

# 2016 COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE AWARDS APPLICATION BEST PRACTICES, Excellence in Action

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*Filled Monday, June 13, 2016*

## **Name of Local Government**

Regional District of Central Okanagan - Economic Development Commission (COEDC)

## **Project/Program Manager Name**

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**The Mayor/Chair is aware that I am submitting this application on behalf of my local government.**

Yes

## Project/Program Title:

Business Walk Program

## Project Summary Paragraph

***Please provide a summary of your project/program in 150 words or less.***

The COEDC, with participation of stakeholder organizations, led Canada's first Business Walk on October 4th, 2012 during Small Business Month in response to industry intelligence stating that the business community feels weakly connected to the regions' municipalities (CFIB Fall 2011). The objective of the Business Walk program is to identify successes and obstacles businesses in the region face and provide timely and responsive BR&E programming to address barriers and capitalize on opportunities. The overarching format for the program has remained the same for the last few years, where in a three hour blitz, more than 65 business and civic leaders volunteer to walk door to door connecting with an average of 400 businesses throughout the Central Okanagan Region. In a brief conversational interaction captured by a survey, business owners/managers are asked questions related to their workforce needs, to rate their business environment and what resources/information would assist them.

## Project Analysis

### 1. SERVICES

***How has the implementation of this program/project improved services in your community?***

Reports detailing the information gathered on a Business Walk are publicly published and distributed within two weeks of the Walk and are used to identify

businesses that require follow-up. Follow-up is typically to 25% of all businesses visited.

For the COEDC the information helps to capture and track the pulse of businesses throughout the region, provides industry intelligence to key stakeholders and identifies opportunities for the COEDC's BR&E programming. Civic and business leaders gain specific information that enables them to identify and remove barriers to doing business in their respective municipalities. The information is used for site visits, 1:1 follow-up and expertise to those businesses requiring assistance. Member-driven organizations such as business improvement associations and chambers of commerce use the information to tailor their services to the expressed needs of the businesses they serve and to develop their annual reports/presentations to their boards.

## **2. EFFECTIVENESS**

***How is the program/project more efficient and/or effective than it was before?***

Since its inception in 2012, the program has been a success and continued on an annual basis. Business Walks have been adopted by 75 communities throughout Western Canada and the BC Ministry of Small Business. The program has also been recognized as a BR&E best practice by the British Columbia Economic Development Association.

The Commission expanded its Business Walks program and introduced Sector-Specific Business Walks in 2013 and a Human Resource focused Business Walk in 2015. Sector specific Business Walks in 2016 include manufacturing/aerospace, healthcare and tourism in addition to the annual October walk. To date, the Commission has conducted eight Business Walks (with 3 more to be conducted this year) and approximately 1670 businesses representing approximately 16,000 employees have been visited with one-on-one follow up assistance provided to over 160 companies across all sectors.

The program has increased efficiencies by introducing a standardized survey that all communities can use. The information collected from the surveys is now entered into a CRM system that allows for easier creation of reports and data retrieval and sharing with partner communities.

## **3. ECONOMIC IMPACT**

***How has the program/project saved the community money and/or resources or encouraged economic development?***

The Business Walk program offers an opportunity to listen to the local business community, identifying common themes for action while bringing together educational resources, municipal services and representatives of the business community for specific action plans. The program allows visitation to numerous businesses in a short amount of time in order to gather industry intelligence to foster growth. The COEDC uses this intelligence to identify companies who require follow up 1:1 assistance and who could benefit from accessing the Commissions' programs and services or other business support agencies.

The program was tailored to fit the needs of the local business environment and took a regional collaborative approach. On its first year, the program gained support from over 65 business leaders (including first nations council, four chambers of commerce, 2 BIA's, Community Futures, Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training and four mayors) as volunteer walkers. That full support from all communities throughout the region, their local governments, business service providers and business leaders continues to date and the information gathered from all walks is being used to build a stronger relationship with businesses and in turn a stronger economy for the Okanagan.

During the most recent annual walk on October 1st, 2015 the COEDC connected with 374 businesses throughout the Region. 3,576 full and part-time employees were represented by the businesses visited. The COEDC and its partners worked collectively to follow-up with 84 businesses on issues such as marketing, subsidies for employee training, parking, zoning, signage, and business plan assistance.

#### **4. ACCOUNTABILITY**

***How has this program/project improved accountability to citizens of your local government?***

The Business Walks program includes participation communities throughout the Central Okanagan – Kelowna, West Kelowna, Peachland, Lake Country and Westbank First Nation. By leveraging partners across all communities, including elected officials, first nations, business support agencies, chambers of commerce, business improvement associations and cross section of industry association leaders, the COEDC was able to gain buy-in and participation from the local business community for the first Business Walk in 2012. Today, that buy-in has transformed into full support and increased participation as business owners recognize the value of having one-on-one conversations with decision makers and community leaders.

Through post-event internal reports generated and published, the COEDC is able to share valuable intel with municipalities and business service providers who use this

information as a tool to address issues and capitalize on opportunities. An example of this is the closure of the Ellis Truck Route by the City of Kelowna as an outcome of intel received from the Business Walks program, where businesses suggested the use of alternative routes for industrial traffic which the City of Kelowna incorporated as part of their 2012 Downtown Plan for safe and pedestrian-friendly downtown.

Findings of the reports are made public and communicated directly to multi levels of government allowing elected officials to work with staff and leaders in the business community to investigate solutions to issues discovered during the walk.

## **5. RESULTS**

***How has this program/project resulted in excellence in action in your community?***

The Business Walks program includes participation communities throughout the Central Okanagan – Kelowna, West Kelowna, Peachland, Lake Country and Westbank First Nation. By leveraging partners across all communities, including elected officials, first nations, business support agencies, chambers of commerce, business improvement associations and cross section of industry association leaders, the COEDC was able to gain buy-in and participation from the local business community for the first Business Walk in 2012. Today, that buy-in has transformed into full support and increased participation as business owners recognize the value of having one-on-one conversations with decision makers and community leaders.

Through post-event internal reports, the COEDC is able to share valuable intel with municipalities and business service providers who use this information as a tool to address issues and capitalize on opportunities. The report is made available to the public and shared with Chambers of Commerce, business improvement associations, community partners and government within three weeks of the Walk. One-on-one follow up is provided by the Commission to greater than 25% of businesses visited.

The program has been recognized by the BC Ministry of Small Business increasing the profile of businesses in our community. The Ministry now provides resources to run the program in communities throughout the province.

## **6. TEAMWORK**

***Tell us about the teamwork involved in making this program/project possible.***

The Business Walks program includes participation communities throughout the Central Okanagan – Kelowna, West Kelowna, Peachland, Lake Country and

Westbank First Nation. By leveraging partners across all communities, including elected officials, first nations, business support agencies, chambers of commerce, business improvement associations and cross section of industry association leaders, the COEDC was able to gain buy-in and participation from the local business community for the first Business Walk in 2012. Today, that buy-in has transformed into full support and increased participation as business owners recognize the value of having one-on-one conversations with decision makers and community leaders.

It takes approximately 2 months for the COEDC to coordinate the Business Walk. Every walk has an average of 65+ volunteer walkers who donate three hours of their time the day of the walk (total of 195+ hours). Volunteers are strategically teamed up in groups of 2 to 3 walkers to balance business service provider or municipal staff representation, match skill sets and increase efficiency. A volunteer recruitment and training video was created by the Commission showing a typical interaction and outlining the process for a visit with business enabling the day of the walk to run smoothly.

## **7. INNOVATION**

### ***What makes this program/project innovative and creative?***

The COEDC's Business Walks pilot in 2012 was the first of its kind in Canada. The Commission leveraged partners across many communities and service providers including partnership with Westbank First Nation; the program was an excellent example of a wide level of partnerships which included municipalities, elected officials, business support agencies and first nations.

In addition to the level of partnership from agencies, the COEDC spent less than \$500 of program dollars to facilitate this program in its launch in 2012 aside from staff time. The program is led by one person leveraging the Commission and stakeholder partnerships. The Commission utilized a CRM system and standardized the programming to identify businesses requiring aftercare, as well as dissected each stakeholder's expertise and networks for maximum program impact and utilization of individual skill sets.

Corie Griffiths, Manager for the COEDC, states "This is a dynamic program which demonstrates how community organizations can work together to determine the needs of a significant number of businesses in a short period of time through meaningful face-to-face communication. While each organization contributes to the common goal, they also have the opportunity to help address those needs through their own unique programs and services."

## 8. SUSTAINABILITY

***What measures have you put in place to ensure the continued operation of this initiative?(e.g. staff time, resources, financial)***

It is important to highlight the program's adaptability and growth capacity. When the program started in 2012, the allocated budget was \$500. As the years progressed and the program has gained traction with increased community participation, the business reach and walking areas have also increased. The program has also seen the addition of one-on-one follow up services provided by the Commission to greater than 25% of businesses and the addition of Sector-Specific Business Walks and a Human Resources Business Walk.

## 9. BEST PRACTICES

***How do the processes behind the program/project, and the subsequent results, serve as an example of best practices?***

The Business Walks program is now on its fifth year and has seen an increased profile within British Columbia and Alberta. Businesses are looking forward to the business walk every October, the process has been refined and the data gathered provides valuable information on the pulse of the business community.

Some outcomes from the Business Walks to date include:

- Regular participation by 65+ civic and business leader volunteers, including mayors and councillors and industry representatives participating;
- Over 1670 Central Okanagan businesses have been visited in the last five years; who employ over 6300 FTE's;
- One-on-one follow up assistance and specialised expertise provided to over 160 companies across all sectors;
- The Business Walk in October 2015 reported that 94% of Central Okanagan Businesses said business was steady or increasing;
- The Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training is promoting the Business Walks program as best practice, including providing access to the MJTST Business Walks Tool Kit developed by the COEDC;
- In response to issues identified in the 2013 Manufacturers Walk, the COEDC facilitated support workshops and resource tools to address stated HR issues, including a facilitated session delivered to 25 Okanagan manufacturers, a "Manufacturers Resources Guide" and a "Manufacturers Recruitment & Training Guide"

- The Ministry of Small Business has implemented the Business Walks program in rural communities throughout the province.

## **10. TRANSFERABILITY**

### ***How is this program/project transferable to other local governments?***

The Business Walks is a highly transferable program and can be implemented in any community as part of its BR&E programming. The Ministry of Jobs, Tourism & Skilled Training uses the Business Walks program as a best practice and the program has now been delivered to over 75 communities in western Canada.

## **11. KNOWLEDGE SHARING**

### ***What helpful advice would you share with other communities looking to embark on a similar project?***

The Business Walks program has received significant traction. Many communities throughout BC, Canada & the US have contacted the COEDC to explore how their communities can facilitate a similar program. The COEDC has created a Business Walks 101 training kit including briefing notes, pre/post reports and communications strategies to share openly with all inquiries.

The Business Attraction Toolkit was developed to assist B.C. communities with their business attraction efforts. Information on planning a business walk is available on the provincial website.

The Toolkit is organized to support communities through the various stages of business attraction, including planning, attracting, assessing and securing business investment.

## **12. TELL US MORE**

### ***Please share any other information you think may support your submission.***

All past Business Walk reports are available to review on the COEDC website [www.investkelowna.com](http://www.investkelowna.com)