BC IDEAS EXCHANGE

BRIGHT IDEAS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

LOCATION
Kootenay

POPULATION
10,600

ECONOMIC BASE
Tourism,
Technology

INNOVATORS
Nelson B.C.

NELSON TECH-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY

From Broadband to the Smart21 Community List

SYNOPSIS

A unique community engagement strategy has helped the city of Nelson take advantage of broadband connectivity to drive the local economy. The community's efforts to build a tech-friendly ecosystem helped earn it a spot on the coveted Intelligent Communities Forum Smart21 List in 2017.

INTRO

The city of Nelson, in B.C.'s West Kootenay region has a long history with broadband internet fibre and has taken a unique approach to engaging the community to explore how to expand the benefits of connectivity. Engagement efforts have shaped a number of initiatives that have built a tech-friendly ecosystem in Nelson and saw the city named a Smart21 community in 2017 by the Intelligent Communities Forum.

THE STRATEGY

In 2013, the city installed broadband fibre throughout downtown while roadwork was being completed. Key players wondered how they could take advantage of the new broadband to drive the local economy.

To explore how, Nelson held a one-day Community Economic Forum in 2014. The event featured speakers from other communities who discussed the importance of evolving to a new economy and helping businesses be competitive amid technological disruptions.

One idea that ignited the interest of participants was Intelligent Communities, essentially communities that have taken steps to prosper in a broadband economy. The Intelligent Community Forum defines six criteria necessary to create an intelligent community:

- broadband
- a knowledge workforce
- innovation
- digital equality
- sustainability
- advocacy

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BRITISH COLUMBIA

By adapting the framework for a rural context, Nelson was able to evaluate its strengths, gaps and future opportunities.

Using the framework, the city identified a number of community strengths to build from, including:

- Broadband fibre infrastructure
- Selkirk College to educate and train a knowledge workforce in the region
- Nelson Tech Club is the largest hackerspace in Canada with over 350 members that functions as a centre for peer learning and knowledge sharing
- Nelson Civic Theatre Society aims to strengthen the local screen-based industry and build the network of film professionals in the region

The framework also helped illuminate opportunities for Nelson to overcome barriers (such as access to global markets), diversify the local economy and expand the creative class in the region.

In 2015, the city hosted an Intelligent Nelson Strategic Doing event to identify projects to help the community be successful in a digital world. The event was attended by entrepreneurs, tech workers, local government, and community thinkers and doers. The Strategic Doing program built on the existing strengths of Nelson and added new ones.

INITIATIVES THAT EMERGED FROM THE EVENT:

- The **Technology for Business pilot** helped increase the uptake of broadband in Nelson by helping businesses understand the benefits of broadband and providing advice on technology applications to achieve their business goals.
- Selkirk College developed a **web application development program** following industry consultations with the aim of graduating more knowledge workers with skills to grow the technology industry in Nelson and surrounding area.
- The Nelson Tech and Knowledge worker Facebook group grew to over 500 members with monthly meetings with networking, keynote speakers and learning opportunities. The group has helped to connect and showcase the network of tech and knowledge workers that were already located in Nelson, as well as attract new faces.
- The city completed a feasibility study for a Nelson Innovation Centre to further support tech and innovation. A recent $100,000 grant from the B.C. Rural Dividend Fund will support the development and implementation of five core services for the Nelson Innovation Centre, including: community-building events, business start-up and acceleration programs, and access to capital, mentorship and industry outpost programming.

A TECH-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY

The result of these initiatives has been the creation of a thriving, tech-friendly community that is well prepared to take advantage of opportunities of the broadband economy. Engaging the community each step of the way has also allowed the small, rural community to embrace new possibilities and helped residents see the long-term employment and lifestyle possibilities.

As a way of better understanding their strengths and opportunities, Nelson applied to the Intelligent Community Awards in 2016. Much to their surprise, the city was named one of the Top 25 Smart Communities in the world – and the smallest community to make the list. That recognition helped put Nelson on the map and highlighted the achievements of the city to people outside the region.

LESSONS LEARNED & FINAL THOUGHTS

- Pulling a whole community together around a shared vision is not without challenges. The Strategic Doing event helped create a **shared vision** and get various players **working toward common goals**.

- Nelson is a small community with big goals. Acknowledging that the **community has limited resources** has led to **exploring new partnerships** with other communities with similar goals, like Telluride, Colorado.

- Kevin Cormack, Nelson's chief administrative officer, advises other communities to play to their strengths, align people with the overall strategy, and take advantage of the things you're already doing right. Setting ambitious but **achievable goals** will **build capacity** and lead to **bigger projects** down the road.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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