



# 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 Construction and Manufacturing Businesses was held in the Town Municipal office on November 6, 2019. A total of 15 people attended the in-person event of the 260 who were invited. 25 people had confirmed attendance. 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

Retail Businesses – October 2, 2019

You can read the What We Heard reports from the other five in-person sessions [here](#).

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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.

**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.

## Development Services Team

At the beginning of the session, a number of Town staff provided updates on each of their business centers, their roles and activities being undertaken. Guests included:

- Colleen Thome, Acting Planning Service Manager
- Rob Dickinson, Engineering and Capital Projects Manager
- Rob Mueller, Permit, Inspection, Assessment Manager
- Matthijs Mak, Purchasing Specialist

## 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



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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.

### 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, timelines and costs.

The following table outlines the issues and 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 that have been listed, what are some possible SOLUTIONS?</b></p>
<p>Internal and external processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of consistency with knowledge of bylaws with Town of Okotoks staff</li> <li>• Staff aren't always fully trained on all concepts so there is inaccurate info being given to developers</li> <li>• Need a homeowner permission letter (unnecessary). We are the only place that (requires) needs it</li> <li>• Amount of detail needed in advance is onerous</li> <li>• Town should not issue building permits to the homeowners on behalf of contractor.</li> <li>• The Okotoks process is not as easy – homeowners don't understand the construction language- they get lost in the process</li> <li>• Directed to follow what's online – verbally there is discrepancy with directions</li> <li>• Streamline process</li> <li>• Applications online don't work for all projects</li> <li>• Applications are not granular enough</li> <li>• Options online are too vague – this affects timelines</li> <li>• Too much redirection</li> <li>• Blueprints for newer builds are often not available from Town of Okotoks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One stop shop would be helpful</li> <li>• Calgary has an online process to apply and upload all your documents, etc.</li> <li>• Change the language to be more easily understood – layman's terms</li> <li>• Reference other projects for examples – give out examples for similar projects</li> <li>• Automate like Calgary</li> <li>• We could live with slightly higher costs if process was easier. MD is expensive because of distances but overall Okotoks is cheap. All those costs are put back to owners</li> <li>• Get rid of homeowner letter</li> <li>• Look at having an actual employee to permit Mon-Fri instead of a contractor Tues/Thurs. May be cheaper</li> <li>• To submit a description of project online, Town planner then responds with direction (specific)</li> <li>• Mimic what Calgary is doing</li> <li>• Homeowners should have some rights to do renos without permits</li> <li>• Separate the fire permit for a fire pit in your front yard at Halloween – this is excessive</li> </ul>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To operate out of garage there was challenges to be approved – denied – fell under an objective opinion of Town of Okotoks staff</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Timelines</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Okotoks takes longer than anywhere to get permits back. MD would take a day, Okotoks would be up to 5 days unless you beg/bug them</li> <li>Takes as long as 5 days to get permit, then inspections only Tues/Thurs – so maybe 10 day process – homeowners lose trust in contractors. They don't have patience for such a long process. Don't understand delays are contractors fault</li> <li>In a home reno it can take up to 10 days for this process...way too long</li> <li>Not knowing when you need a permit (homeowners) – most don't get one because process is too daunting, time to get first permit is too long</li> <li>Turn around time for inspections – in Calgary if you get it in before noon the inspection is the next day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guarantee turnaround time for inspections: In Calgary if you book at 2 pm you get in the next day. At 2:01 you can't</li> <li>Can you pay more to expedite inspections?</li> <li>Timelines would be extremely helpful to mitigate homeowner expectations</li> <li>If you make a request Monday, you get a response saying "we'll consider it" not yes. You don't know if you're approved. Again it affects the homeowner and their timelines</li> </ul>
<p><b>Costs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You have too many upfront costs getting drawings etc. before you find out if you can even build it. Need clearer guidelines about what would be approved or whether the scope may be expanded so as to reduce those upfront costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interest calculations should not be held by Town of Okotoks</li> <li>Reduce development fees for temporary structures on your property – ie. it cost \$1000 for a sea can on a certain electrical company's land</li> </ul>
<p><b>Communication</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Send out new bylaws/revised as they change (email out)</li> </ul>

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- Online notifications to all stakeholders – new business license and those existing
- Increase communication between business and Town of Okotoks
- Homeowner section with FAQs and a Business section – two different audiences
- Not knowing where to find the opportunities

### Some additional comments captured included:

- Development bonds – how do they arrive at \$?
- Structured scale with development bonds
- Instead of turning down projects Town of Okotoks should help with ways/methods to make it work
- Rezoning for all areas of Okotoks
- Less restrictions on landowners' current usage

### Question 3

**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?**

Participants shared a variety of ideas on what the Town should consider when revising the land use bylaw.

### Zoning and Restrictions

Several commentators want more flexibility in zoning. It was also suggested that the number of zones should be reduced and the uses should be increased. One participant stated that zoning for older areas should also be considered when revising zoning for newer developments.

Participants also shared that there are too many restrictions for current land owners and the Town should consider existing usage versus their future plans for the land. Another participant

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echoed this statement by sharing that the Town should not dictate the “the right type” of structure. There is a desire for the Town to bring back more flexibility and “human decisions” in order to empower staff to make decisions.

Other comments related to this theme included:

- Arbitrary rules need eliminating
- Allow secondary suites above garage

### **Parking**

Another theme that emerged as a consideration for the bylaw revisions was parking. One participant shared that parking should be considered on a case-by-case basis. We also heard participants say that parking rules are too restrictive and not all of the parking rules make sense.

There were also specific suggestions to improve parking including:

- Take the south side of Elma Street, change to angle parking, there would still be room for traffic
- Create an easement of 4-5m on the north side of Crescent Road – specifically for parking
- Turn the alleyway beside the tracks into a one-way street to allow for parking on the south side

### **Signage**

Participants told us that there are too many signage restrictions including size and number of signs. The topic of signage for advertising purposes was a concern. One participant suggested, “too many, distracting when driving, should be temporary as opposed to permanent.”

### **Business Engagement and Education**

One participant commented on engagement surrounding the creation of the revised bylaw and urged the Town to “Take small business into consideration when developing policy.”

Participants also told us that after the bylaw revision it is important to provide education and/or information sessions to the group (and potentially others) about the changes.

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### Question 4

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

Suggestions for infrastructure ranged from physical building structures to transit, parking and roads. Comments included:

- New pool / rec centre
- Expansion of public transit
- Work with CN to move train tracks right out of town
- Bridge on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street needs to be widened or another bridge added
- Twin 32<sup>nd</sup> – improve traffic flow with schools and everywhere else
- Get rid of the trees on Elizabeth Street to reconfigure and allow for angle parking – these take up a lot of space, safety concerns with pedestrians
- Traffic calming on Alma Street and angle parking options as well
- Parking is crazy in residential areas – large cars and multiple cars per house and no street parking
- Find a location for a parkade downtown
- Charging stations downtown should not be reserved for only electric cars – should just be first come/first serve until more uptake of those vehicles

Additionally, we heard from participants the desire for the Town to privatize road maintenance and connected to that, concern about the management of human resources (maintenance staff) with Town of Okotoks.

Participants also suggested more creativity in the design of Okotoks communities. We heard criticism of the D'Arcy development with homes being situated too close to the highway and the location of commercial zoning behind the community.



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### Question 5

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

There were several suggestions for improving business permits and licensing costs but also praise for the Town for keeping their costs reasonable:

- Costs up front are reasonable because of information needed
- Actually think costs are reasonable comparable with elsewhere

Improvement suggestions included a fair evaluation of property taxes and assessment of a property that has undergone improvements. Another cost theme that emerged was improving timelines overall in order to reduce costs. Comments included:

- Improving inspection times will reduce costs – not all inspectors are here everyday
- Timelines affect costs more than the actual charges
- If the Town of Okotoks fails to respond within a timeline there should be an automatic approval. This forces the municipality to be accountable (one week residential for example)

One participant suggested “Higher permitting costs for out of town businesses would help support local businesses – elsewhere that’s the case, then pay for the increase costs of automation etc. and keep costs down for locals.”

Additional comments related to cost included:

- Complaints from sub-contractors on the permit fees (daily, weekly) – hard when you might only be doing 1 or 2 jobs – reduce these costs
- Town of Okotoks needs to run lean behind the scenes
- Look at Kelowna for how they are running permit processes – 72 hour response for building permits, home inspection 48 hours)
- Tiering process to deal with questions. Online process needs to be more comprehensive and structured
- Accept pictures of projects to help with understanding development permit needs

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### Question 6

**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?**

Two main Economic Development supports were identified by participants. The first was communication and the various tactics that would support businesses. The second support identified a variety of tools.

### Communication

It is important to business owners that a variety of communication methods be deployed to the business community. Suggestions included:

- Regular newsletter to all licensed businesses available online – make communications a 2-way process
- Emails – great when it's straight facts that are easy to digest
- Notifications emailed when changes are made that affect business owners
- Facebook page needed for contractors and developers, closed joining process that is vetted so people who join are legit, allow everyone to communicate and work together, LinkedIn may also be an option
- Push notification type communications to allow contractors to understand opportunities for work

The kind of information business owners would like communicated included Economic Development projects that have been completed, changes that affect business owners and opportunities for work.

Participants also told us what does not work:

- Surveys – not great
- No one reads the info posted in the Western Wheel

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### Tools

Participants suggested a database update for business contact information so emails and information is relayed to the business owners. Another tool idea included a place for businesses to offer their feedback.

### Question 7

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

A key theme from training and workforce centered around standards and codes not being met. Participants suggested the Town monitor complaints and fine offenders in order to protect clients, owners and business reputation.

Participants also desire opportunities to collaborate with businesses to work together on projects and cross train within companies. We also heard that employees could be shared between businesses.

Access was another theme that was heard. Participants want access to where in town they can promote their business, the resources that are available and a listing of local services (ie. local first aid trainers).

A number of other suggestion related to training included:

- Social media training
- Business financials for tradesmen who then buy businesses (ie. accounting and CRA)
- Human resources – how to hire/fire, policies/standards
- Financing – both what it takes to start and how to run, how to deal with banks
- Legal implications/liability

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### Considerations for Future Engagement

Throughout the roundtable sessions, the business community has expressed an appreciation and desire for continued engagement. Communication, education and information is a consistent message that we heard through the engagement process. It should be noted that this engagement leads to the community having a voice in shaping the Town's policies and processes.

### What's Next?

The sector specific roundtable sessions have been completed. A final report will be developed and presented to Town Council on December 9, 2019.

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

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### APPENDIX A

#### Transcribed Notes

##### Question 1

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

Permit process – need a homeowner permission letter (unnecessary). We are the only place that (requires) needs it. Homeowners are confused plus it's legally defined that a permit should be pulled. Smaller companies just don't do it

Okotoks takes longer than anywhere to get permits back. MD would take a day, Okotoks would be up to 5 days unless you beg/bug them

Takes as long as 5 days to get permit, then inspections only Tues/Thurs – so maybe 10 day process – homeowners lose trust in contractors. They don't have patience for such a long process. Don't understand delays are contractors fault

In a home reno it can take up to 10 days for this process...way too long

Amount of detail needed in advance is onerous. You have too many upfront costs getting drawings etc. before you find out if you can even build it. Need clearer guidelines about what would be approved or whether the scope may be expanded so as to reduce those upfront costs

Town should not issue building permits to the homeowners on behalf of contractor. This is illegal and it happens all the time: what if they did the work themselves with the contractor's name on the permit? And the price of the permit is already built into the quote given so it becomes an admin headache

Not knowing where to find the opportunities

Continuity between different municipalities (ie. Okotoks, High River, Calgary, etc.)

One stop shop would be helpful

Calgary has an online process to apply and upload all your documents, etc.

The Okotoks process is not as easy – homeowners don't understand the construction language- they get lost in the process

Not knowing when you need a permit (homeowners) – most don't get one because process is too daunting, time to get first permit is too long

Turn around time for inspections – in Calgary if you get it in before noon the inspection is the next day

Continuity with interpretation of bylaws

Lack of consistency with knowledge of bylaws with Town of Okotoks staff

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Directed to follow what's online – verbally there is discrepancy with directions

Streamline process

Applications online don't work for all projects

Applications are not granular enough

Options online are too vague – this affects timelines

Too much redirection

Time delays are losing potential customers, delays with back and forth communications

Blueprints for newer builds are often not available from Town of Okotoks

To operate out of garage there was challenges to be approved – denied – fell under an objective opinion of Town of Okotoks staff

Staff aren't always fully trained on all concepts so there is inaccurate info being given to developers

Development bonds – how do they arrive at \$?

### Question 2

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

Mimic what Calgary is doing

Homeowners should have some rights to do renos without permits. Separate the fire permit for a fire pit in your front yard at Halloween – this is excessive

One call and online process

Rezoning for all areas of Okotoks

Less restrictions on land owners current usage

Change the language to be more easily understood – layman's terms

Homeowner section with FAQs and a Business section – two different audiences

Structured scale with development bonds

Interest calculations should not be held by Town of Okotoks

Workshops where planners can educate developers (regular, specific, different projects and scopes)

Instead of turning down projects Town of Okotoks to help with ways/methods to make it work

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Send out new bylaws/revised as they change (email out)

Online notifications to all stakeholders – new business license and those existing

Increase communication between business and Town of Okotoks

Discretionary approvals often have interruptions which lead to inconsistency

Reference other projects for examples – give out examples for similar projects

Automate like Calgary

We could live with slightly higher costs if process was easier. MD is expensive because of distances but overall Okotoks is cheap. All those costs are put back to owners

Get rid of homeowner letter

Look at having an actual employee to permit Mon-Fri instead of a contractor Tues/Thurs. May be cheaper

Guarantee turnaround time for inspections: In Calgary if you book at 2 pm you get in the next day. At 2:01 you can't

Can you pay more to expedite inspections?

Timelines would be extremely helpful to mitigate homeowner expectations

If you make a request Monday, you get a response saying “we’ll consider it” not yes. You don’t know if you’re approved. Again it affects the homeowner and their timelines

Does the discretionary bias lean toward approval or non approval

To submit a description of project online, Town planner then responds with direction (specific)

### Question 3

**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?**

Not restricting the current land owner as to what they can use the land for versus what the Town has for future plan of the land

Signage – too many restrictions on number of signs, size, etc.

Signage for advertising – sale signs, too many, distracting when driving, should be temporary as opposed to permanent

Not dictating what the Town thinks should be “the right type” of structure

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Take small business into consideration when developing policy

Flexibility in zoning – right now if you have to fit in a box and if you don't you're out of luck

Reduce number of zones. Increase uses of each

Rules are restrictive and employees can't actually make decisions if it doesn't check a box they say no. Bring back more flexibility and human decisions

Reduce development fees for temp structures on your property – ie. it cost \$1000 for a sea can on a certain electrical company's land

Stand by generators aren't allowed. The only known town in AB who won't allow this but now emerg services building has a giant one. Quieter than a lawnmower and equal to AC units - Arbitrary rules need eliminating

When LUB is changed, please provide education/info sessions to this group about changes

Zoning needs to change for some of the older areas not just the new developments

Increase percentage of site coverage allowed

Allow secondary suites above garage

Not all parking rules make sense – change the parking requirements on a case by case basis

Parking requirements are too restrictive these need to be re-evaluated

Take the south side of Elma Street, change to angle parking, there would still be room for traffic

Create an easement of 4-5m on the north side of Crescent Road – specifically for parking

Turn the alleyway beside the tracks into a one way street to allow for parking on the south side

### Question 4

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

New pool / rec centre

Allow for more creativity in design of communities – cookie cutter

D'Arcy development – zoning for commercial is in behind, houses are close to highway, property value is down, not appealing to be next to highway

Expansion of public transit

Work with CN to move train tracks right out of town (ie. Lethbridge has done this)

Bridge on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street needs to be widened or another bridge added – get ahead of the curve!

Start privatizing road maintenance



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Concerns about the management of human resources (maintenance staff) with Town of Okotoks

Get rid of the trees on Elizabeth Street to reconfigure and allow for angle parking – these take up a lot of space, safety concerns with pedestrians

Traffic calming on Alma Street and angle parking options as well

Twin 32<sup>nd</sup> – improve traffic flow with schools and everywhere else

Parking is crazy in residential areas – large cars and multiple cars per house and no street parking

Find a location for a parkade downtown

Charging stations downtown should not be reserved for only electric cars – should just be first come/first serve until more uptake of those vehicles

### Question 5

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

How the Town evaluates property taxes is unfair – business assessment

If you have property you own if you do improvements they assess you too high when it's an advantage to the Town for the building to look better

Improving inspection times will reduce costs – not all inspectors are here everyday

Complaints from sub-contractors on the permit fees (daily, weekly) – hard when you might only be doing 1 or 2 jobs – reduce these costs

Town of Okotoks needs to run lean behind the scenes

Look at Kelowna for how they are running permit processes – 72 hour response for building permits, home inspection 48 hours)

If the Town of Okotoks fails to respond within a timeline there should be an automatic approval. This forces the municipality to be accountable (one week residential for example)

Tiering process to deal with questions. Online process needs to be more comprehensive and structured

Accept pictures of projects to help with understanding development permit needs

Privatize roads maintenance

Actually think costs are reasonable comparable with elsewhere

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Timelines affect costs more than the actual charges

Costs up front are reasonable because of information needed

Higher permitting costs for out of town businesses would help support local businesses – elsewhere that's the case, then pay for the increase costs of automation etc. and keep costs down for locals

### Question 6

**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?**

Road closures – move barriers out past Southridge Drive – include all downtown business in the event

Database for business contact information needs update - people not getting emails or information

Incentives to use local companies – rebates, tax breaks, etc.

Ec Dev should develop a program for businesses to support each other

Build Calgary – services surrounding areas lots of info for Calgary but don't see anything from Okotoks – nothing that changes here gets communicated – they will also hold a breakfast

Regular newsletter to all licensed businesses available online – make communications a 2-way process

Notifications emailed when changes are made that affect business owners

Place to offer feedback

Checklist when projects have been accomplished so that businesses are aware of what Ec Dev is doing

Communicate opportunities for work – hard to find: push notification type communications – allow contractors to understand opportunities

No one reads the info posted in the Wheel

Facebook page needed – contractors and developers, closed joining process that is vetted so people who join are legit, allow everyone to communicate and work together, LinkedIn may also be an option

Surveys – not great

Emails – great when it's straight facts that are easy to digest

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### Question 7

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

Teach common sense! Haha

You need to be prepared for workplace reality and work ethic

Business financials for tradesmen who then buy businesses esp. accounting and CRA

HR – how to hire/fire, policies/standards

Financing – both what it takes to start and how to run, how to deal with banks – what to expect

Legal implications/liability

Info not accreditation, evenings or online

Complaints with workmanships and business licenses needs to be monitored – codes are not being followed (fine them)

Some businesses need to be fined when standards are not met (safety codes) to further protect other clients/owners/reputation of business

If the Town of Okotoks lets “bad contractors” continue to do business there needs to be fines if codes are not followed

From the business sector to start cross training within companies – increase communication, there could be collaborative effort within business to work together on projects

Access to where in town you can promote your business – what resources are available?

Access to listing of local services (ie. local first aid trainers)

Shared employees between businesses

Social media training