

# 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 Retail Businesses was held in the Town Municipal office on October 2, 2019. A total of 12 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 Businesses – September 19, 2019

You can read the What We Heard reports from these sessions [here](#). 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.

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**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:

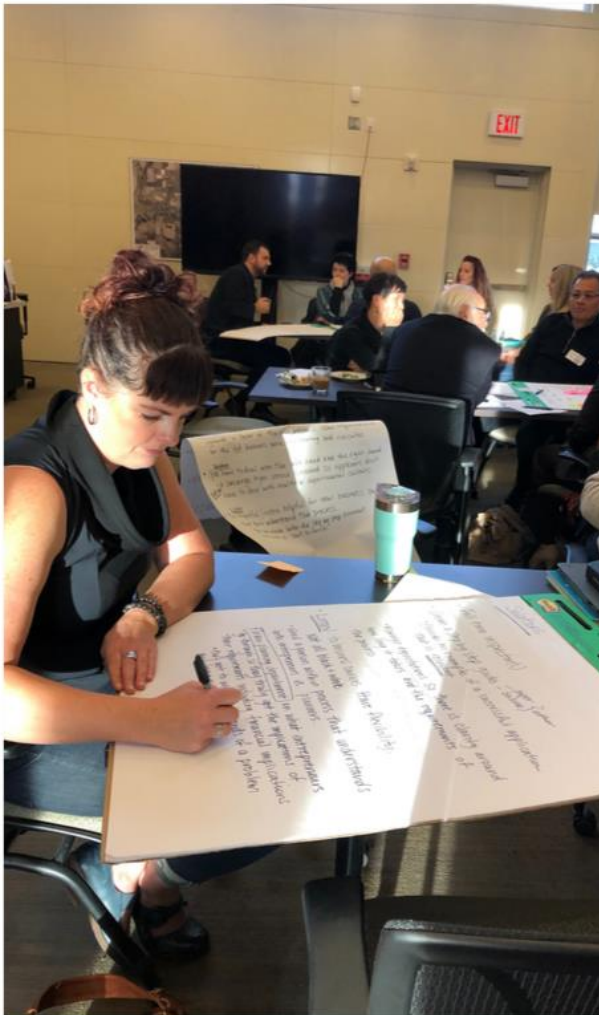
1. Development and building permit process
2. Signage
3. Land use bylaw
4. Costs
5. Programs that would benefit businesses

Within these topic areas we aimed to understand what is working, what is not, what barriers exist and gather feedback on possible solutions. We also asked participants to tell us the support they need from the Economic Development team. And finally participants were asked to complete a survey at the end of the session. Two of the questions related to marketing and those results have been summarized in question 7.

All retailers that did not participate in the in-person session had an opportunity to complete an online survey through survey monkey. Five responses were collected and that input has been added to this report.

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### 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 processes, communication and access to information, signage and parking.

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

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<p>Question 1</p> <p><b>What are the ISSUES you have encountered in the development/building permit process?</b></p>	<p>Question 2</p> <p><b>Looking at the issues, what are some possible SOLUTIONS?</b></p>
<p>Communication and access to information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You have to deal with the left hand and the right hand</li> <li>Disconnect between departments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A concierge type service is needed so applicants don't have to deal with multiple departments</li> <li>Town website revamp for user friendliness – open search bar</li> <li>Contact us on website – more business categories, a drop down menu</li> <li>Prospective/new business welcome package</li> <li>Be respectful/extra helpful for new business owners that don't understand the process – this can include both the step-by-step document, the planners, etc. start to finish</li> </ul>
<p>Internal and external processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No direction/manual for resources</li> <li>Departmental culture within the Town of Okotoks – externally we see it as Town of Okotoks</li> <li>I found the red tape to be excessive</li> <li>Too stringent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need a step by step guide/clarity of permit application</li> <li>Step-by-step process of permit application</li> <li>Create a step-by-step guide – paper, online, either – provide an example of a successful application that is relevant</li> <li>Build a matrix for resources</li> <li>Very clear steps on documents</li> <li>Well developed process</li> <li>Tutorials on the process available on the website (short and concise)</li> <li>Good to have well informed staff to be able to ask questions</li> <li>LISTEN to business owners – have flexibility, not all black and white</li> <li>Need a person within the process that understands both entrepreneurs and planners</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train the planning department on what entrepreneurs go through so they truly get the implications of their requirements including financial implications – they get to wash their hands of a problem and move on. The business owner lives with the result, the expense, the frustration</li> <li>• Each individual case should be looked at separately</li> <li>• Reducing the red tape and providing resources that are willing to work with the businesses, not against them is crucial. Finding a solution sometimes seems to be a struggle</li> </ul>
<p>Signage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restrictions</li> <li>• Elma Street needs signage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear sign bylaws</li> <li>• Allow for blade signs</li> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• Visually pleasing</li> <li>• Standardize/unity/cohesive look</li> </ul>
<p>Parking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed use rules versus commercial pertaining to parking</li> <li>• Number of parking stalls required for smaller business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the numbers of stalls required for businesses on Elma Street</li> <li>• Are the criteria for businesses on the street to have a certain number of parking stalls?</li> </ul>
<p>Timelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Took a lot of time to go through all the steps to open – once one task was complete more had to be done which took a lot of time</li> <li>• Availability of an inspector – only work Tuesday and Thursday not enough</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage expectations so there is clarity around how long it takes and the requirements of the whole process</li> <li>• Full time inspectors</li> </ul>

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### Some additional comments captured included:

- Online reservation to secure a designated location for mobile vending (for a fee)
- Visitor Information Centre at Town entrance
- More options for businesses
- No issues. Town process was more than adequate. Thank you for being seamless
- No concerns, expedited in a timely process
- No concerns, very easy process

### Question 3

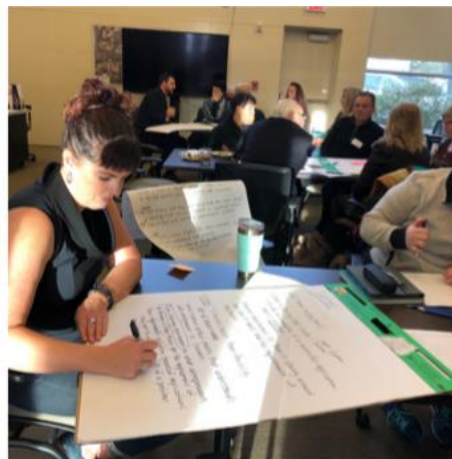
#### **Signage has been a regular topic at the roundtables. Do you have suggestions for retail signage and the regulations that need to be in place?**

Signage issues have been a theme echoed in past roundtable sessions. We wanted to dive deeper into signage issues with this group of retail business owners. The most prevalent comment about signage was a lack of consistency in regulations. The majority of participants told us that all businesses should be held to the same standards.

The topic of sandwich board signs was another theme that emerged. The importance of sandwich board signs for smaller business on Elma Street were highlighted. For those businesses with side street locations, sandwich board signs are seen as very helpful for alerting customers of the business location. Other participants remarked that sandwich board sign usage should be limited because if there are a “sea of sandwich board signs consumers won’t see them.” Other considerations for sandwich board signs included:

- Rules as to where they are situated (safety and visually pleasing)
- Not effective in commercial areas

One participant summed up their view by suggested the Town “start over with the signage bylaw.”



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### Question 4

**The land use bylaw is being reviewed in 2020. Business and workplaces are changing. More people are shopping online. Do you have suggestions as to what the Town of Okotoks should consider as this bylaw is being reviewed?**

Town of Okotoks Senior Planner, Colin Gainer, shared information about the upcoming land use bylaw rewrite and encouraged people to participate in the upcoming public consultation process. Parking, flexible usage, number of zones and improvements to roadways and downtown were themes that we heard.

#### **Parking**

Participants shared a variety of ideas related to parking. Time limitations for parking downtown was a comment made by one participant and echoed by another who suggested enforcement “mark tires on event days.” One commentator proposed the usage of designated parking permits to park at specific locations.

Other considerations for parking included:

- Park and ride options for events meaning the public would be encouraged to park at schools and the recreation centre and shuttle to events
- Multilevel parking at the creamery site
- Need parking available to walkable areas – consider weather issues

#### **Flexible Usage**

Retail participants told us that business owners are creative in sharing spaces and the land use bylaw rewrite should allow for space sharing. The downtown business mix should be interesting, walkable and shoppable, examples being Canmore and Inglewood. The suggestion of the downtown street level focused on retail and restaurants with offices (such as a chiropractor) upstairs was mentioned.

An online survey respondent conveyed their suggestion that “the Town of Okotoks should focus on making it easy to open up a business and make it easy to adjust land use so as to make it more attractive for business to move to Okotoks.”

#### **Number of Zones**

Comments heard on this theme encouraged the Town to consider less zones. Participants want to simplify and one person advised, “20 plus zones is 15 too many.”

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### **Improvements to Roadways**

Participants shared specific ideas for improving Elma Street. We heard that access to Elma Street is a challenge if you are traveling west. Another suggestion we heard was to widen the road on the north side of Elma Street. Increasing the speed limit to 50 or 60 km per hour on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street was another improvement suggestion.

### **Improvements to Downtown**

Participants suggested a number of improvements to downtown including better lighting, wayfinding, benches, trees and beautification but want the downtown area kept walkable and intimate. One participant remarked, “Roger Brooks actually said all this 2 years ago and it all got shelved and we are still saying the same things.”

### Question 5

#### **Do you have suggestions on how the costs of business permits and licensing could be improved?**

Participants shared a number of ideas regarding cost improvements.

- Set up a fee schedule
- A Town grant for new business – something unique, environment impact, business plan
- Costs should be based on size, scale and type of business and did not agree with a “blanket approach.”
- Costs based on area, demographic and zone.
- A base cost of \$500 that covers the business license and inspections.

A sentiment heard in this session, as well as at other roundtable sessions, was transparency about all Town start up costs. One participant stated that it “feels like never ending fees.” Another commentator would like transparency and honesty about where taxes and fees go.

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### Question 6

Of this list, what program would benefit you the most? Why? Do you have other suggestions?

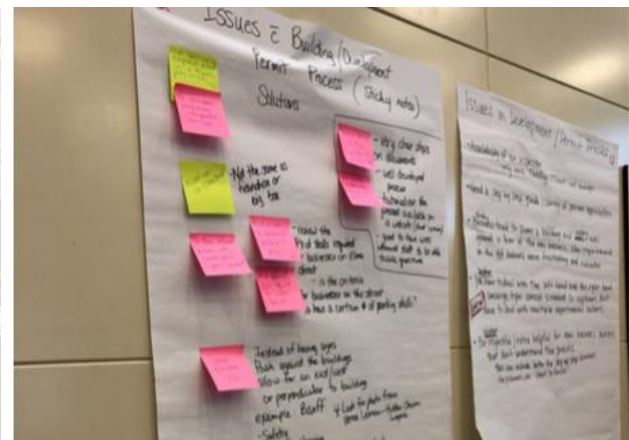
- Signage
- Benches
- Greenery, planters for entrance
- Window expansion for display
- Wayfinding banners

Of the choices listed above, participants most frequently chose signage as the program that would benefit them the most. The suggestions about signage included gateway signs (with lights) into downtown, an updated “welcome to Okotoks” sign and standardization of signage for different sized businesses.

Another program participants feel is beneficial was the Town-wide suggestion of a planter or bench program in conjunction with local businesses and high schools.

Other program ideas included:

- Seasonal lamp post decoration
- Gathering spaces for people to hang out especially during events
- Uniform standardized architectural look
- Exterior lighting for longer evening hours
- Consistent shopping hours for downtown business in the evening
- Better access to businesses
- Solution to the parking challenges
- Brochures for Old Towne



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Other comments shared related to process. One participant suggested a collective process in determining programs and another person proposed a simplified “how-to” process so that businesses would know what is/ is not allowed.

### Question 7

**There are many local business resources, each with a specific mandate. Economic Development is involved in Business Retention, Business Licensing, Business Engagement with local events, and in conjunction with the planning department, making changes to reduce red tape. How can economic development support you?**

The main support identified by participants was education. Participants shared that the Town needs to educate businesses on what business organizations are available and also teach businesses how to market themselves.

Participants also told us communication is another support needed from the Town. One participant stated, “Close the feedback loop!” Business owners want to know what happened to the information or ideas they gave, what the Town did or didn’t do with the information and *why*. Participants want the Town to “deliver the results – everyone gets wound up and excited then nothing happens.”

Additional supports identified included:

- Media pitch/collected information/publication about interesting entrepreneurs and businesses that exist in town
- Market Okotoks as a town as a whole
- I would support a BRZ mandate in the downtown area
- Online local business owner page (Store Manager's for local corporately owned locations). Share successes, opportunities. Administered by the Town to timely answer any questions from the business community
- Have people that can research different industries to adjust to their needs
- Encourage new business owners to access free resources to help with start up cost and business planning – have a mentorship program in place with likeminded businesses
- Host an evening information event as this is a challenge for small business/hours of operation

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### **Marketing**

A post-session survey asked participants two questions about marketing and advertising. The results of those questions are summarized below.

The first question asked participants to rank, in order of importance, the marketing efforts most important to their target market. The choices given were:

- Radio
- Facebook
- Poster Distribution
- Print (Western Wheel)
- Online Ads (okotokstoday.ca / Town of Okotoks events page)

Overwhelmingly participants chose Facebook as the most important marketing tool. Participants ranked online ads second and print ads third. Rounding out the rankings was radio (a close number four) and poster distribution at number five.

The second question asked: Is there another advertising stream that is valuable to your business that you would like to target? Participants shared three ideas:

- YouTube
- Joint advertising/marketing with multiple business (like the sidewalk sale)
- Signs on Elizabeth Street directing to Elma Street



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### Considerations for Future Engagement

As noted above, business owners are eager for communication and continued engagement with the Town. Communicating how participants' input affected decision making is vital to building trust and relationships with the business community. The Town is committed to an open and transparent engagement process so that participants see how their voices helped to shape decisions like the land use bylaw revisions and other red tape initiatives.

### What's Next?

Economic Development will be meeting with three other stakeholder groups through November 2019. Additional industry specific roundtable sessions will take place as follows:

Restaurants and Pubs – October 30

Construction and Manufacturing – November 6

Additional “What We Heard” reports will be compiled from participant feedback. Participants and Internal staff will have an opportunity to review the document which goes to Council for review.

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### APPENDIX A

#### Transcribed Notes

##### Question 1

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

Availability of an inspector – only work Tuesday and Thursday not enough

Need a step by step guide/clarity of permit application

Existing business tried to share a building and history was ignored in favour of the new business. New requirements on the old business were frustrating and ridiculous

You have to deal with the left hand and the right hand

Departmental culture within the Town of Okotoks – externally we see it as Town of Okotoks

Mobile vending issues – food truck

No direction/manual for resources

Clear sign bylaws

Disconnect between departments

Rental space is expensive

No parameters on type of retail in close proximity

Signage restrictions and rules

Mixed use on Elma Street – not the same as franchise or big box

Mixed use rules versus commercial pertaining to parking

Number of parking stalls required for smaller business

Took a lot of time to go through all the steps to open – once one task was complete more had to be done which took a lot of time

No concerns, expedited in a timely process

No concerns, very easy the process

No issues. Town process was more than adequate. Thank you for being seamless

I found the red tape to be excessive. I understand the process however I feel there are instances where common sense should prevail. When dealing with the development team, I was held to letter of the law. However, when it suited them better they bent the rules

Too stringent

Is there different process with shared space with permit and development?

None for me I have been here a while however inconsistency in parking issues being listened to is a problem

##### Question 2

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

A concierge type service is needed so applicants don't have to deal with multiple departmental cultures

Be respectful/extra helpful for new business owners that don't understand the process – this can include both the step-by-step document, the planners, etc. start to finish

Step-by-step process of permit application

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Online reservation in designated locations for mobile vending (for a fee)  
Build a matrix for resources  
Visitor Information Centre at Town entrance  
Town website revamp for user friendliness – open search bar  
Contact us on website – more business categories, a drop down menu  
Prospective/new business welcome package  
Review the numbers of stalls required for businesses on Elma Street  
Are the criteria for businesses on the street to have a certain number of parking stalls?  
Instead of having signs push against the buildings, allow for an east/west or perpendicular to building (ie. Banff) – look for photo from Verna Leman – Hidden Charm Lingerie  
Safety  
Visually pleasing  
Standardize/unity/cohesive look  
Elma Street needs signage  
Very clear steps on documents  
Well developed process  
Tutorials on the process available on the website (short and concise)  
Good to have well informed staff to be able to ask questions  
Full time inspectors  
Create a step-by-step guide – paper, online, either – provide an example of a successful application that is relevant  
Manage expectations so there is clarity around how long it takes and the requirements of the whole process  
LISTEN to business owners – have flexibility, not all black and white  
Need a person within the process that understands both entrepreneurs versus planners  
Training planning department on what entrepreneurs go through so they truly get the implications of their requirements including financial implications – they get to wash their hands of a problem and move on. The business owner lives with the result, the expense, the frustration  
I believe if the development team would remove themselves from their duty and look at the problem or issue from the business owners' perspective making an amicable decision would be easily obtained. It is not always black and white, sometime there will be shades of grey. Each individual case should be look at separately  
More options for businesses

### Question 3

**Signage has been a regular topic at the roundtables. Do you have suggestions for retail signage and the regulations that need to be in place?**

Gateway  
Wayfinding  
Eye pleasing  
Signage treated on individual basis

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Basic regulations – max size requirements

Start over with the signage bylaw

Sandwich boards – limit as to when/where (ie. sales, downtown promotions, events)

- If there is a “sea of signs/sandwich boards” consumers won’t see them
- Rules as to where they are situated (safety and not visually pleasing)
- For commercial areas not effective
- For smaller business on Elma Street there are very helpful for alerting customers of the business (side street locations)

Be consistent

Again: Realize implications of what you decide – Business lost 40K because they could not put signage out for 3 weeks when the same signs are elsewhere

A sign rental company from Calgary specifically said they “would not deliver to Okotoks because they are not business friendly”

One person wants flag signs and are not allowed whereas they are obvious elsewhere so businesses who follow the rules suffer

You have to pay (and spend time) getting land titles when the Town knows exactly who owns the building and the lease says they can put up a sign – comes across as crazy to businesses, unimportant red tape

Consistency when the first paid for by the Town planning advisor was hired he had so many great ideas for signage and consistency in them It all was harmonious and very appealing to the eye

Allow sandwich boards to help drive footprints into the building. Monitor developments, their sales and retention. Set up for successful development

Again when I renovated my business, I inquired to put up a digital sign. I was told it would be too distracting for drivers and was not permitted. A couple years later the town pops up a blinding digital sign on 32nd street. I feel that the rules were bent to suit them

### Question 4

**The land use bylaw is being reviewed in 2020. Business and workplaces are changing. More people are shopping online. Do you have suggestions as to what the Town of Okotoks should consider as this bylaw is being reviewed?**

Must look at the differences of each area – ie. commercial area versus downtown (keep small areas intimate and walkable)

Must have close parking available to walkable areas – consider weather issues

Widen the road (boulevard) on the north side of Elma Street

Access to Elma Street is a challenge driving west

Look at the speed limits on Northmount/Southmount and 32<sup>nd</sup> Street – increase for 50 km/hr to 60 km/hr

Development must have a vision for future use – ie. commercial use lower level/residential above

Limitations on the time parking can take place downtown

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Designated parking/permits to park at specific locations

Lower the number of business zones (5-ish)

For Town events, encourage people to park in a public parking spot “school, rec centre” and bus people into event

Consider a parking lot

20 min customer parking enforced by bylaw

Meter person marking tires on event days

Put parking at creamery lot multilevel parking

Business owners are creative in space sharing – LUB should be written to allow space sharing

Too many of the same kinds of businesses on the same street – use examples of Canmore and Inglewood where the business mix is shoppable and interesting and walkable

Downtown focused on retail and restaurants – put chiro/office/etc. upstairs not street level

Less zones – 20+ is 15 too many, simplify

Open house for business owners so everyone understands what each other does/has

Downtown doesn't feel like a downtown – needs better lights/wayfinding etc., benches/trees/beautification

Cochrane has sidewalk wayfinding as example – free for business owners

Roger Brooks actually said all this 2 years ago and it all got shelved and we are still saying the same things

No as a small business owner I continue to support brick and mortar small businesses and promote them as well

There should be no bylaws beside a basic business license to operate for the seller For the buyer, there should be a secure location within the town for pick up. This drives unknown traffic in the neighborhoods and those looking to steal the goods. Increase in theft is occurring within the Town

The Town of Okotoks should focus making it easy to open up a business and make it easy to adjust land use so as to make it more attractive for business to move to Okotoks. Leave the online marketing to the business as they know their respective industries best. Example would be big sky BBQ. People come from Calgary because of online marketing and producing a good product

### Question 5

**Do you have suggestions on how the costs of business permits and licensing could be improved?**

Done under the business license

Costs based on the size of the business

Based on the type of business

Licensing dependent on the business activity

Costs also must be based on area/demographics/zone

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Be more transparent/honest about where both taxes and fees go  
Could get Home Depot to donate or Visions pallets to the high schools to build planters for beautifying downtown – so many benefits  
Permit costs should be based on size/scale rather than blanket approach  
Business could handle the costs if there was a tangible result or benefit/reinvestment  
Feels like never ending fees  
Understand business owners pay in both dollars and time  
Base cost of \$500 that covers business license, inspections  
Encourage new business owners to access FREE resources to help with start up cost and business planning – have a mentorship program in place with likeminded businesses  
Set up a fee schedule  
Be transparent about all start up costs coming from the Town!  
The Town offering a grant for new business – criteria example – something unique, environment impact, business plan  
All is fine here  
Have people that can research different industries to adjust to their needs  
One price for all permits to be covered

### Question 6

**Of this list, what program would benefit you the most? Why? Do you have other suggestions?**

- **Signage**
- **Benches**
- **Greenery, planters for entrance**
- **Window expansion for display**
- **Wayfinding banners**

Gateway signs to downtown with lights  
Seasonal lamp post decoration  
Carol's idea for a Town-wide planter/bench project  
Create gathering spaces for people to hang out especially during events  
No one actually knows what is allowed so it's too much to bother with sometimes. Can't imagine navigating the "how-to"  
Needs to be a collective process  
Update and welcome to Okotoks sign (3)  
Access to business – challenges with parking  
Access to Elma Street is a challenge (west side)  
Boulevard down the street is pleasing to the eye but may present future problems (ie. blocks vision/safety)  
Uniform standardized architectural look  
Signage – standards for different size businesses  
Lighting (exterior) to have longer evening hours

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Consistent shopping hours for downtown business in the evening

Signage and benches are a wonderful addition please make sure store signs are approved though

The planters although sparsely placed are such an invitation to stay a while

The brochures for Old Towne were a great benefit to people spending time here we all talked about them and directed people to parts of downtown. I understand with including the entire town businesses this is problematic

Allowing businesses to promote sales within the community without a cost. Maybe a Town of Okotoks Facebook business support page. Spaces feel ousted because they cannot afford to advertise within the community or because their corporation does not allow for it

Signage

Signage and Window Expansions

### Question 7

**There are many local business resources, each with a specific mandate. Economic Development is involved in Business Retention, Business Licensing, Business Engagement with local events, and in conjunction with the planning department, making changes to reduce red tape. How can economic development support you?**

The Town needs to educate business on what business organizations are available in town

Market Okotoks as a town as a whole

Teach individual businesses how to market themselves

YouTube video (video workshop)

Deliver the results – everyone gets wound up and excited then nothing happens

Close the feedback loop! What happened to the information or ideas given, what you did, what you didn't and why

COMMUNICATE

Media pitch/collected info/publication about interesting entrepreneurs and businesses that exist in town

Maybe host evening info events as this is a challenge for small business/hours of operation

I would support a BRZ mandate in the downtown area the town is too big for Ec Dev to pay attention to all areas for all of this isn't it?

Understand with the growth of Social Media, being cohesive as a community is a key/and has been a benefit to Okotoks growth "work in the City, shop at home" moto. Promote what you can do to help grow businesses, not how to get more money out of them (ie: volunteer for the town and get free participation in events). This supports community spirit, building business relations and growth opportunities

Reducing the red tape and providing resources that are willing to work with the businesses, not against them is crucial. Finding a solution sometimes seems to be a struggle

Make sure the administration understands that people and business are customers and that they should act like

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Question 8 – this question was only asked in the online survey

### **What learning topics/events would help you in your business?**

I think that the money spent on the Town Plaza was great what a shame it is not utilized more  
I think also that more restaurants are needed downtown – unique not BOX style, people come from Calgary and outlying areas to spend a day they do not necessarily want to eat at a restaurant they can eat at where they live

Online local business owner page (Store Manager's for local corporately owned locations).

Share successes, opportunities. Admin'd by the Town to timely answer any questions from the business community

Help with shipping small packaging inter provincial