

First Impressions Community Assessment

Town of Lake Cowichan

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General Overview

During the third week of July 2022, a member of the 4VI sustainable development team traveled to Lake Cowichan to perform a First Impressions Community Assessment. The survey information gathered during this field visit was used to provide suggestions towards Lake Cowichan'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 Lake Cowichan 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 a positive impression of Lake Cowichan and many aspects of the village exceeded expectations. Specifically, the quality of public spaces and recreational facilities, landscaping and beautification, and walkability were particularly noteworthy. Areas identified for improvement include tour operators, the central business district, public art, and the availability of year-round tourism attractions. Following the site visit and survey assessment, 4VI sustainable development members believe Lake Cowichan 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 neighborhoods of Lake Cowichan were centrally located and close to community services. The quality of residential areas 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 also some unmaintained housing which led to a decrease in overall curb appeal. Most neighborhoods had sidewalks, encouraging active transportation and allowing pedestrians to walk safely between different areas of town. It was also positive to see new multi-unit housing being developed in town.

Section 2: Services & Facilities

Score: Excellent

2.1 Recreational Facilities Lake Cowichan featured a range of high-quality recreational facilities. The community centre regularly hosts programs and has an ice arena, curling rink, fitness centre, gymnasium, community hall, skatepark, and baseball fields. In addition, Lake Cowichan has a library, seniors' activity centre, outdoor stage, public docks, beach volleyball court, outdoor basketball court, and a variety of well-maintained parks, trails, and playgrounds that are within walking distance from most neighborhoods and the town centre. A bowling alley in Youbou and a golf course in Honeymoon Bay were also a 15-minute drive away. Adequate bike racks were seen throughout the downtown centre and recreational spaces, however bike lanes were not available. One amenity missing in Lake Cowichan is a public swimming pool. The nearest swimming pool is the Cowichan Aquatic Centre, located a 20-minute drive away.

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 centrally located, however it was difficult to locate due to a lack of directional signage. The closest hospital is in Duncan, a 20-minute drive away.

Section 3: Public Spaces

Score: Excellent

3.1 Public Toilets Public toilets were seen at the visitor centre, Riverside Park and Central Park. All of the public restrooms were clean and easy to find. The need for public toilets along the river for tubers was identified as a significant challenge.

3.2 Benches & Picnic Areas There was an abundance of public seating throughout Lake Cowichan. In particular, the downtown centre and recreational spaces had picnic tables and benches that were in great condition. Picnic shelters were seen at Saywell Park and Riverside Park. It is recommended to increase the number of picnic tables under the shelter at Saywell Park.

3.3 Garbage Bins Garbage bins were plentiful and easy to find around town. Dog waste bag dispensers were also available at Saywell Park. During meetings with stakeholders, it was noted that garbage bins are often overflowing during the summer months due to public works employees not working on weekends. Due to a lack of garbage and recycling bins along the river, significant litter from tubers was also identified as a major challenge.

3.4 Landscaping & Beautification Parks and public spaces were well-cared for and frequently used by community members. Street planters and landscaping were prevalent throughout the main street. It was noticed the road to the Lakeview Park beach access runs alongside an industrial area. Adding trees alongside the road would help to create a more visually appealing experience.

3.5 Public Art Lake Cowichan featured a small variety of public art including a totem pole, mural, Ts'uubaa-asatx artwork, and street banners. An increase in artwork throughout the downtown centre could lend significantly to Lake Cowichan's beautification and community pride. Additionally, revitalization of the footbridge that connects Riverside Park to South Shore Road would significantly enhance the visitor experience. The bridge would be an ideal location for a mural and interpretive signage depicting the unique history and culture of Lake Cowichan. The totem gathering place being developed outside the museum will also create a valuable space for visitors.

3.6 Parking A central parking lot in Saywell Park provides easy access to the river and the central business district. Additional street parking and overflow lots were available on Point Ideal Drive, a short walk from downtown. EV charging stations were seen at Saywell Park and the community centre. During meetings with stakeholders, the need for more public parking lots was identified. Parking at Lakeview Park could also be upgraded and expanded to allow for easier access.

3.7 Signage The location of signage allows visitors to easily find their way to and around Lake Cowichan. The brand-aligned welcome sign off Highway 18 and new wayfinding signage throughout downtown were visually appealing and well-located. Currently, there is no

welcome sign on the South Shore Road entrance. It is recommended to add a welcome sign here for visitors arriving from Port Renfrew. It is also recommended to remove the floating walkway sign at the Lakeview Park entrance since the boardwalk no longer exists.

Section 4: Main Street & Central Business District

Score: Needs Attention

Lake Cowichan's central business district was well-organized and easily walkable. The main street was closely located to public green spaces, the waterfront, residential neighborhoods, and accommodation providers. Unfortunately, numerous empty and dilapidated storefronts may give visitors an impression that Lake Cowichan has poor economic health. Revitalization of the facades along the main street would help to enhance overall curb appeal. Additionally, removing street parking and installing parklets would transform the main street into a vibrant space for residents and visitors. This is expanded on further in the recommendations section.

Section 5: Community Attitudes, Engagement, and Knowledge

Score: Excellent

The surveyor noticed a great level of customer service while exploring 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 Lake Cowichan. Public washrooms were accessible and the visitor centre, museum, and Jakes at the Lake had ramps for greater accessibility. Narrow sidewalks and limited crosswalks along the main street may create challenges for accessibility. It was difficult to determine which accommodations and trails were accessible by looking at online materials.

Section 7: Tourism

Score: Satisfactory

7.1 Restaurants Lake Cowichan had a variety of restaurants including a pub, cafes, farm to table, fast food, and an ice cream shop. One resident expressed the challenge of long wait times at Jake's at the Lake. Depending on zoning regulations, Saywell Park would be an ideal location for food truck services during the summer months. A floating restaurant could also take advantage of Lake Cowichan's spectacular views.

7.2 Stores The stores in Lake Cowichan provided key staples for visitors staying in the area. The main street featured a small selection of unique boutiques and shops. The surveyor sees substantial opportunity to attract new businesses and expand the diversity of retail stores. It is also suggested to offer retail goods from local artisans in the visitor centre. Offering branded products would also help to increase Lake Cowichan's visibility on Vancouver Island.

7.3 Accommodation There were a variety of accommodation options in Lake Cowichan including hotels, lodges, B&B's, cabins, vacation rentals, houseboat rentals, retreat centres, and plenty of campgrounds. Overall, accommodations appeared to be well-cared for and some were within walking distance to the town centre.

7.4 Tour Operators There were a limited number of tour operators in Lake Cowichan. Water sport equipment, tube, and boat rentals are available for visitors during the summer months. Kaatza Adventures also offers kayaking and cultural tours, and Kenzie's Fishing Adventures provides fresh-water fishing tours. Due to the abundance of natural spaces, the surveyor sees substantial opportunity to expand guided tour experiences in Lake Cowichan.

7.5 Tourist Attractions Many of the tourism attractions in Lake Cowichan were recreation and nature-oriented including swimming, boating, fishing, water sports, camping, hiking, caving, mountain biking, and cycling. Key attractions include tubing down the Cowichan River, music festivals at Laketown Ranch, the museum, and the Cowichan Valley Trail. Lake Cowichan also hosts a wide variety of family-oriented events throughout the year. Known as a summer destination, it is difficult to find tourism attractions 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. This also provides incentive for local businesses to add services and extend operating hours. Indoor roller skating is a unique offering in Lake Cowichan that could be developed into a recognizable attraction during the off-season.

7.6 Availability and Quality of Information The visitor centre featured ample maps, visitor guides, and brochures for Lake Cowichan and nearby communities. The information kiosk in Saywell Park was another excellent resource for visitors providing maps, a business directory, annual events, and information on the town's history. It is recommended to categorize the business directory to help visitors easily identify the various businesses. Sectors could include accommodation, food and beverage, retail, tour operators, and services.

It was difficult to find trip-planning information by looking at Lake Cowichan's online platforms. In addition, Lake Cowichan does not have an active Instagram presence for visitors. More and more, visitors are looking to plan their travel through online platforms. Developing a visitor facing website and improving social media platforms will spread awareness about Lake Cowichan as a destination and function as a useful trip planning tool. It is recommended to utilize The Ready To E-Market Program offered complimentary through the [Vancouver Island Coastal Tourism Resiliency Program](#). The Ready To E-Market Program provides foundational digital marketing skills through one-to-one coaching with industry experts, including support for website development and social media.

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 Lake Cowichan has for destination planning and strategy.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Walkability ● Family-friendly destination ● Stunning waterfront location ● Excellent public spaces and recreational facilities ● Friendliness of residents ● Outdoor recreation opportunities ● Abundance of campgrounds ● Annual festivals and events ● Visitor centre is well-located ● Canada's largest outdoor stage ● Fly-fishing capital of Canada ● Easy access off Highway 19 ● On the Pacific Marine Circle Route ● Gateway to Port Renfrew, Nitinat and Bamfield ● One of the largest lakes on Vancouver Island 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limited tour operators ● Limited winter tourism products ● Long restaurant wait times during peak season ● Lack of parking during peak season ● Visitor centre operates seasonally ● Empty and abandoned storefronts ● Availability of online information ● Social media presence
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unique brand storytelling ● Develop year-round visitation ● Diversify tourism attractions ● Increased travel to rural areas ● New business attraction ● New people moving to community ● Marine and land-based tours ● Development of mountain biking, hiking, and whitewater kayaking ● Rebuild floating boardwalk ● Development of resort style accommodations ● Downtown revitalization through public art and parklets ● Expansion of bike lanes and paths ● Experience development for Cowichan Valley Trail users ● Partnerships with nearby communities ● Partnership with Ts'uubaa-asatx Nation 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Largely seasonal destination ● Lack of affordable housing and rentals ● Labour shortage ● Litter and sanitation challenges ● No cell service along Highway 18 ● Elk collisions on Highway 18 ● Competition from other destinations on Vancouver Island ● Lack of awareness of Lake Cowichan as a destination ● Lack of capacity and funding to develop tourism infrastructure

Tourism Development Recommendations

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

1) Tourism Coordinator

One of the largest barriers towards tourism development in Lake Cowichan is the lack of a tourism coordinator. 4VI can work with stakeholders to help identify grant opportunities that may fund this position. Once a tourism coordinator role is filled, the next step will be to develop a tourism strategy. A tourism strategy will help to create a coordinated road map for Lake Cowichan's tourism development and should be planned in consultation with community members. Creating a space where community members feel heard is a great opportunity to foster community support for economic development. There may also be an opportunity to work more closely with Tourism Cowichan Society to provide expanded services in the Lake Cowichan region.

2) Parklets on Main Street

The surveyor sees substantial opportunity to revitalize Lake Cowichan's main street into a vibrant public space for residents and visitors. Street parking could be converted into parklets that provide outdoor seating, business patio space, and green space. Benefits of parklets include creating opportunities for human connection, attracting foot traffic, increasing revenue for business owners, reducing vehicle congestion, enhancing the streetscape, and creating a safe and welcoming environment. 4VI can work with stakeholders to identify grant opportunities that are aligned with this project.

3) Revitalization of Walking Bridges

As mentioned previously, enhancing the footbridge that connects Riverside Park to South Shore Road would provide a unique experience for visitors. Installing a mural that represents the history and culture of Lake Cowichan would create an educational experience for visitors and enhance the vitality of the corridor. Additionally, the main bridge into town along South Shore Road receives a high amount of foot traffic. This would be an ideal location to install public art and interpretive signage that provides more information on the heritage designation of the Cowichan River.

4) Hiking Trail Guide Amplification

During engagement sessions with stakeholders, it was learned that the local trail association is currently developing a trail master plan and trail infrastructure for hiking and mountain biking in Lake Cowichan. Upon completion, it will be important to amplify these outdoor recreation opportunities to visitors through print and online materials. Tourism Cowichan Society can support with distribution and amplification of the Cowichan Lake Trail Blazers Society trail brochure. Targeting hiking and biking travelers during the off-season will also help to support local businesses year-round and prevent overcrowding during the summer months.

5) Summer Food Truck Program

The high influx of visitors and tubers during the summer months creates a need for more dining options in Lake Cowichan. A summer food truck program located in Saywell Park would help to eliminate pressures on existing restaurants, ease visitor frustration, and create new economic opportunity in the community. Food truck services would also increase the vibrancy of this outdoor space and foster community connection. A partnership between the Town of Lake Cowichan and the Cowichan Lake District Chamber of Commerce could be formed to manage this program.

6) Infrastructure for Tubers

The lack of public washrooms and garbage facilities along the Cowichan River creates substantial litter and sanitation issues each year due to the high volume of tubers. Accessible washroom facilities and garbage and recycling bins should be installed to address these challenges. Increasing the amount of educational signage along the river can also help educate tubers on responsible behaviors.

7) Investment Attraction Strategy

It is recommended to create an updated investment strategy to aid in attracting new businesses to Lake Cowichan. The first step to developing an investment attraction strategy will be identifying Lake Cowichan's tourism brand and unique value proposition as a destination. Highlighting community assets and having a strong understanding of visitor numbers will also be important for articulating investment opportunities to new entrepreneurs and investors.