

TEXADA ISLAND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

May 29, 2017

To the BC Rural Dividend Fund Committee:

Thank you very much for taking the time to consider the Texada Island Chamber of Commerce \$10,000 grant request application. I am the new President of the Chamber of Commerce, recently elected on March 31, 2017. We thought you made it easy for us to follow the application process (thank you). Please consider this letter as one of the "Optional Support Letters" in our package.

Getting right down to it, Texada is a bit of a 'hard nut to crack'. One of the top issues might have to do with our people. Our island has been experiencing significant demographic changes. For example, according to the 2016 Census, between 2011 and 2016, we've experienced a 49% increase in the population aged 65 and older. Texada's population of 55+ sits at 61% of the total population. Guess what? We have zero senior's residence or palliative care facilities here. Not public, not private. So, when people age, they age-out, as in they age-off the island, sadly, to get into the facility they need. While that's notable, the other very important part of our population story is that new and younger people have been moving to Texada in record numbers. They're bringing fresh ideas, perspectives, and new desires for shopping, business and cultural activities. But, there are so many roadblocks.

While there are major resource industries on Texada, our employed are highly susceptible to labour strife and external market factors. This past winter, the Lafarge-Holcim quarry workers were locked out by the employer for 4 months because they wouldn't agree to all of the company's terms offered. There was no real alternative to support those workers and families to look elsewhere locally for employment. Our logging industry is also a very important area of employment. As with other locations in the province, Texada is now facing greater uncertainty within the context of a U.S. Trump administration that has just imposed a 20 percent tariff on Canadian softwood lumber. It isn't hard to imagine that that policy may have detrimental effects on local business revenues and local employment if Canada is unsuccessful at nipping that in the bud through successful negotiations.

There are many Texadans who are financially under-resourced for different reasons. Many of our young people are extremely talented and entrepreneurial and, because there are few large employers on the island, they find ways to do multiple numbers of small businesses or occasional jobs (if they're lucky to get anything at all). Not many can make a healthy financial life of it, though. There are young people liquidating their financial reserves to make ends meet or make a go of new businesses, but they can only do that for so long. We certainly would like to find a way for them to be more financially viable so that the young people can stay. Many of our seniors are living on pensions, and must be judicious about their spending decisions as well. Combined, these two major types of income scenarios have a generally depressive effect on money flow to stores, entrepreneurs, and artists. An increase in tourism could be a bright economic engine.

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In the recent past, the province was approached to help our island obtain public transportation. The answer was that our numbers didn't warrant taxpayer-supported assistance. Therefore, we don't have any public ground transportation at all. This makes it extremely hard on young people, families, seniors, and tourists. Some would argue that solving local ground transportation would be 'economic development' for Texada. There's one bus, once a week, which picks up people in each village (Gillies Bay and Van Anda) to take them off-island to Powell River. That's it. The lack of island transportation is an enormous roadblock for locals and for tourists. The Chamber of Commerce is looking to the Texada Island Inn (a bar, restaurant and hotel undergoing reconstruction) to provide a van and driver that could do pick-ups and drop-offs. One of our new directors on the board of the Chamber has ground transportation as his main responsibility and he is making a solid effort to find solutions for this issue. We may also look to Bowen Island regarding their Linking Island Friendly Transportation (LIFT) formal hitchhiking program as a possible solution, among other ideas. It would be fantastic if a consultant had solid recommendations for us in this regard.

Our burgeoning aviation community sees about 500 small aircraft landing annually because Texada has the only paved runway of all the Gulf Islands. People love to fly here. If we had the capacity to build a modest mobile restaurant and an aviation fuel facility at the airport, we would likely receive many more aviation visitors. Once they land – there's no bus for them. There's no car rental company outpost. There's no taxi service either. We've since placed 6 well-functioning bicycles with helmets at the airport, but it's not always everyone's first choice to hop on a bike, especially in the rainy months. It would only be safe for them to ride to the Gillies Bay side of the island. We also have a private boat club that receives about 500 transient vessels per year, and many of those boats have at least 2 people in them – which essentially increases tourists in significant numbers, especially compared to our population but again – without public transportation – boating visitors are limited to walking around the Van Anda Village.

In 2015 Islanders voted 95% to try and get BC Ferries service from Texada to Comox. Surprise! (Not.) No response to us from the Ferry Advisory Committee or BC Ferries. So, two-and-a-half years later our commute is still 5 hours-long to get to Vancouver Island because the schedules to take the two ferries to get there are totally impractically arranged. Our entrepreneurs and larger businesses need to get to Vancouver Island because not all goods and services can be purchased in Powell River (our 1-ferry commute). Also, due to our low population, many businesses need to open their customer base to Vancouver Island to thrive, or simply survive. We would also love to receive tourists from Vancouver Island to bring more off-island dollars to our businesses. The bright light is that last Thurs May 25, 2017 (2 and a half years after our major lobby), BC Ferries and the Ferry Advisory Committee finally voted to take our request for appropriate service to Comox seriously. They're actually going to entertain this idea now – and that holds a promise to change a lot on the economic development front for Texada.

Last Fall we discovered that Destination BC did not have a page for Texada Island, which is a major failure as it is such an effective tourism engine in our province. Since then I have had over 30 email exchanges with one of their managers and, despite their initial protestations that we "wait at least one more year for their website revamp", thankfully, they've agreed to upload a Texada landing page and photos for us "now" (likely going live within the next month). Having a home on Destination BC could greatly improve Texada's visibility and ability to attract tourists.

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Although Texada is 'on the Sunshine Coast', BC Ferries also doesn't register Texada as a possible visit destination on their Sunshine Coast and Vancouver Island Circle Tour. So, the largest of the Gulf Islands has somehow remained very invisible. At the BC Ferries & Ferry Advisory Committee meeting last week, they suggested that once Destination BC has a page for us 'perhaps' BC Ferries could link to us. We can hope that with tenacity we may be able to move that needle as well.



See that very big and long island to the right of Comox? That's TEXADA! The yellow highlighter denotes BC Ferries Sunshine Coast Circle Tour. If they panned in a straight line from Powell River to Texada on this map, we might just register as a Sunshine Coast destination!

We could always hope that wouldn't be too hard for BC Ferries to change if we engage in a persistent email and phone campaign ... Yes, it's on our to-do list now.

Many residents don't feel Texada has adequate infrastructure to receive tourists, however – particularly in camping facilities, hotels, inns or home-lodging businesses like Airbnb. People can say a lot of things but, frankly, the research hasn't recently been done. I think it would be more accurate to say that nobody knows for sure how many actual rooms are available so that sentiment is possibly more likely assumptions that are not well founded. We don't know. A consultant could assist us with this research.

There are so many areas around the island that could be excellent marketing stations for what businesses have to offer but it doesn't seem like the whole 'signage stations situation' has been worked out – particularly with the whole 'inclement rainy weather thing'. So, most businesses operate very 'mysteriously'. Locals don't tend to easily know where entrepreneurs are or what they're doing, let alone relying on tourists to provide us with their precious dollars. And, as I highlighted earlier, all the new people arriving are settling in and doing their best to figure out how to market their offerings. The Chamber is now starting to find ways to help them improve on-island marketing but maybe there are ways that an expert consultant could assist us as well.

The Chamber of Commerce has just gone through quite a reinvigoration process. We have updated our vision statement, which is now: Promote business in a way that celebrates community and supports a healthy, economically sustainable and rural way of life on Texada. At our Mar 31, 2017 Annual General Meeting our organization has now increased our board from a small number of active directors to the full complement of 13 and 12 of these are business owners, which is also a significant change to the face and operations of our organization. There's now a much more active desire to find a way to support local, increase visibility for new businesses and entrepreneurs.

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We have summer festivals that are well attended and bring in more dollars to businesses, but explorations of winter cultural programming and greater improvement to our primarily Fall/Winter season hunting industry infrastructure could certainly be better examined for opportunities as well.

To mention just two opportunities, the island has public agricultural bounties of blackberries and stinging nettle, which are well known to have significant health benefits. Perhaps a cooperative business model, using the under-construction Texada Food Hub community commercial kitchen (emerging out of our 2011/2012 Economic Development Action Plan) could offer ways to increase income to locals. What other recommendations could a 2017-2018 Economic Development Action Plan update help us to identify? What are some possible actions we can focus our energy on to make our island's economy function better for the people? How could the Chamber of Commerce take such a plan and help improve our community's financial health? With your grant support, we would like to explore this within the context of our many new realities, as highlighted in this letter.

In terms of our trade balance, it's extremely lopsided. Roughly \$6 million dollars in payroll goes to locals and to employees who live in Powell River and commute to Texada Island. Millions of those dollars are spent in Powell River, and in the reverse, some estimate that only about a couple hundred thousand off-island dollars are spent on Texada. Someday, a study could help us determine accurate trade balance figures of course. What good that kind of study could do for us is perhaps questionable, but it might assist us in future government funding applications to undertake marketing or infrastructure improvement campaigns to make Texada more attractive and serviceable to tourists, for example. Perhaps you might have guidance for us in this regard. As a basic start, most Powell River residents have never even been here, and they're just a 40 minute ferry ride away!

Committee members, as you can hopefully see, there's lots for us to think about in our economic development planning. Thank you once again for your time, consideration, and review of our project grant request to the BC Rural Dividend Fund.

Sincerely,

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