

First Impressions Community Assessment Village of Chemainus

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General Overview

During the second week of July 2022, a member of the 4VI sustainable development team traveled to Chemainus to perform a First Impressions Community Assessment. The survey information gathered during this field visit was used to provide suggestions towards Chemainus' tourism development opportunities. Listed in this document are the key findings from this survey, a SWOT analysis, and recommendations for future tourism development.

The First Impressions Community Assessment required the surveyor to observe and evaluate different aspects of Chemainus from the viewpoint of a first-time visitor. Areas of assessment are broadly grouped into the following sections: residential, services and facilities, public spaces, commercial, community engagement, accessibility, and tourism. Overall, the surveyor was left with an overwhelmingly positive impression of Chemainus and many aspects of the town exceeded expectations. Specifically, the curb appeal of residential areas, landscaping and beautification, public art, friendliness of residents, walkability, and unique retail opportunities were particularly noteworthy. Areas identified for improvement include the availability of tour operators and wayfinding signage. Following the site visit and survey assessment, 4VI sustainable development members believe Chemainus has significant potential to further develop its tourism sector.

Key Survey Findings

Section 1: Housing & Residential Areas

Score: Excellent

The neighborhoods of Chemainus were centrally located and close to community services. It was evident when driving through the neighborhoods that residents took great pride in their homes. Houses were well-maintained with particular consideration to landscaping and gardens. Sidewalks were plentiful, encouraging active transportation and allowing pedestrians to walk safely between different areas of town.

Section 2: Services & Facilities

Score: Satisfactory

2.1 Recreational Facilities Chemainus has a range of recreational facilities including a library, outdoor stage, ice arena, skatepark, outdoor fitness park, golf course, beach volleyball court, baseball field, pickleball courts, tennis courts, and basketball courts. A variety of well-maintained parks and playgrounds were within walking distance from most neighborhoods and the town centre. A seniors activity centre hosts regular activities and fitness classes. Bike lanes were available on a portion of Chemainus Road and adequate bike racks were seen throughout the main street. One amenity missing in Chemainus is a public community centre. A community centre that offers programming for children and adults would be a valuable asset for residents and provide a central gathering space for special events.

2.2 Educational Services The local elementary and secondary schools appeared to be well-maintained and had ample outdoor spaces for students.

2.3 Health Services The medical centre was easy to locate and had sufficient directional signage. During engagement sessions with stakeholders, the need for walk-in medical clinics was identified.

Section 3: Public Spaces

Score: Excellent

3.1 Public Toilets Public toilets were seen at the visitor centre, Chemainus Road, Kin Beach Park, and Fuller Lake Park. All of the public restrooms were clean and easy to find. During engagement sessions with stakeholders, it was noted that Chemainus would benefit from more washroom facilities during the summer months. Washroom lineups are common during tour bus arrivals.

3.2 Benches & Picnic Areas There was an abundance of public seating throughout Chemainus. In particular, the downtown centre, Waterwheel Park and Kin Beach Park had picnic tables and benches that were in great condition. Kin Beach Park also had a picnic shelter.

3.3 Garbage Bins Garbage bins were plentiful and easy to find around town. Dog waste bag dispensers were also available at Kin Beach and Askew Creek Park. The addition of composting and recycling bins in Chemainus would help to divert waste from the landfill.

3.4 Landscaping & Beautification Parks and public spaces were well-cared for and frequently used by community members. Hanging flower baskets and gardens were prevalent throughout the downtown centre. Both residential and commercial areas had a high degree of curb appeal.

3.5 Public Art Well-known for its strong artistic community, Chemainus featured an abundance of outdoor murals, sculptures, statues, and carvings. Artistry was woven into every aspect of the town, creating a highly unique experience that set's Chemainus apart from other destinations.

3.6 Parking The location and number of parking spots in Chemainus was adequate. This was especially evident in key locations such as the downtown centre, the visitor centre, and along Chemainus Road. RV parking was available on Croft Street and EV charging stations could be found at the visitor centre. One area for improvement is to expand and upgrade the parking lot at Kin Beach to create easier access for both visitors and residents.

3.7 Signage Wayfinding signage and maps were well-located to help visitors navigate around town. This said, many of the wayfinding signs were small and difficult to read while driving. Adding a directional sign at the Chemainus Road-Crofton Street intersection would be helpful for visitors arriving from Crofton and Salt Spring Island. It is also suggested to replace the unreadable map located at the ferry terminal and to remove the Bike Share Hub sign located at the visitor centre as it appeared this service is no longer available. Furthermore, it is recommended to upgrade the Chemainus welcome signs to better align with Chemainus' unique tourism brand and create a more vibrant and eye-catching appearance. Lastly, attracting visitors off the highway due to signage regulations was identified as a key inhibitor for tourism in Chemainus.

Section 4: Main Street & Central Business District

Score: Excellent

Chemainus' main street was well-organized, easily walkable, and had a strong visual appeal. For a town of its size, the availability of retail stores, restaurants, and professional services was exceptional. Visitors are left with a positive impression of strong economic health in the community. The downtown centre was within walking distance of public green spaces, the waterfront, residential neighborhoods and various accommodation providers.

Section 5: Community Attitudes, Engagement, and Knowledge

Score: Excellent

The surveyor noticed an exceptional level of customer service while exploring the visitor centre and various local restaurants, galleries and shops. Employees were welcoming and very knowledgeable about their community. Overall, the surveyor observed a high level of friendliness from residents including waves, smiles, and greetings.

Section 6: Accessibility

Score: Excellent

The accessibility of facilities and services for people with physical disabilities in Chemainus was excellent. Public washrooms were accessible and businesses that were not at ground level offered ramps. The Best Western Plus Chemainus Inn also provides wheelchair accessible rooms. One recommendation for improvement is to create a list of trails that are wheelchair accessible. This could be featured on the Visit Chemainus website and available at the visitor centre.

Section 7: Tourism

Score: Satisfactory

7.1 Restaurants Chemainus had a wide variety of restaurants including fine dining, international cuisine, cafes, bakeries, pubs, and a brewery. The surveyor was impressed with the high quality and quantity of dining options available.

7.2 Stores The unique retail options in Chemainus are a key attraction for visitors. The downtown and Old Town areas featured a variety of shops, artisan galleries, and antique stores. The visitor centre sold souvenirs including books, postcards, and locally made products. The surveyor also heard two different residents express that Chemainus has the "best thrift store on the island."

7.3 Accommodation There were a variety of accommodation options in Chemainus including a hotel, motel, B&B's, inns, bike hostel, vacation rentals, and campgrounds. Overall, accommodations appeared to be well-maintained and many were within walking distance to the town centre.

7.4 Tour Operators There were a limited number of tour operators in Chemainus. Horse-drawn carriage tours were available, however it was difficult to find specific information on when they operate. Additionally, e-bike rentals were available through Citrus Cycles. The surveyor sees substantial opportunity to expand guided tour experiences in Chemainus. This would also help to increase visitors' length of stay.

7.5 Tourist Attractions Most of the tourism attractions in Chemainus are arts and culture oriented. Key attractions include the famous self-guided mural walking tour, Chemainus Theatre Festival, museum, artisan galleries and antique stores, local eateries, horse-drawn carriage tours, and a variety of annual festivals and family-friendly events such as the farmers markets and concerts in the park. Other attractions include the golf course, Kin Beach, Fuller Lake, a diving site, freshwater fishing, and cycling the Cowichan Valley Trail.

7.6 Availability and Quality of Information The visitor centre featured ample maps, visitor guides, and brochures for Chemainus and nearby communities. Additionally, the Visit Chemainus website and print map provided a very informative overview of the visitor services and activities available in the community. The Chemainus Chamber of Commerce website also provides a small section on visitor information. Having two visitor-facing websites may create confusion for visitors. The Chemainus Visitor Centre social media platforms were another excellent trip-planning tool.

SWOT Analysis

The following SWOT analysis was created from the information gathered during the First Impressions Community Assessment. The purpose of this analysis is to summarize and visually organize the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats Chemainus has for destination planning and strategy.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● World famous outdoor murals and professional theatre ● Stunning oceanfront location ● Strong cultural heritage ● Charming residential areas ● Unique architecture and character ● Family-friendly destination ● Walkability ● Accessibility ● Well-maintained parks and trails ● Variety of high-quality dining, accommodation and shopping options ● Variety of public services ● Annual festivals and events ● Strong community pride ● Friendliness of residents ● Visitor centre is well-located ● Availability of online information ● Easy access off Highway 19 ● Gateway to Thetis and Penelakut Islands 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Short length of stay ● Lack of repeat visitors ● Lack of tour operators ● Lack of monetized tourism products ● Shortage of volunteers ● Lack of recreation programming for children and adults ● No central community centre ● Limited public access to waterfront ● Visitor centre not open on weekends ● Quality of wayfinding signage ● Lack of visibility from highway ● Tour buses arrive on Mondays when businesses are closed ● Lack of access to the waterfront
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unique brand storytelling ● Develop year-round visitation ● Diversify tourism offerings ● New business attraction ● New people moving to community ● Partnerships with nearby communities ● Centralized location for day trips ● Waterfront development ● Experience development for Cowichan Valley Trail users ● Access to major transportation centers (Nanaimo Airport and ferry terminals) ● Partnership with tour bus companies ● Partnership with local First Nations 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of affordable housing and rentals ● Lack of housing development for families moving to Chemainus ● Labour shortage ● Competition from other destinations on Vancouver Island ● Lack of awareness of Chemainus as a destination ● Lack of funding to develop tourism infrastructure ● Highway signage regulations

Tourism Development Recommendations

The following recommendations were created based on the First Impressions Assessment, online audit, and engagement sessions held with local stakeholders in Chemainus.

1) Seawalk Development

Development of Chemainus' waterfront was expressed by local stakeholders as a key avenue to draw visitors to the community. Although Chemainus is a seaside community, there is limited infrastructure that allows visitors to easily access the waterfront. The development of an oceanfront boardwalk would showcase Chemainus in a reinvigorated way and create an opportunity for both visitors and residents to enjoy the oceanfront setting.

2) Welcome Sign Upgrades

As mentioned earlier, upgrading the welcome signs to better align with Chemainus' unique tourism brand will help to create a more cohesive and eye-catching appearance. The solid brown colour of the current welcome signs can be difficult to spot during poor weather conditions and at nightfall. Revitalizing the signs with vibrant colors that reflect Chemainus' artistic character will help capture the interest of visitors and provide a memorable first impression.

3) Mural Scavenger Hunt

The self-guided mural walking tour is a key attraction in Chemainus, however it tends to appeal to an older audience. To enhance this experience for families, a kid-friendly mural scavenger hunt could be created. A list of questions could be provided that require families to search the murals for the answers. This could be offered digitally through a QR code or with printed materials. Upon completion of the scavenger hunt, children could collect a small reward at the visitor centre such as a sticker. Families could also receive a discount voucher to a group of local businesses.

4) Self-Guided Antique Store Tour

One of Chemainus' unique tourism assets is its abundance of antique and vintage stores. In order to better facilitate this experience for visitors, it is suggested to create a self-guided antique store tour in partnership with Ladysmith. A formalized approach would include a webpage with a list of participating stores, contact information, and a map. In addition, it is recommended participating retailers are given standardized signage so visitors can easily identify the tour locations.

5) Local Eateries Campaign

While Chemainus has traditionally been recognized for its murals and quaint shops, it also features a variety of high-quality eateries. A campaign that highlights these local restaurants would be a valuable way to encourage locals and visitors to experience Chemainus in a new way. Visitors could be entered into a prize draw when they eat at a participating restaurant. Posting a picture of the food on social media and tagging the campaign to be entered would bring attention to local businesses and spread awareness about Chemainus' unique culinary experiences.