

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

### An Introduction

The Town of Okotoks, within its Economic Strategic Plan, has set business retention and expansion (BRE) as a priority. A BRE program helps to ensure that the existing businesses in Okotoks continue to survive and grow, resulting in a healthy economic environment which will attract future investment. Traditional BRE activities include surveys of the business community, either online or as individual interviews. The strategic plan also identified specific target sectors with the most optimal opportunity for growth. The Economic Development Business Center decided to hold roundtable discussions for each sector, allowing for discussion of issues, challenges and solutions relevant to each participant.

The roundtable structure provides an opportunity for Economic Development to connect with businesses to determine what is working and not working within their business sector, provide potential solutions and learn of their future plans for expansion. This information validates activities and priorities for Economic Development, while taking into account the strategic plan, and helps foster improved communication between the Town and the business community.

A roundtable session for Health Businesses was held in the Town Municipal office on September 19, 2019. A total of 13 people attended the in-person event. Other roundtable sessions already held include:

Commercial Developers and Commercial Realtors – July 10, 2019  
Home Based Businesses – July 24, 2019  
Professional, Scientific and Technical Businesses – September 11, 2019  
Health – Sept 19, 2019

Two more roundtable discussions are scheduled through November.

This report does four things:

1. Provides a summary of themes, ideas, and potential solutions to ensure the Town maintains a supportive small business climate.
2. Provides the transcribed notes from the roundtable session.
3. Provides feedback to the Town of Okotoks as to how they can assist and partner with industry sectors to achieve success and reduce “red tape.”
4. Provides an action plan for Economic Development for Business Retention and Expansion projects.

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

**A note to readers:** Thank you to all that participated in these conversations. We are grateful to those who shared experiences, ideas and solutions in this process and helped deepen our understanding of the complexities.

### What We Asked

There were several key topic areas that we wanted to better understand:

1. Development and building permit process
2. Land use bylaw
3. Infrastructure
4. Costs
5. Training and Workforce
6. How economic development can support you

Within these topic areas we aimed to understand what is working, what is not, what barriers exist and gather feedback on possible solutions.

### What We Heard

Participants were asked to share their experiences, ideas and challenges regarding the key topic areas. The following section details what we heard, the themes that emerged and analysis of the feedback provided. The transcribed notes from the session can be found in **Appendix A**.

At the beginning of the session, participants were asked to identify issues and solutions in the development/building permit process. The most prevalent themes included communication and access to information, timelines and signage.

The table below outlines the issues and also the proposed solutions that were offered.

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

<p><b>Question 1</b></p> <p><b>What are the ISSUES you have encountered in the development/building permit process?</b></p>	<p><b>Question 2</b></p> <p><b>Looking at the issues that have been listed, what are some possible SOLUTIONS?</b></p>
<p>Communication and access to information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of correspondence to timing/renewal/cost</li> <li>• Duplication of info submitted</li> <li>• No blueprints available with Town</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business license renewal reminders</li> <li>• Better exposure of who to contact with questions in Town of Okotoks staff/department</li> <li>• Assign one staff to a file as the primary contact with license – providing better customer service</li> <li>• To have a “coach” in the process (“business development”) – too many steps in the process, would help with the time it takes, wouldn’t miss steps</li> <li>• Simple checklist sheet for each step needed to complete license/permit</li> <li>• Checklist of supporting documents</li> <li>• More basic guidelines in general (step-by-step)</li> <li>• Computer program to help better manage licensing/permit process</li> <li>• Later hours for business owners to be able to come into the Town – to not interfere with business hours (or Town employee to come to them)</li> <li>• Provide an assessment of space business owners are looking at (sometime have previous issues)</li> </ul>
<p>Timelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permitting and licensing delays</li> <li>• Should not take as long to license/permit</li> <li>• Building permits and inspections take an inordinate amount of time “months”</li> <li>• Getting information regarding timelines with new development areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Permitting and licensing delays – increase efficiency of Town of Okotoks departments</li> <li>• Timelines of each process</li> <li>• Each department involved treat applications as a project management with better timelines</li> <li>• Reasonable turnaround – less than a week</li> </ul>

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

<p>Signage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signage bylaws are too restrictive</li> <li>• Sign permits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide guidelines for signage (before opening)</li> </ul>
<p>Land use restrictions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulatory requirements – bylaw use/land use</li> </ul>	
<p>Costs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costs – too expensive compared to other jurisdictions</li> <li>• Lease costs/square foot</li> <li>• Extreme property taxes</li> </ul>	

**Some additional comments captured included:**

- Not-for-profit did not fit well into existing categories
- My experience was pretty seamless
- A building or space that has already been inspected
- Filled space = better tax base for Town of Okotoks

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

### Question 3

#### **What are your suggestions for Land Use Bylaw?**

Participants were asked for suggestions to change or improve the Land Use Bylaw and five major themes emerged.

#### **Land Use Designations**

There was a strong overall sentiment that regulatory requirements are too strict. One participant commented that, “spaces are empty because only specific businesses are ‘allowed.’” It was suggested that the Town allow for more business flexibility and permitted uses. Other comments included:

- Greater diversification within each Land Use Designation
- Less restrictive covenance on land use
- Being able to switch uses of business
- Allow more variances/exemptions
- Lessen the number of industrial and commercial use categories- generalize, decrease, combine (C3-C4 into CZ)
- Allow for temporary use of a building while variance process is being reviewed as long as all documents have been properly filled out and filed
- Create a more walkable downtown with designated parking around the downtown area

#### **Parking**

Participants told us that parking restrictions do not satisfy their needs as business owners and the Town needs a greater understanding of what businesses actually need for parking. It was suggested that the Town consider reducing the number of stalls required and review the number of handicapped stalls required. Participants proposed designated parking around the downtown area and commented that transit would help alleviate some of the parking issues downtown. One participant questioned why a new business “inherits” parking issues and stated, “If bylaw changes why should the new businesses be responsible and not the Town?”

#### **Signage**

Two comments were shared that relate to signage. Overall participants felt that signage needs to be made consistent and uniform. One idea to implement consistency as to design “preapproved templates with dimensions/lighting.”

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

### **Costs**

Participants also shared their views on high rent costs in Okotoks. We also heard that overall the process to start a business in Okotoks is too expensive.

There were a few suggestions to reduce costs for new business owners.

- More incubation spaces to assist small business with reduced rent or lease cost at start up
- More “live-work” spaces
- Businesses who have more than one business in their building could “share” a business license and give the main business a break on their license

### **Question 4**

#### **What are your suggestions for infrastructure?**

Participants shared a wide variety of infrastructure suggestions to meet the needs of the business community. Although the comments varied greatly a few themes did emerge.

#### **Downtown**

Participants shared their view that downtown Okotoks needs to be more “walkable.” One participant suggested that Elizabeth Street be closed at the big clock and converted to a pedestrian zone. Parking and transit were two other suggestions for infrastructure in the downtown area. “Provide parking around the area by the train tracks,” was proposed by one participant.

#### **Road Infrastructure**

Participants also commented on additional infrastructure improvements such as dedicated bike lanes on main roads and traffic circles where feasible at busy intersections.

#### **Development**

We heard participants say that infrastructure improvements should include mixed use development by blending business and living space. It was also suggested that Okotoks should be building up, not out, where possible. One participant commented generally saying, “Okotoks needs something to draw people here, people seem to visit and not come back.”

#### **Technology**

One participant shared their view that high speed internet needs to be available sooner.

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

### Question 5

#### **What are your suggestions for costs?**

The most prevalent theme we heard around costs related to signage and eliminating extra costs. Participants told us they want guidelines on what signage should look like and as long as signs fall within those guidelines there should be no additional costs. Another participant made a suggestion related to pre-existing signs: Where pre-existing signs have been approved and displayed, allow for transfer of pre-existing sign approvals of multiple businesses, i.e. illuminated signs.

Participants also commented on tenant improvement costs stating that the costs for minor improvements need to be minimal if there are no changes to the structure. It was also noted that costs are too high for tenants with some of the requirements not making sense especially if the previous tenant was “grandfathered.”

An overall suggestion was that the Town needs to be transparent with all costs.

### Question 6

#### **What are your suggestions for support from Economic Development?**

Participants suggested the need for a “coach” or dedicated person to help them navigate Town processes and assist with business start up. Another commentator proposed a paid Economic Development liaison to collect information to help better understand business sector needs.

Other suggestions for Economic Development support included:

- Promoting and supporting “local”
- Host and promote events that showcase business diversity
- Host meet and greets to foster relationships between the Town and the business community
- Develop a searchable Town directory (an Okotoks “Google”) using tag words and advertise the directory
- Create and maintain a business calendar with events and workshops
- Instead of opting in for the Business Directory, have businesses opt out

### Question 7

#### **What are your suggestions for support from training and workforce?**

Social media training was the most frequent comment heard related to training. Participants requested more training on how to use social media and how to link social media to the Town of Okotoks to build support for their business. Additional ideas for training included group information training opportunities for those who are considering opening a business in Okotoks.

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

More communication about training and workshop opportunities was also suggested by participants.

The business incubator idea that was mentioned previously was also suggested here. There is a need for shared costs and assistance with start up in order to help small businesses succeed.

### Additional Comments

Participants shared ideas about the topics they are interested in teaching within the community. Some of the ideas brought forth included:

- Mendability – Would teach parents/caregivers how to deal with meltdowns, teach seniors how to improve memory
- Massage Haven – Teach couples/parents massage techniques for relaxation/colicky babies
- Illuminate – Would like in to schools to teach students how to deal with stress

Another suggestion was to host an evening where local health professionals provide information to the community.

We also heard that Medical Services should be connected to local events happening in the community such as the Summer Games.



# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

### Considerations for Future Engagement

In this session we heard a desire for continued engagement and one participant suggested, “Roundtable sessions with business associations or hub for business owners to know and understand each/all associations(s) and what they offer.”

The Economic Development team is committed to building trust and relationships with the business community. Engagement sessions will continue to model best practices in public engagement by involving the business community in decisions that affect them, seeking to understand their opinions and perspectives and delivering transparent reports on engagement activities like the roundtable sessions.

### What’s Next?

Economic Development will be meeting with 3 other stakeholder groups through November 2019. Additional “What We Heard” reports will be compiled from participant feedback. Participants and Internal staff will have an opportunity to review the draft document prior to going to Council for review. A final summary report will be delivered to Okotoks Town Council in early December.

Contact info:

Angela Groeneveld, Economic Development Manager	<a href="mailto:agroeneveld@okotoks.ca">agroeneveld@okotoks.ca</a>	403-938-8907
Leslie Warren, Economic Development	<a href="mailto:lwarren@okotoks.ca">lwarren@okotoks.ca</a>	403-995-6336

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

### APPENDIX A

#### Transcribed Notes

##### Question 1

#### **What are the ISSUES you have encountered in the development/building permit process?**

Land use restrictions

Lack of correspondence to timing/renewal/cost

Extreme property taxes

Duplicated of info submitted

Regulatory requirements – bylaw use/land use

Costs – too expensive compared to other jurisdictions

Getting information regarding timelines with new development areas

Signage bylaws are too restrictive

Leasing costs are greater than Calgary

Information

Time

Land use

Lease costs/square foot

Taxes

Signage

Inspections and permitting

Not-for-profit did not fit well into existing categories

Sign permits

No blueprints available with Town

Permitting and licensing delays

Should not take as long to license/permit

Building permits and inspections take an inordinate amount of time “months”

My experience was pretty seamless

##### Question 2

#### **Looking at the issues that have been listed, what are some possible SOLUTIONS?**

Business license renewal reminders

Permitting and licensing delays – increase efficiency of Town of Okotoks departments

Checklist of supporting documents

Timelines of each process

Better exposure of who to contact with questions in Town of Okotoks staff/department

Simple checklist sheet for each step needed to complete license/permit

Each department involved treat applications as a project management with better timelines

Reasonable turnaround – less than a week

A building or space that has already been inspected

Computer program to help better manage licensing/permit process

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

Assign one staff to a file as the primary contact with license – providing better customer service  
Filled space = better tax base for Town of Okotoks  
Provide guidelines for signage (before opening)  
More basic guidelines in general (step-by-step)  
Later hours for business owners to be able to come into the Town – to not interfere with business hours (or Town employee to come to them)  
To have a “coach” in the process (“business development”)– too many steps in the process, would help with the time it takes, wouldn’t miss steps  
Provide an assessment of space business owners are looking at (sometime have previous issues)

### Question 3

#### **What are your suggestions for Land Use Bylaw?**

Reduce the number of land use designations so these are encompassed under one  
Lessen the number of industrial and commercial use categories- generalize, decrease, combine (C3-C4 into CZ)  
Greater diversification within each land use bylaw  
Allow more variances/exemptions (with land use definition) – preapprove

- Example: Industrial sub 1, sub 2 with checkbox
- Example: Commercial sub 1, sub 2 with checkbox

Ideally reduce time and administration processes  
Reduce regulatory burdens to allow business flexibility and more permitted uses  
Being able to switch uses of business  
Less restrictive covenance on land use  
Broader categories with less restrictions (overarching guidelines)  
Allow for temporary use of a building while variance process is being reviewed as long as all documents have been properly filled out and filed  
Parking – designated spaces and overflow space  
Restrictions don’t satisfy business needs – make restrictions more flexible, better understanding of what each business needs for space  
Reduce the requirement for number of stalls  
Review the requirement for number of handicapped stalls (disproportioned) – get rid of red tape and big brother attitude  
Signage – make consistent and uniform  
Preapproved templates with dimensions/lighting  
Too strict – spaces are empty because only specific businesses are “allowed”  
Incubation space to assist small business with reduced cost rent/lease to get started  
Parking – why does a new business “inherit” parking issues (assessment)  
If bylaw changes why should the new businesses be responsible and not the Town?  
Too expensive when already paying for other things

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

- Create a more “walkable” downtown
- Have designated parking around the downtown area
- Transit in town would help with the parking issues
- More “live-work” spaces
- More incubation spaces
- The way Okotoks is structured makes it difficult for lower income/people who rent to start a business
- Can’t start a business in a home you rent
- Rents are too high to make it
- Requirement for multiple licenses with one type of business and not others (Hair dresser versus health care)
- Landlords don’t have enough rules/regulations which puts more on the shoulders of the business owners who rent
- Businesses who have more than one business in their building could “share” a business license – give the main business a break on their license

### Question 4

#### **What are your suggestions for infrastructure?**

- Transit
- More downtown more walkable – close off downtown by the big clock and make it a park
- Provide parking around the area (by the train tracks – make it better parking)
- Better communication in general
- Okotoks needs something to draw people here, people seem to visit and not come back
- After hours and Sundays - Needs to be all of downtown business to make it worthwhile for people to come
- Build up not out where possible
- Mixed use development blend of business and living space
- High speed internet available sooner
- Dedicated bike lanes on main roads
- Complete a traffic analysis
- Traffic circles added to busy intersections or proper spots, identify feasible locations

### Question 5

#### **What are your suggestions for costs?**

- Guidelines with what the signs should look like and appear with no extra costs
- As long as signs are within guidelines there should not be extra costs
- Where pre-existing signs have been approved and displayed allow for transfer of pre-existing sign approvals of multiple businesses, i.e. illuminated signs
- Pay for only what you need

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

Be transparent with costs involved

Tenant improvements – costs too high for minor improvements, costs should be minimal if changes are not changing structure

Too many costs for tenants – especially when previous tenant was “grandfathered”

Sometimes requirements don’t make sense

Have someone as a dedicated coach or someone to assess all that is needed

### Question 6

#### **What are your suggestions for support from Economic Development?**

Fee to better support and network business through Ec Dev to have a liaison paid to collect and understand business sector needs

### Question 7

#### **What are your suggestions for support from training and workforce?**

More training on use of social media to make it easier to follow

How to link social media to Town of Okotoks to support and build services

Follow Ec Dev to learn more about activities

Hire a business coach to understand resources and to be able to refer accurately

Training so the same thing on social media

Group information training opportunities for those who are considering opening a business in Okotoks

Business incubator – shared costs for spaces to assist with start up

Entity to help small business start-up and succeed

Town of Okotoks to have coaches to assist with start up

Promotion of what we have locally

Have events that showcase business diversity

Group promotion within specific industries

Promote from within

Pool of money to host events and appropriately market to showcase business

Referral registry to know what is available for each industry

Hosting meet and greets to better know each other

Have a checklist – include items to consider

Businesses who don’t pay for business licenses don’t get a “renewal” – so they miss “updating” information

Have a Town contact for each type of business who is designated, saves getting transferred

Have a searchable Town directory using tag words – a Town “Google”

Advertise the directory

Instead of opting in for the directory opt out – automatically include everyone

Town of Okotoks to walk the talk on supporting local

Commercial gap analysis

Social media training

# What We Heard Report

## Okotoks Economic Development

Make info for workshops/training in Town more available  
Roundtable with business associations or hub for business owners to know and understand each/all associations(s) and what they offer  
Business business calendar with events and workshops

### **Additional Comments**

Medical services – connect to local – summer games, events  
Vet local business to connect support to local opportunity

What can you teach?

Mendability – ie. would teach parents/caregivers how to deal with meltdowns, teach seniors how to improve memory

Massage Haven – ie. teach couples/parents massage techniques for relaxation/colicky babies

Illuminate – ie. would like in to schools to teach students how to deal with stress

Have an evening where local health professionals provide information to the community