

First Impressions Community Assessment

Duncan

August 2022

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General Overview

During the second week of August 2022, a member of the 4VI sustainable development team traveled to Duncan to perform a First Impressions Community Assessment. The survey information gathered during this field visit was used to provide suggestions towards Duncan's 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 Duncan 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 rated most of the assessment areas as satisfactory, with the services and facilities, central business district, and community attitudes receiving an excellent rating. Specifically, the quality of recreational facilities, unique retail opportunities, public art, and walkability were particularly noteworthy. Areas identified for improvement included curb appeal of residential areas, highway beautification, availability of accommodation, and the quality of wayfinding signage. Following the site visit and survey assessment, 4VI sustainable development members believe Duncan has significant potential to further develop its tourism sector to the benefit of residents and visitors alike.

Key Survey Findings

Section 1: Housing & Residential Areas

Score: Satisfactory

The quality of residential areas in Duncan varied significantly. It was evident when driving through the neighborhoods that some residents took great pride in their homes, with particular consideration to landscaping, gardens and property maintenance. Conversely, there was some unmaintained and abandoned housing which led to a decrease in overall curb appeal. Over the past two years the average benchmark price of a single-family home in Duncan has more than doubled. This has contributed to increased housing challenges and the visibility of homelessness around town. Most neighborhoods had sidewalks, encouraging active transportation and allowing pedestrians to walk safely between different areas of town.

Section 2: Services & Facilities

Score: Excellent

2.1 Recreational Facilities Duncan featured a range of high-quality recreational facilities. The community centre regularly hosts programs and has an indoor swimming pool, ice arena, fitness centre, gymnastics centre, skatepark, library, and performing arts centre. In addition, Duncan has a seniors' activity centre, outdoor fitness equipment, curling rink, spray park, rock climbing gym, bowling alley, golf courses, and a wide variety of well-maintained parks, trails, playgrounds, sports fields, and sports courts. Adequate bike racks were seen throughout the downtown centre, however bike lanes were limited.

2.2 Educational Services A wide variety of elementary and secondary schools were available throughout Duncan including private, public, French immersion, and alternative schools. Local schools appeared to be well-cared for and had ample outdoor spaces for students. The university campus was recently built in 2011 and offers a variety of undergraduate programs.

2.3 Health Services The hospital was easy to locate and had sufficient directional signage. Duncan also has numerous medical services including doctor offices, dentists, massage therapists, counselors, nutritionists, midwives, disability services, and various specialists.

Section 3: Public Spaces

Score: Satisfactory

3.1 Public Toilets Public toilets were seen near the museum, at the visitor centre, and in public parks. All of the public restrooms were clean and easy to find. It is recommended to increase the number of public washroom facilities in the downtown centre as this was identified as a key challenge for visitors.

3.2 Benches & Picnic Areas There was ample public seating throughout Duncan. In particular, the downtown centre and recreational spaces had picnic tables and benches that were in great condition. A covered picnic shelter was seen at Centennial Park. It is recommended to add more picnic tables and shelters in the public green space beside the museum.

3.3 Garbage Bins Garbage bins were plentiful and easy to find around town. Dog waste bag dispensers were also available at public parks. During meetings with stakeholders, it was noted that garbage bins are often overflowing on event days which results in an increase of litter. The addition of composting and recycling bins would also help to divert waste from the landfill.

3.4 Landscaping & Beautification Parks and public spaces were beautifully maintained and frequently used by community members. Street planters and hanging flower baskets were prevalent throughout the downtown centre. The surveyor sees substantial opportunity to increase beautification along the highway corridor through Duncan. This is expanded on further in the recommendations section.

3.5 Public Art Duncan featured a wide variety of public art including totem poles, banners, murals, and outdoor photo galleries. The celebration of Indigenous culture and history through public art is a unique experience that sets Duncan apart from other destinations.

3.6 Parking The amount of parking throughout Duncan was adequate. This was especially evident in key locations such as the downtown centre, visitor centre, and recreational spaces. EV charging stations were widely available. Tour bus parking was also available on Duncan Street.

3.7 Signage Generally, the location of wayfinding signage allows visitors to easily find their way around Duncan. Maps were also located around the downtown centre to help visitors navigate. This said, it is recommended to add more identifiable signage along the highway that encourages travelers to stop and visit the downtown centre. It is also suggested to add wayfinding signage to Centennial Park from the downtown centre. Indigenous place names on the street signs and

abundant interpretive signage provides a valuable learning opportunity for visitors. Further recommendations for signage improvements are provided in the recommendations section.

Section 4: Main Street & Central Business District

Score: Excellent

Duncan's central business district was well-organized and easily walkable. There were a wide variety of retail stores, restaurants, and professional services. Visitors are left with a positive impression of economic health, community pride, and entrepreneurship in the downtown centre. The central business district was closely located to Centennial Park and residential neighborhoods. It was noticed that some of the building exteriors look worn and neglected, especially along Government Street. Revitalization of these facades would help to enhance overall curb appeal.

Section 5: Community Attitudes, Engagement, and Knowledge

Score: Excellent

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

Section 6: Accessibility

Score: Satisfactory

The accessibility of facilities and services for people with physical disabilities was generally satisfactory in Duncan. The visitor centre, community centre, museum, Centennial Park, and public washrooms were accessible spaces. Most storefronts were at ground level, however, there were other stores that were not wheelchair accessible. Wide sidewalks throughout the central business district allowed for greater accessibility.

Section 7: Tourism

Score: Satisfactory

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

7.2 Stores The unique retail options in Duncan are a key attraction for visitors. The downtown centre featured a variety of high-quality boutiques, shops, and artisan galleries. The visitor centre also sold souvenirs including books, postcards, and locally made products.

7.3 Accommodation There were a small selection of accommodation options in Duncan including hotels, motels, B&B's, and vacation rentals. Most accommodations and campgrounds are located in surrounding communities, a 15-20-minute drive outside of Duncan. It was noticed that some of the motels in the town centre are in need of upgrades. The two campgrounds located in Duncan are in need of significant maintenance and are currently not suitable for visitors.

7.4 Tour Operators There are a wide variety of tour operators that provide winery and culinary tours in Duncan's surrounding areas. Guided heritage tours and a steam train ride are available at the BC Forest Discovery Centre. Marine tours including whale watching and kayaking are available in Cowichan Bay, a 15-minute drive from Duncan. Visitors can also experience a self-guided walking tour of the totem poles in the downtown centre. The surveyor sees substantial opportunity to expand Indigenous cultural tourism experiences in Duncan, including guided totem tours.

7.5 Tourist Attractions Most of the tourism attractions in Duncan are oriented around agritourism, arts and culture, and outdoor recreation. Duncan's self-guided totem walking tour and year-round farmers market are key attractions for visitors. Other attractions include the wineries, performing arts centre, Cowichan Valley Museum, BC Forest Discovery Centre, Raptors Centre, Hand of Man Museum, Malahat Skywalk, and outdoor activities such as hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, golfing, birdwatching, and cycling the Cowichan Valley Trail. It is difficult to find tourism attractions in Duncan during the winter season. Creating more opportunities for off-season travel will help increase the number of annual visitors to the region and lengthen the tourism season.

7.6 Availability and Quality of Information The visitor centre featured ample maps, visitor guides, and brochures for Duncan and nearby communities. The visitor centre staff were very knowledgeable about their region and provided terrific recommendations for things to do. Additionally, the business directory located near the museum is an excellent resource for visitors. The City of Duncan website provides a small overview on visitor information. For online trip-planning, the Tourism Cowichan website and Cowichan Regional Visitor Centre social media platforms would be the best resources.

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 Duncan has for destination planning and strategy.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Walkability ● Family-friendly destination ● Variety of well-regarded schools ● Excellent recreational facilities and public services ● Well-maintained parks and trails ● Access to outdoor recreation ● Variety of dining and retail options ● Annual festivals and events ● Visitor centre is well-located ● Friendly customer service ● Strong cultural heritage ● Variety of public art including world's largest outdoor totem pole collection ● Unique Indigenous tourism assets ● Agritourism experiences 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited winter tourism products ● Many tourism attractions close during January and February ● Lack of accommodation providers ● Curb appeal of some residential areas ● Highway entrance and corridor ● Outdated and dilapidated signage ● Lack of overnight parking for Cowichan Valley Trail users ● Lack of coordination with tour bus companies ● Lack of guided totem tours
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unique brand storytelling ● Develop year-round visitation ● Increased travel to rural areas ● New people moving to community ● Partnerships with nearby communities ● Day trips from Nanaimo and Victoria ● Access to major transportation centers ● Enhance beautification of highway entrances and corridor ● Dispersion of annual events into the off-season ● Expansion of bike lanes and paths ● Experience development for Cowichan Valley Trail users ● Partnership with tour bus companies ● Partnership with Cowichan Tribes ● Indigenous tourism ● Business support for agritourism entrepreneurs 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Largely seasonal destination ● Lack of affordable housing and rentals ● Labour shortage ● Lack of island wide transportation for visitors without vehicles ● Competition from other destinations on Vancouver Island ● Lack of awareness of Duncan as a destination

Tourism Development Recommendations

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

1) Signage Inventory

A key challenge identified for Duncan and surrounding communities is numerous dilapidated and outdated signage along the Trans-Canada Highway. For example, outdated signage for the former Quw'utsun' Cultural Centre continues to provide confusion for visitors. It is recommended to build a comprehensive signage inventory to identify which signs need to be repaired, removed, or added. Once completed, the City of Duncan can work with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure and the Cowichan Valley Regional District to implement signage improvements.

2) Totem Management Strategy

1 in 4 visitors to British Columbia are seeking authentic Indigenous experiences (Destination British Columbia). With this growing interest in Indigenous culture and history, there is substantial opportunity to further develop Duncan's totem walking tour. This said, it is critical that Indigenous cultural experiences are led and controlled by local Indigenous groups. It is recommended to create a totem strategic plan in partnership with Cowichan Tribes. A management strategy will aid in organizing ongoing maintenance and protection of the totem poles, tracking inventory, outlining steps for future experience development, and acquiring funding to offer guided totem tours. For example, a partnership with Tourism Cowichan could help to fund part-time tour guide positions through the visitor centre.

3) Cowichan Valley Trail Infrastructure

Multi-day hiking and cycling trips along the Cowichan Valley Trail is recognized as a key attraction for visitors coming to Cowichan. This said, the trail is lacking essential facilities and infrastructure such as overnight parking lots, signage, washrooms, water stations, bike lock stations, bike wash stations, lighting, and trailside accommodations. Development of an overnight parking space and a parking pass system would allow hikers and cyclists to safely leave their vehicles while utilizing the trail. In addition, sections of the trail are currently washed out due to storm damage. The Job Creation Partnerships program through WorkBC could help to fund employment for repairs. Connector trails between the Cowichan Valley Trail and the City of Duncan are also needed. This would allow trail users to access Duncan for essential goods and services, as well as generate economic benefit for local business owners.

4) Highway Corridor Enhancement

It is recommended to create a beautification plan to enhance the visual appearance of Duncan's highway entrances and corridor. Examples of beautification efforts could include median greenery, planter boxes, street banners, artwork, and public green spaces. Furthermore, the industrial areas located at both entrances do not provide a visually attractive experience for visitors entering the community. Adding landscape buffers along industrial areas will help to improve attractiveness and

reduce noise. In addition, it is recommended to upgrade the Duncan welcome signs to create a more vibrant and eye-catching appearance. Installing totem poles beside the welcome signs would help to enhance Duncan's recognition as the "City of Totems." Adding more noticeable wayfinding signage along the highway corridor would also help direct travelers to visit the downtown centre.

5) Events Calendar

During engagement sessions with stakeholders, the overlapping of annual events and festivals in Cowichan was identified as a challenge. Majority of events take place on weekends during the summer months. Dispersing major events into the fall and winter seasons will help to lengthen the tourism season and provide incentive for businesses to extend their operating hours. The creation of a universal events calendar featured on the Tourism Cowichan website would help facilitate event coordination and partnership between event organizers. It would also act as a useful tool for visitors planning trips to the region.