everything here is world-class. It’s impressive!”

– Contest Winner

The contest committee was inundated with entries, some in writing, others via video, all of them stating they would love to trade in their current lot in life for a saner existence in Kaslo. After extensive video interviews, the contest committee chose two families from Calgary and Victoria as winners.

From the moment of their arrival on June 29 until their departure on July 3, these two young families were afforded an insider’s look at small-town life. Activities included a tour of the village’s spectacular K-12 school, a walk down Kaslo’s bustling Front Street to meet local store owners, a tour of Kaslo’s historic city hall, social events like potlucks and barbecues, Canada Day fireworks over the lake, and tours of Kootenay Lake.

There were opportunities to check out local real estate, kick back on the beach, visit some of the town’s eateries and its craft brewery, and generally soak up the local vibe.

Both families left impressed, vowing to return — permanently.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Small rural towns can **attract young urban families**.
- **Towns need to be clear** on what makes their community unique.
- They need to mount an **engaging, social media-centric campaign** to attract attention, and ensure locals are enthusiastic and prepared to put their best foot forward.
- Build on the initiative by following up with a **sustained social media outreach**.

SUCCESSES

RAISING AWARENESS

- Escape the City has shown there are indeed young urbanites interested in a possible move to a small town.
- Kaslo now has a fan base of hundreds of folks who’ve made clear they’re interested in the town. The contest generated plenty of local buzz, not to mention regional and national interest, thanks to traditional media coverage.
- Kaslo has already seen its population poised to increase by two — one of the winning families has sold their Calgary home and purchased a place in Kaslo!

COMMUNITY PRIDE

- The Kaslo contest has demonstrated an initiative like this can help a community come together, identify its unique strengths, then proudly share them with newcomers.

COLLABORATION

- The BC Rural Centre has gained valuable insight about how to launch place-marketing initiatives and is looking at additional collaborations with other remote communities.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Randy Morse
Communications Director,
BC Rural Centre
250 353-3016



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