

# STRENGTHENING RURAL CANADA



## Community Plan for Gold River, British Columbia



NOVEMBER 2016

## THE PEOPLE

Gold River is right at the heart of Vancouver Island in British Columbia and has a population of about 1,200. We reside in the traditional territory of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation. Our Indigenous neighbours are located on Tsaxana Reserve just three kilometers to the west. Schools, churches and retail outlets serve both communities. Our population demographics are changing. Our school population is declining; however our senior population is growing primarily because we have infrastructure (health and recreation services) already in place and homes can be purchased for a very reasonable price in today's market. We also have a number of people who are unemployed and for various reasons are dependent on social services provided by government agencies.

## COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Tucked between the Gold and Heber Rivers, the village of Gold River is the gateway to the historic Nootka Sound. Its beautiful and rugged terrain makes the area popular with hikers, fisherman, whale watchers and kayakers. The largest nearby community is Campbell River (population 31,000) which is 90 kilometers, or one and a quarter hours drive away.

Gold River was originally developed as a company town for pulp and paper industry supported by a thriving logging industry. However, the pulp mill closed its doors in 1998, and even though forestry and logging employ many people, that work can be unsteady and periodically stops for indeterminate periods. There is an inland fish hatchery and several floating fish farms in the inlet; very few commercial fishermen operate in the area. We have a deep sea port used primarily for the transport of raw logs out of the area. A small marble quarry operation has started in the last eight months which shows some promise for future growth in mining. Gold River is the home of the MV Uchuck III, a coastal freighter that regularly takes supplies and people along the rugged coastline to Yuquot, or Friendly Cove – a national historic site on Nootka Island where Captain Cook first landed on North American shores.

The village is surrounded by beautiful hiking trails, provincial parks, limestone caves and rugged camp grounds that make it an ideal spot for nature lovers who prefer to stray from large crowds. In addition, there is a 9-hole golf course, and ice rink, a curling rink, and a swimming pool.

When the pulp mill closed many families had to move away, small businesses closed, service providers no longer had the number of people to continue; eventually even the bank closed its doors. This meant that residents had to travel to Campbell River for key services and while there, did much of their shopping. This led to even more business closure since people were not buying locally. Small businesses like grocery stores can only afford to stock common items and generally have to charge more than the larger big box stores that are just over an hour away.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND LITERACY COLLABORATION

In addition to two schools serving the K-12 population and an outreach basic education classroom provided by North Island College at Tsaxana Reserve, Gold River has its own literacy society dedicated to serving the adult population seeking to develop life skills and find employment. NIEFS (North Island

Employment Foundations Society) visits the Gold River Literacy Centre twice each month to register clients and support their search for employment.

The communities of Tsaxana and Gold River are separate jurisdictions, but the people have common concerns - education, health, recreation and employment in our area. Literacy issues are a point in fact. We would like to see increased collaboration between the two communities to develop skills and talents for the benefit of both communities.

### Community Interviews

Our facilitator came to Gold River and after a brief introduction and tour of the town and surrounding area began interviewing individuals. These residents were chosen to represent a cross section of the people who continue to live here and, although they may have concerns about the current viability of the community still believe in a positive future for Gold River.

Sector representatives interviewed:

- Business owner of coffee shops, construction company, pharmacy, grocery store and other retail
- Artisans
- Health center manager
- Chamber of Commerce representatives
- Village Mayor and Counsellors
- The Village Voice representative
- School District staff
- School Board Chair
- Women's Auxiliary volunteers
- Western Forest Products Manager
- Seniors' representative
- Students at the high school
- Vancouver Island Library Board member
- Literacy outreach coordinator
- Librarian

As in most struggling rural communities, similar things were reported from almost all of the interviewees: "We need more industry – bigger and more diverse"; "We need the youth to volunteer"; "We need to attract more people who will stay"; "We need to take care of our seniors". We heard things like: "What could I do to make my town better?"; "More people need to shop locally"; "We need to pretty the town up"; "We need to have enough here for our youth to stay".

Small communities depend on one another in ways that may not be understood in an urban setting. One resident said, "there are heroes in every second house". When someone is in need, neighbours come together to help. When someone needs funds because of health issue, the community puts on a bake sale and raises enough to ease the financial pressure of the family.

Residents have concerns for losing more and more services and lack of future opportunity for youth and young families to move to and stay in Gold River. As fewer services are available in Gold River, people

have to travel to Campbell River. Once they're in Campbell River they use other services there and do their shopping there. This means that fewer people shop locally so that even more services are discontinued or closed in Gold River. Fewer businesses and services mean fewer employment opportunities. It becomes a downward spiral.

There was also a group of seven high school students in Grades 8-12 that gathered one afternoon to discuss with the facilitator their thoughts on Gold River and how the declining population affects them in the school and in the community. They talked about what their future looks like if they choose to come back to Gold River after post-secondary training. Options are limited and they are aware of the struggles here in the current work force. Most students said that they are leaving to go to post-secondary or to get jobs that interested them. There are good paying summer jobs for students in and around Gold River but they said working at these jobs showed them what they don't want as a career. Most of the students didn't see a future for themselves in Gold River.

### Public Meeting

An enthusiastic group of thirty six residents attended a public meeting to discuss Gold River's strengths and weaknesses. The people attending were a good representation of our current population in that the majority were retired and the balance were working age people with kids in the schools and jobs in and around the community. Notably, there was representation from:

- School District
- Business
- Local Government
- Health services
- Literacy organization
- Seniors

The information gathered at this meeting was used to help create a Community Plan. This plan will help us move forward in developing the skills required to help Gold River grow.

### Challenges identified:

- Developing more employment opportunities
- Encouraging industry – small, medium, large
- Caring for the seniors – as they age, they require more care, i.e. seniors homecare and a long term care facility
- Addressing transportation requirements both within the community and to other places
- Keeping the balance of industry vs natural environment
- Accessing local lands for larger lots and hobby farms
- Enticing younger families to move to Gold River to help support our infrastructure – pool, arena, golf course & community center

On the other side of that there are so many good characteristics that play into making our residents so positive and enthusiastic about a great future that may be just around the next corner. Some of the positive attributes are:



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Aqua Culture	Fish & Game Sales – Regulated Federally & Provincially Harvesting Seaweed - Regulated	
Composting & Soil		Local Compost Processing – local business or volunteer opportunity

## TOURISM

	OUT OF OUR CONTROL	IN OUR CONTROL
Food & Accommodation	Restaurants – private businesses Hotels – private business	Camping- RV hookups – The Village Hostels, Bed & Breakfast, Air BNB – Advocate for local establishments – zoning and bylaws
Access & Promotion		Maps – Trails, Kayak & Canoe areas – partner with School District Promotion & Partnerships: Tour Packages- Eco tourism & Retreats Fishing Resorts, Friendly Cove, Grease Trail – Chamber of Commerce Gold River Days – Promote & expand on activities: -Wood Carving -Golf Course -Caving -Rock climbing -Signage
Education	International Students Program International Summer Program Nootka Sound Outdoor Ed Program Post-Secondary Partnership opportunities	Tourism training: - Boat Safety - Lifeguarding - Tour Guides - Fishing Guides - Cooks/Chefs - First Aid Attendants - Food Safe - Bus Drivers

## GOALS AND ACTIONS

A task group of six was formed and a meeting held to discuss the next steps. The challenges and problems were easily identified. However, as we continued to discuss possible solutions for some short term success, it became clear that communication is a problem that underlies all three focus areas. Over the past few years we have lost a couple of beloved tools in our Gold River Communication tool box. The Record was a local paper that published bi-weekly, prior to closing a few years ago. The local cable channel (The Wheel), is no longer used to share community information. For many of our older residents this leaves a gap in “getting the word out”. Not all residents, especially seniors are comfortable with computers and the internet. Although many people connect with others daily, often we manage to only see the people in our own circles. So the real task is building a communication

infrastructure where by all residents can access the information they need. So then, it was determined that in each of our three focus areas, communication strategy is needed for them to be successful. Some literacy and essential skills training is needed for this to happen.

Theme	Strategy	Action	Skill Development	Partners
Senior Care	Youth Workforce matched with seniors needs	Job Board created hopefully using the Gold River Buzz	<b>Youth:</b> -self-employment skills - accounting -time management -promotion -training in equipment and tool use, safety and maintenance <b>Seniors:</b> -course on internet and computer use for accessing job board on website	Task group, volunteers  Gold River Literacy Society, Gold River Buzz
Value Added Products	Community Composting Facility – less waste into land fill and rich soil to sell to gardeners	Advertise in the community for people who are interested in spearheading this project – finding a site and what supplies are needed, communication around appropriate composting ingredients and how to keep wildlife out.	-Collaboration -Planning -Science of composting and making soil -Accounting -coordination of volunteers and staff -Quality control of product -Risk Management	Task group, local compost experts
Tourism	Maps and signage for local trails – specifically Scout and Antler Lake marked with level of difficulty and estimated time to walk	Advertise for a cartologist and interested youth to work on the trails. Advertise for volunteers.	-Cartology -GPS reading -Collaboration -Organization -Computer use -Woodworking -Brochure Design	Professional Cartologist, School District through the Outdoor Ed program, local woodworker/designer

## INDICATIONS OF SUCCESS

When we see increased involvement and activities that are combining several of the groups together then the communication work has begun and certainly will continue to grow as new relationships flourish.

Short term indications of success:

Job Board is created and is being used by seniors; youth are trained and are assisting with jobs for

seniors. Compost facility is created and being used by community members. Signage and mapping completed for several trails in the Gold River area.

Long term indications of success:

Youth are more engaged with the community. Youth have some practical skills and stronger basic skills as a result of participating in community initiatives. There is more support for seniors living in the community. There are more jobs in the community, particularly related to seniors' care and tourism development. There is more resiliency in the community as people undertake actions to create jobs.

## CONCLUSION

The community literacy and essential skills planning process brought together a broad cross-section of the Gold River community. It has created some momentum and hope for the community members to move forward and take on some of the initiative to improve the circumstances of the community.