

VISITOR CENTRE INFORMATION PACKAGE

What is a Visitor Centre?

The purpose or mandate of a community Visitor Centre is to provide a full range of services which increase resident and visitor awareness of local, regional and provincial tourism products, and enhance the quality of the visitor's experience by promoting longer stays and/or return visits thus maximizing the economic benefits to the community. Services provided by full status Visitor Centres typically include travel information and route planning, reservations, ticket sales and merchandise sales.

Objectives of community operated Visitor Centres include:

- * Greet and assist visitors to the community
- * Provide accurate, helpful and high quality general and detailed information on attractions and visitor services
- * Promote local attractions, events and tourism opportunities which motivate visitors to stay longer and spend more money in the community
- * Sell tourism opportunities, whether through a retail program, reservation and ticket sales, package tour sales, or similar activities
- * Collect visitor data to determine who visitors are, their origin, their destination, their activities, their length of stay, and their needs
- * Provide visitor data to community businesses
- * Encourage development of the tourism industry in the community and educate the community about the value of tourism and the value of the Visitor Centre
- * Answer mail, e-mail and fax enquiries from prospective visitors
- * Motivate visitors to make return visits to the community
- * Promote the community throughout the region through Visitor Centre Network members
- * Promote the community to its market through its Regional Destination Marketing Organization

Why Operate a Visitor Centre?

The decision to operate a Visitor Centre should be based on the benefit it can bring to the community.

Every successful Visitor Centre depends strongly on the commitment of the local community. Visitor Centres are operated as a business which delivers a service to a consumer. In order to determine if the financial, human and physical resources to operate a visitor centre are available, the community is encouraged to complete the following "Community Visitor Centre Review" before proceeding further.

COMMUNITY VISITOR CENTRE REVIEW

1. Does the visitor need a Visitor Centre in your community?

For example, have local businesses experienced an increase in tourism related inquiries to the point that it is perceived as a burden? Has tourist traffic increased in your area, with no increase in the number of visitors using tourist facilities? Have new tourist attractions developed which make the community more of a destination area?

2. Does the community need a Visitor Centre?

Do local tourism-related businesses perceive a need for a Visitor Centre? Do residents express a need for a Visitor Centre? How many businesses derive a significant portion of their revenue from tourists?

3. Does the community financially support the Visitor Centre?

The Visitor Centre must be financially supported by the community. Based on current information, \$10,000 is a conservative estimate to fund a seasonal centre open for July and August. Will your community financially support a Visitor Centre through a municipal fee for service and membership fees paid by local businesses, for example?

4. Are there personal commitments from your community to staff and supervise the Visitor Centre?

Is there a strong base of committed individuals willing to donate time and experience to ensure the success of a Visitor Centre? A Visitor Centre runs successfully with strong commitments and good management and supervision.

5. What are your community's objectives for a Visitor Centre?

Outline specific objectives you want your Visitor Centre to accomplish in your community. How will you measure whether these objectives are achieved?

6. Are there community attractions or areas of interest that Visitor Information Counsellors can encourage visitors to visit, thereby extending visits to and increasing tourism revenue for your community?

In order for a Visitor Centre to fulfill its mandate of bringing economic benefits to the community there must be avenues within the community for visitors to spend their money. Be careful that the role your Visitor Centre fills is not simply directing visitors to the neighbouring community to spend; if this appears to be the case, perhaps a partnership arrangement with the neighbouring community would be the best way of providing service.

7. Do your local businesses reflect increased visitation as a result of your Visitor Centre operation?

Once your Visitor Centre has been operating, poll local tourism businesses to determine whether they are experiencing an increase in visitor traffic. Involve local businesses in "tracking" the origin of their visitors, perhaps through the use of discount coupons given out at the Visitor Centre.

8. Does the financial remuneration to your community justify your investment in the Visitor Centre operation?

The sponsor organization must consider the economic viability of operating a community Visitor Centre. Do you have the financial, physical and human resources necessary to operate a “manned” booth? How will you determine if the centre does influence the visitor so that the visitor stays longer in the community and/or spends more money there?

9. Is this the best way to enhance tourism in your community?

A Visitor Centre is not the only means to enhance tourism in a community. Has your community completed a community tourism action plan? An action plan, formulated by a tourism action committee representing industry operators, municipal council, chamber of commerce and economic development, assists a community to identify their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in tourism.

A community plan co-ordinates the tourism development activities in the community. Through careful planning, budgets for tourism development can be spent in the most effective way. Communities take possession of their industry development and decision making.

What is the Visitor Centre Network?

The Visitor Centre Network is a network of approximately 115 community-operated Visitor Centres throughout British Columbia. Each centre is owned and funded by a sponsor organization within the community. Sponsor organizations include such organizations as chambers of commerce, regional districts, municipalities, and historic societies. Tourism British Columbia staff provide resources to assist community Visitor Centres meet their objectives and provide training, counselling, and program information/support.

The purpose or mandate of the Visitor Centre Network is to provide a professional level of service to visitors, which creates short- and long-term benefits to the community. The corporate identity enables visitors to recognize official Visitor Centres in British Columbia where they will receive a consistently high level of service.

What is the Structure of the Visitor Centre Network?

There are three levels of Visitor Centres in the Visitor Centre Network, each with differing membership criteria and benefits (see attached).

A first-time applicant to the program joins the Network as a Tourist/Visitor Information Booth (T/VIB). As the membership requirements are minimal, this level offers great flexibility: the non-profit sponsor organization can determine location, dress code, employment and supervisory criteria, staff training, hours of operation, etc. This allows a community to service its visitors without having to meet Network criteria constraints and with a modest financial commitment.

Once an organization has successfully operated a Tourist/Visitor Information Booth for a minimum of one year and regularly submits its visitation statistics to Tourism BC, it can apply to become an Associate Visitor Centre. To be approved for membership at this level, the sponsor organization must, among other criteria, demonstrate its ability to meet the current Network Terms, Conditions and Criteria. Operating at this level requires an increased level of financial support. Should you wish to learn more about the transition requirements, please contact the Network Program Manager.

Those who are able to meet all Network Terms, Conditions and Criteria can apply for membership as a Full-Status Visitor Centre. Changes in sponsorship, visitor traffic patterns, supervisory commitment, or a poor record of Network/employment violations may result in a change of status (and/or deregulation from the program) in the following year.

What is the Procedure to Join the Network?

To belong to the Visitor Centre Network, sponsor organizations must complete and submit an application annually to Tourism British Columbia. Applicants must comply with Visitor Centre Network Membership terms and conditions, and meet the minimum membership criteria.

What are the Network Terms, Conditions and Criteria?

Network Terms, Conditions and Criteria are attached. Their purpose is to improve the quality and level of service to the public. By applying minimum standards to all Visitor Centres, the visitor is assured of receiving a consistent level of service at every Visitor Centre throughout BC.

Network Terms, Conditions and Criteria are reviewed and, if necessary, revised annually by Tourism BC.

Why Consider Options?

A Visitor Centre is not the only means to enhance tourism in a community. The following options to a community Visitor Centre should be considered when:

- * Investment in a Visitor Centre does not "pay off"; other activities may be more effective for less cost and effort
- * A Visitor Centre meets objectives; other activities will enhance your community's overall tourism action plan

What Are Options To A Community Visitor Centre?

Options to consider include:

1. **Build** an un-manned information kiosk, which is not restricted to hours of operation or season. A well-designed un-manned facility can provide the information the visitor requires to stay in the community.

The facility should provide a covered display area where visitors can stand, or use benches to rest, to examine displays which should be clear and self-explanatory. Include a large-scale, detailed street map showing location of services, hotels, restaurants, and attractions.

Brochures are not dispensed so it is important that displays convey similar information. Pictorial displays and a local bulletin board under glass provide necessary information to visitors.

Each un-manned centre should be well lit. A drinking fountain, telephone, and washroom facilities are desirable, but are costly and require regular maintenance. Paid advertising can off-set costs to develop and maintain the centre.

Consult with and obtain approval from municipal council and Ministry of Transportation and Highways to choose a location and design.

2. **Partner** with another community to provide information to visitors. Not every community needs a Visitor Centre. It may be more effective and economical to support neighbour Visitor Centres.

Establish a positive working relationship; your neighbour Visitor Centres can provide information on your community. Make a slide presentation, talk to their staff so they know your community. Ask local businesses to donate services so staff are familiar with the community amenities and attractions first hand. Organize a Familiarization Tour.

3. **Build** an area promotional sign outlining points of interest, maps, and circle tours. Area signs alert visitors to alternate Visitor routes, for areas on a side road, at the end of a road, or when businesses are widely dispersed.

Design and content of area promotional signs must be consistent with criteria established by the Tourism British Columbia. Area promotional signs may be allowed under permit from the Ministry of Transportation and Highways but first must be approved by the Tourism British Columbia.

For information regarding area promotional signs, contact Wanda Hook, Tourism British Columbia, Operations Division, Wanda.Hook@tourism.bc.ca.

4. **Produce** a brochure and distribute it to neighbour Visitor Centres. A brochure enhances the Visitor counselling process. The visitor receives detailed community information and is encouraged the use services and products. A well-designed brochure can increase community appeal.

Careful planning is necessary. A brochure need not be elaborate or expensive but it must create a desire to visit. Contact professional printers specializing in brochures to assist in the content and design. Contact other communities; ask them how they produced their brochure, its success, and what errors to avoid. Don't produce a brochure that doesn't work.

5. **Beautify** your community. Many communities invest these funds to make the community attractive so visitors want to spend time. A Visitor Centre itself does not attract visitors to a community or induce them to stop. Hanging flower baskets and street planters are popular projects.
6. **Plan** an event such as a sports tournament or festival. The investment to develop and sponsor an event may have a bigger economic impact on the community than a seasonal Visitor Centre. Think about it. Will an event sell more hotel rooms and restaurant meals than the Visitor Centre sells in a season?
7. **Educate** the community on the value and importance of tourism to the local economy. It is important that all players in the tourism industry and residents reflect the attitude that visitors are welcome.

One vehicle to educate people on the value of tourism in British Columbia is SuperHost®, a skill-based training seminar designed to upgrade the level of service and hospitality to visitors and to increase awareness and support of tourism activities in the community. For more information on SuperHost®, contact Tourism British Columbia, Training Services Unit (250) 387-1711.

What is the Role of the Visitor Centre Manager?

The key to a well-run Visitor Centre is administration and management. A job description to assist persons responsible for recruiting this position is on the next page. Dependent on circumstances, some responsibilities may not apply or may be modified.

VISITOR CENTRE MANAGER JOB DESCRIPTION

The role of a Visitor Centre Manager is to:

1. Work with the sponsor organization to develop a business plan to ensure minimum Visitor Centre Network criteria are maintained;
2. Promote the community, region, and province by offering multiple activity options that enhance and extend visitor stays or encourage return visits;
3. Improve the level and quality of service provided to visitors through staff training and resource materials.

Qualifications of the Visitor Centre Manager include:

- * Supervisory/management training and experience
- * Strong interpersonal skills
- * Good organizational skills with accuracy to detail
- * Ability to meet deadlines
- * Excellent communication skills
- * Strong word processing, spreadsheet and database skills
- * Ability to deliver formal classroom and on-site training
- * Experience in the tourism industry
- * Tourism/Visitor Information Counsellor certification

Responsibilities of the Visitor Centre Manager include:

1. Operations:

- * Establish an operational budget for Visitor Centre
- * Ensure minimum Network standards are met
- * Determine hours of operation and length of season
- * Develop and implement an inventory control system for publications; establish brochure acceptance policy
- * Coordinate interior and exterior building maintenance
- * Collect and maintain accurate financial and statistical reports
- * Liaise with Ministry of Transportation to ensure signing is erected/removed
- * Collect, record and inventory a community database
- * Organize displays and brochure racks; ensure sufficient stock available
- * Update exterior display information in clearly visible area
- * Post Tourist Alert details and other emergency information
- * Circulate "INFORM Bulletin" and other bulletins to staff to ensure accuracy of information being disseminated

2. Staffing:

- * Recruit, interview and select staff
- * Train staff in the Tourism/Visitor Information Counsellor program; mark and process exams
- * Supervise and motivate staff; complete employee job performance evaluations; handle difficult situations
- * Orientate new employees including introduction to sponsor organization, office orientation and procedures, telephone techniques
- * Handle complaints
- * Schedule staff relative to office requirements and in compliance with Labour Standards

3. Communications:

- * Liaise with Tourism British Columbia staff concerning problems, suggestions and opportunities
- * Attend annual provincial Network conference
- * Submit monthly statistics to Tourism BC