

First Impressions Community Assessment

Town of Ladysmith

July 2022

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General Overview

During the second week of July 2022, a member of the 4VI sustainable development team traveled to Ladysmith to perform a First Impressions Community Assessment. The survey information gathered during this field visit was used to provide suggestions towards Ladysmith'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 Ladysmith 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 Ladysmith and many aspects of the town exceeded expectations. Specifically, the quality of public spaces and recreational facilities, landscaping and beautification, curb appeal of residential areas, friendliness of residents, and unique retail options were particularly noteworthy. Areas identified for improvement included availability of tour operators, hours of operation, wayfinding signage, and cycling infrastructure. Following the site visit and survey assessment, 4VI sustainable development members believe Ladysmith has significant potential to further develop its tourism sector.

Key Survey Findings

Section 1: Housing & Residential Areas

Score: Excellent

The neighborhoods of Ladysmith 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: Excellent

2.1 Recreational Facilities Ladysmith featured a range of high-quality recreational facilities. The community centre regularly hosts programs and has an indoor swimming pool, fitness centre, gymnasium, skatepark, and youth rec room. In addition, Ladysmith has a library, community hall, waterfront amphitheatre, seniors' activity centre, golf course, and a wide variety of well-maintained parks, trails, playgrounds, sports fields, and sports courts that are within walking distance from most neighborhoods and the downtown centre. Adequate bike racks were seen throughout First Avenue, however bike lanes were not available.

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.

Section 3: Public Spaces

Score: Excellent

3.1 Public Toilets Public toilets were seen at the visitor centre, First Avenue, Transfer Beach, and the marinas. All of the public restrooms were clean and easy to find. Showers were available at the community centre and marinas. During interviews with community members, the need for more public washrooms along main street was identified.

3.2 Benches & Picnic Areas There was an abundance of public seating throughout Ladysmith. In particular, the downtown centre and recreational spaces had picnic tables and benches that were in excellent condition. Picnic shelters were seen behind Aggie Hall and at Transfer Beach.

3.3 Garbage Bins Garbage bins were plentiful and easy to find around town. Dog waste bag dispensers were also widely available.

3.4 Landscaping & Beautification Parks and public spaces were beautifully maintained and frequently used by community members. Both residential and commercial areas had a high degree of curb appeal with particular consideration to the restored heritage buildings and vibrant facades along First Avenue.

3.5 Public Art Ladysmith featured a variety of public art including banners, heritage artifacts, a metal collage, murals, and an outdoor checkerboard.

3.6 Parking There was ample parking throughout Ladysmith. This was especially evident in key locations such as the downtown centre, Transfer Beach, and Coronation Mall. EV charging stations were seen near the museum. It is recommended to expand parking at the Ladysmith Community Marina to allow for easier access.

3.7 Signage Generally, the location of signage allows visitors to easily find their way around Ladysmith. One area for improvement is to install wayfinding signage to help visitors locate hiking trailheads. Additionally, there was no welcome sign along the highway when heading northbound into Ladysmith. It is also recommended to add signage along the highway that encourages travelers to stop and visit First Avenue. Lastly, it is recommended to remove the signage for the waterfront art gallery since it has moved to a different location.

Section 4: Main Street & Central Business District

Score: Excellent

Ladysmith's main street was well-organized, easily walkable, and had a strong visual appeal. There were a wide variety of retail stores, restaurants, and professional services. 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, and residential neighborhoods. The surveyor sees opportunity to build stronger connectivity between the central business district and the marinas. This is expanded on further in the recommendations section.

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 businesses. Employees were welcoming and very knowledgeable about their community. Residents of Ladysmith are known to have strong community pride and volunteer spirit. 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 Ladysmith. Public washrooms were accessible and the museum had a ramp for greater accessibility. Some parks were wheelchair accessible, including Transfer Beach and a portion of the Holland Creek Trail. The Microtel Inn & Suites provided wheelchair accessible rooms.

Section 7: Tourism

Score: Satisfactory

7.1 Restaurants Ladysmith had a wide variety of restaurants including international cuisine, cafes, bakeries, pubs, food trucks, and a brewery. The surveyor was impressed with the high quality and quantity of dining options available. While visiting, the surveyor heard visitors expressing the difficulty of finding places to eat on Mondays and Tuesdays due to operating hours. During interviews with stakeholders, the limited operating hours of restaurants during event days was also identified as a challenge. Strategies such as employee sharing or an event rotation schedule may help to reduce pressures on business owners.

7.2 Stores Ladysmith's main street featured a variety of high-quality boutiques, shops and antique stores. The visitor centre sold souvenirs including postcards and branded Ladysmith bags. The Cedar-Yellow Point Artisan Tour also provides visitors a unique countryside experience to purchase hand-made products from local artisans, crafters and farmers.

7.3 Accommodation There were a small selection of accommodations in Ladysmith including hotels, a motel, lodges, B&B's, cabins, vacation rentals, and campgrounds. This said, there were very few options located in the downtown centre and the motel is in need of upgrades. Most accommodations were a 10-15-minute drive outside of Ladysmith. The development of a heritage hotel on First Avenue would provide a unique visitor experience in Ladysmith, encourage active transportation, and motivate longer stays.

7.4 Tour Operators There were a limited number of tour operators in Ladysmith. The Ladysmith Maritime Society provides harbour boat tours daily during July and August. Sealegs Kayaking offers guided kayaking tours, as well as kayak and SUP rentals at Transfer Beach. A variety of agri-tourism experiences were also available in the Yellow Point area. The surveyor sees substantial opportunity to expand heritage and marine-based tour experiences in Ladysmith. This would also help to increase visitors' length of stay.

7.5 Tourist Attractions Most of the tourism attractions in Ladysmith are arts and culture oriented. Well-known for its rich history, Ladysmith's self-guided heritage walks are a key attraction. A variety of family-oriented events and festivals are hosted throughout the year including concerts in the park, Arts on the Avenue, Ladysmith Days, the Heritage Boat Festival, and the Festival of Lights. Other attractions included Transfer Beach, the museum, art gallery, self-guided studio tour, and outdoor activities such as hiking, paddling, boating, birdwatching, and cycling the Cowichan Valley Trail.

7.6 Availability and Quality of Information The visitor centre featured ample maps, visitor guides, brochures and heritage walking guides for Ladysmith and nearby communities. Additionally, the Tourism Ladysmith website provided a very informative overview of the visitor services, accommodations, and activities available in the community. The Tourism Ladysmith social media platforms are 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 Ladysmith has for destination planning and strategy.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strong heritage ● Walkability of First Avenue ● Named Canada's Greatest Streets ● Unique architecture and character ● Excellent public services ● Variety of dining and retail options ● Charming residential areas ● Family-friendly destination ● Strong community pride and volunteerism ● Friendliness of residents ● Well-maintained parks and trails ● Annual festivals and events (e.g., Festival of Lights) ● Stunning oceanfront location ● Visitor centre is well-located ● Availability of online information ● Easy access off Highway 19 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Short length of stay ● Limited tour operators ● Limited accommodation options in the downtown centre ● Lack of wayfinding signage to hiking trailheads ● Many restaurants closed on Mondays and Tuesdays ● Lack of monetized winter tourism products
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unique brand storytelling ● Develop year-round visitation ● New business attraction ● New people moving to community ● Partnerships with nearby communities ● Centralized location for day trips ● Marine and heritage-based tours ● Build stronger connectivity to marinas ● Expansion of parklets for patio space ● Develop cycling infrastructure ● Experience development for Cowichan Valley Trail users ● Monetized winter tourism attractions to accompany Festival of Lights ● Access to major transportation centers (Nanaimo Airport and ferry terminals) ● Partnership with tour bus companies ● Partnership with Stz'uminus First Nation 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of affordable housing and rentals ● Labour shortage ● Competition from other destinations on Vancouver Island ● Lack of awareness of Ladysmith 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 Ladysmith.

1) Cycling Infrastructure

During engagement sessions with stakeholders, the need for more cycling infrastructure was highlighted. The development of bike lanes, bike lock stations, and an e-bike program would allow Ladysmith's central business district to become a more accessible space for cyclists as well as reduce vehicle traffic. Building a multi-use pathway to Oyster Bay will also encourage the use of active transportation for visitors staying at the Microtel Inn & Suites.

2) Connectivity to Marinas

Proximity to the waterfront is one of Ladysmith's unique assets yet there is limited connectivity between the marinas and the downtown centre. The development of a multi-use pathway from the Oak Bay Marina to the downtown centre and an e-bike program would allow marina visitors to easily access the central business district, providing increased economic benefit to local business owners. Additionally, installing informational signage about Ladysmith at the Oak Bay Marina will be an important resource for visitors arriving by way of boat.

3) QR Codes for Heritage Walking Tours

The rich history found in Ladysmith represents a unique value proposition for visitors that could be further developed. To enhance the existing heritage walking tours, it is recommended to install interpretive signage that utilizes QR codes. QR codes are an accessible tool that allows visitors to retrieve information quickly and easily. Producing educational videos that visitors can access through their phones would be an excellent way to promote Ladysmith's heritage sites and stories. 4VI can work with stakeholders to identify grant opportunities that are aligned with this project.

4) Wayfinding Signage to Hiking Trailheads

Ladysmith features a wide variety of well-maintained walking and hiking trails, however it can be difficult for visitors to locate hiking trailheads. It is recommended to install wayfinding signage to the trailheads and parking lots for Heart Lake, Stocking Lake, Holland Creek, and Christie Falls. Wayfinding signage should have a consistent design to allow for easy recognition.

5) Travel Itineraries

Typically, visitors to Ladysmith have a short length of stay and many are only passing through. In order to motivate longer stays and highlight tourism assets, it is recommended to create travel itineraries. Travel itineraries can be developed specifically for a weekend stay in Ladysmith, as well as a multi-day trip that includes nearby communities such as Saltair, Chemainus, Crofton, and Cedar/Yellow Point. Itineraries can also be crafted around specific visitor interests such as arts and



culture, history, culinary, and outdoor recreation. For example, the abundance of antique stores in both Ladysmith and Chemainus is a unique experience that could be linked through an itinerary.