

# Ucluelet Chamber of Commerce Taps Into Local Business Wisdom



BRIGHT IDEAS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

## SYNOPSIS

Changing with the times: the Ucluelet Chamber of Commerce found a new role by pivoting toward economic development through its business and employee retention and expansion program.

## LOCATION

Vancouver Island/  
Coast

## POPULATION

1,576  
(2016 Census)

## ECONOMIC BASE

Tourism, fisheries,  
forestry, residential  
and commercial  
construction

## INNOVATORS

Ucluelet Chamber  
of Commerce



## INTRO

Ucluelet is a small town on the western edge of Vancouver Island. Its year-round population is approximately 1,600, and in 2018 the District of Ucluelet issued over 400 business licenses – that’s a lot of small businesses per capita!

A local saying is that “Ucluelet’s residents flew or grew here.” Those who flew, or moved to Ucluelet mid-career, have had to find their niche in a seasonal market. Those who grew have survived difficult economic times characterized by shifting market drivers.

Much like Ucluelet’s residents, the local Chamber of Commerce had to find its place in a changing economic landscape.

## THE CHALLENGE

The Ucluelet Chamber of Commerce is 70 years old and traditionally provided visitor and destination marketing services. In 2015, Tourism Ucluelet took the lead on those services, causing a significant loss of revenue for the Chamber.



This required the Chamber to reinvent its focus and value proposition. It had to ask: “What do local businesses and not-for-profits need and how can we help?”

The answer was a pivot toward economic development services. As a smaller municipality, the District of Ucluelet had not recently employed a full-time economic developer, but

the Chamber saw the opportunity to help fill that gap. The Chamber’s small, volunteer-driven board decided to launch an ambitious campaign aimed at understanding business needs and helping to support local employment, and hired economic development consultant Jamie Vann Struth to give expert guidance as the program was implemented.



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## THE STRATEGY

The Ucluelet Business and Employee Retention and Expansion Program (UBERE) was funded for its first year by the [District of Ucluelet](#), the [Island Coast Economic Trust](#), and the [BC Rural Dividend](#) program. It was designed as a business retention and expansion (BRE) program, with a secondary mission to support local youth development.

The program's aim was to interview 100 local employers to get detailed insight into critical issues, to report the findings, and to immediately provide support to keep local businesses in good shape and help them grow into the future. Interviews were co-ordinated by local facilitator Joseph Rotenberg, with mentorship from Vann Struth. In addition, a custom set of detailed census data was used to understand employment patterns and identify the twin pillars of Ucluelet's economy: tourism and harbour-related industries.

Chamber staff supported local employers by referring them to resources, developing an [online resource catalogue](#), mediating conflicts between local business entities, connecting local employers with programs like [Export Navigator](#), conducting research on behalf of employers, co-ordinating the delivery of workshops on priority topics, and publishing blog entries that celebrate local employers.

Based on their analysis, Chamber staff reported six critical BRE issues to Ucluelet municipal council:

- Seasonality of revenues
- Employee retention and attraction
- Housing
- Trade and professional business support shortages
- Commercial and industrial buildings shortages
- The lack of strategic business and succession planning

In response, Chamber staff communicated housing and commercial opportunities to local businesses, featured business planning resources in an online business support catalogue, and co-ordinated the delivery of six workshops intended to address issues around employee attraction and retention, residential tenancies, succession planning and bookkeeping.

Several other initiatives were designed to support local youth development. A [registry of employers](#) who hire high-school-aged youth was compiled through the interviews and distributed to the high school and posted on Chamber communication channels. An after-school youth entrepreneurship program was started based on Junior Achievement's [Company Program](#) through which Chamber staff and three local entrepreneurs helped participants build a company that sells a real product or service.



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## SUCCESSSES

- By late October, 89 businesses had taken part in UBERE interviews.
- The program has delivered numerous workshops that address local business needs. One example is a forklift certification course that was brought to Ucluelet after two interview respondents independently identified it as a need for the local workforce.
- The Chamber has engaged a different – younger – demographic of business owner through the UBERE program. As a result, Chamber membership is on the rise, helping secure the financial future of the organization.
- The program has directly supported 28 employers. For example, Chamber staff resolved conflicts between local business entities and connected employers with CRA resources to address tax questions.
- The Chamber and District of Ucluelet staff have strengthened their relationship through the UBERE program. As a result, they are working together to develop online tools that support local small businesses and communicate Ucluelet's attributes and opportunities for economic development.

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

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## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Keep interviews short.** Most respondents don't have more than an hour to talk
- **Work closely with local government** to apply for funding and address municipal challenges
- **Expert workshop instructors** are worth the money, but **look for local talent first**
- **Work with regional partners** to identify regional solutions
- **Don't wait** – start finding solutions and helping employers ASAP
- If your organization does not have the capacity to develop a BRE program, **hire an expert contractor** to remotely train and manage your staff

