

Project MOBILE INFO TOGO VISITOR SERVICES UNIT

Mobile Visitor Services Unit Project April 1st 2017 to October 31st 2018

A Project of the Cowichan Lake & District Chamber of Commerce

Funded by the Island Coastal Economic Trust

















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The purpose of this mobile trailer unit project is to enhance the tourism and informational services offered in Cowichan Lake and the surrounding area to be more effective in meeting the demands and expectations of today's visitors on how they connect. The purpose is also to provide mobile and on the ground services while attending local and regional tourism attractions, annual, and special events happening in Cowichan Lake and the Cowichan Valley Region.

The estimated cost of the project is \$90,400 with 30% of this to be funded by the Island Coast Economic Trust of \$30,000. The other sources of funding will come from Corporate Sponsorship Donations, and In-Kind Donations, In-Kind Man Power Hours, Local Government including the Town of Lake Cowichan and CVRD's Area F & I, Destination BC through the 2017 Innovation fund, Public Sector contributions and through Chamber fundraising campaigns.

The Mobile Infotogo Visitor Service Unit Project will enhance the visitor and resident experience of the surrounding communities of Cowichan Lake and the region of the Cowichan Valley. The Infotogo unit will be a mobile Visitor Information Centre that engages visitors and residents at events, festivals, venues, and attractions valley wide. The program goal is to contribute to a more economically and culturally vibrant region through:

- Information provision
- Improving the visitor experience
- Empowering people to make decisions to see more, do more and spend more

The graphic wrap design, banners, flags and awning to the unit will be highly visible, bright, captivating and recognizable as a Tourism Marketing Venue when at various events. The project will create temporary and permanent employment and there will be noticeable economic benefits to the community and the region with increased revenues for businesses ensuring their continued viability. The Unit will be available to go and setup on sites wherever the action is, with Destination BC trained counsellors to welcome and engage the visitors and residents at the events showcasing the multitude of choices of attractions available to them and enhancing their experience with touch screen iPads and tactile information pamphlets, maps, brochures and guide books of the Cowichan Lake Area, the Cowichan Valley, Vancouver Island and the province of BC.

Introduction / Background

Cowichan Lake area is known for the logging and mining industry that has gone through many changes over the past 15 years, with the closure of the mills, schools, and businesses, this area has suffered greatly economically. We are a tourist destination that requires a choice from the visitor to make. You have to come off of the main Highway Number 1 and drive 26 minutes on Highway Number 18 to get to our communities. Cowichan Lake is part of the Pacific Marine Circle Route which has been gaining more popularity as a result of the paving the road between Cowichan Lake and Port Renfrew in 2010. The Pacific Marine Circle Route averages approximately 150 to 200 people per week who explore it as we are the gateway to Carmanah/Walbran, Nitinat, and Bamfield. We have a lot of visitors that come here for the trails, fishing on the lake and the river, camping, and tubing down the Heritage Cowichan River, our annual events around the lake, and for the music festivals including Sunfest at Laketown Ranch.

Currently, the majority of the visitors to these attractions and events do not come into Visitor Centre for a number of reasons:

- There are many visitors that shop at our local businesses, including the Deep Fried Ice Cream, who say that visitors were just passing through on their way to or just come off of the circle route and they stopped for a coffee or needed to use the washroom.

- There are tour busses that come through and their PMCR tour bus guide provides the riders with information – sometimes guides or drivers will come into the Visitor Centre and collect material to hand out in the bus.
- They have limited time and prefer to get a coffee or ice cream, have a lunch under our covered area and visit the washrooms.
- They do not want more paper for their already full luggage.
- The concert grounds are fully serviced so they do not have to venture into town, as well a lot of the people at the concert grounds were unaware that there was a town with amenities so close by as they just drove in the highway and didn't notice the signs.
- At the events people came and accidentally happened up on the event, they were invited by their family or friend to come out and attend or they were return visitors that only went to this event.
- Tubers come into the community and go straight to the tubing company get on a tube and then get picked up and dropped off at their vehicle once the tube ride is done. They find that they are too tired then to explore the rest of the area, but they will plan to come back another day.

As well with our regular events that happen around the lake we were missing out on interacting and engaging with those types of visitors, an opportunity to give them a reason to return for a longer stay on their own at a future date, and/or to tell friends and family at home about the friendliness of the people in Cowichan Lake and, by extension, Vancouver Island and BC. Personal interactions with the visitors at events are what will make us stand out.

The Mobile Visitor Services Unit Project involved us getting an In-Kind mobile trailer from Island Moving for us to use until we raise the funds to purchase our own trailer, an In-Kind truck from Frank Worsley to tow it, and driver Frank Worsley to pull it and park it and then move it again for the next event. Certified Folder provided the shelving to display our local brochures and area maps, we purchased a tent for shelter, two bistro tables & chairs and a mat for the rest area, and rented four 6 x 2 tables from the Seniors Centre to display some of our new retail products that were available to buy. We hired two summer time temporary students for 12 weeks to meet and greet as well as distribute information to the visitor during the day at the event location. The students had the appropriate Destination BC training, wore a badge and T-shirts to identify them as visitor centre councillors, carried information in their back packs as well when they walked the grounds to seek out visitors, and were equipped with a tablet with a data plan. The trailer had signage that was identifiable and filled with material about our region, island and province. The tent was placed just outside the unit for shelter, and tables and chairs were provided for visitors to sit and rest. We had merchandise available to sell to visitors who came to the mobile unit as well. The unit was set up at the front in an area of the events where people would be able to see us as they entered and we recorded the number of people that visited.

Methodology:

The Mobile Unit staff managed most parts of their work in cooperation with the Visitor Centre. When they were not with the mobile unit they were in the centre working shifts. Only their hours of training and when they are out on the mobile unit are recorded in this document.

We used the data forms as used by the Visitor Centre to collect data and then input it into the DBC website statistics page under Roaming Visitor Stats. .

May 22 - June 13, 2017	Hired Mallory Marrs and Amber McKigney to be our mobile unit staff. Located a business for the mobile trailer, truck and driver and rallied 10 volunteers for inkind use. Purchased materials, T-Shirts and name tags for Staff and Volunteers
June 14 - 23, 2017	Training: learned Visitor Centre procedures and Destination BC Training was provided to Mallory and Amber, they became familiar with use of the tablets and payment machines; worked with Visitor Centre Coordinator to determine

selection of materials that would be loaded on the trailer, etc. Developed a question sheet to use for recording the collected information.

June 24 - 30,
2017

Received the In-Kind Trailer where 3 staff and Coordinator and 4 volunteers cleaned, loaded unit with shelving and materials, decorated with signage and learned how to lock down materials when it had to be towed to next event, learned how to unload the trailer and put up the tent and tables and properly display the merchandise, maps and brochures.

July 1 -
September 9th
2017

Our Mobile/Visitor Information staff worked Tuesday to Sunday 10:00 to 6:00 in both the Visitor Centre and at the event grounds They greeted visitors and collected statistics, interacted with the tour directors and drivers, and answered questions from people passing by, event attendees, and visitors at the visitor centre.

The Events attend in 20017

July 1st, Lake Cowichan Canada Day in the morning

July 1st, Mesachie Lake Canada Day in the evening

July 8th, Saywell Park Cowichan Idol

July 15th, Honeymoon Bay Days & Cowichan Idol

July 22nd, Saywell Park Cowichan Idol

July 29th, Youbou Cowichan Idol

August 2nd Still Standing Viewing

August 3rd to the 7th, for Sunfest & Cowichan Idol

August 12th, Youbou Regatta

August 16th, Motor Sport Circuit

August 26th Chili Barn Dance

September 2nd, Summer End BBQ

September 9th, Lake to Lake Walk, 2 locations at Glenora

October 7th, Chamber Showcase

October 10th, Returning IN-KND Trailer

May 7 th , 2018	In May we purchased our own trailer to use as the Mobile Visitor Services Unit at Great price Chamber Directors worked with Visitor Centre Coordinator to determine selection of graphics and materials that would need to be loaded on the trailer. Coordinator and 4 volunteers cleaned, loaded unit with shelving and materials, decorated with signage and learned how to lock down materials when it had to be towed to next event, learned how to unload the trailer and put up the tent awnings and tables and properly display the merchandise, maps and brochures.
July 1 – October 13 th 2018	Unit was covered with the Banners and Magnet banners for the Heritage Days Parade, Lake Days Parade and Canada Events Our Mobile/Visitor Information staff and volunteers worked 10:00 to 6:00 at the event grounds They greeted visitors and collected statistics, interacted with the tour directors and drivers, and answered questions and directed them to the visitors centre if more booklets and pamphlets or accommodation bookings were required. The Events attend in 2018 May 19th, Heritage Days, June 9th Lake Days, July 1st, Lake Cowichan Canada Day & Mesachie Lake Canada Day Monday July 16th the Mobile Unit was sent to Victoria for graphic wrapping and returned Sunday July 29th, 2018 with its new look
First Event with New Graphic Look	August 2nd to the 6th, for Sunfest First Event with New Graphic Look August 11th, Youbou Regatta August 16th, Motor Sport Circuit September 8th, Lake to Lake Walk, 2 locations at Glenora Trails Park October 13th - Chamber Business Showcase & Job Fair October 28th – Cross on the Rock Cycle Event Next Event will be the Santa Parade on November 25th 2018

Actual Costs: SEE ATTACHED EXCEL

Results:

The single greatest success of this project was the **much-increased interaction with visitors**, especially those at the events and resulting new information about how we can give remarkable service in the future.

The Mobile Info Staff and Volunteers interacted with bus drivers, tour guides, event organizers and entertainment groups, and event attendees. Once they understood that we were there to provide free information and materials, they came to seek us out to get information on the area.

Once the visitors were aware of our presence, they were delighted to take the time to talk to us and get free BC postcards and stickers, and purchase some of our retail products. This also provided the Mobile Info staff and volunteers with the opportunity to:

- Distribute town, regional and Island maps and brochures,
- Tell them about the Museum and attractions and places to shop and eat and stay.
- This greatly improved the experience of these visitors as they had only been able to see the most obvious sites in the past as they had been previously unwilling to enter the Visitor Centre

We were fortunate to have staff and volunteer with second languages of French and some knowledge of Mandarin and German, allowing them to interact more quickly with some of the visitors. In the four months of the project, being on duty interacted with 18,372 people from various locations including:

- Germany
- China
- Quebec
- France

There is a great deal of local interest in the project including: which generated media coverage from

- The Cowichan Lake Gazette
- The Cowichan Valley Citizen
- The Valley Voice

Overall, our statistics of visitors for events is called the roaming stats - increased from 185 in 2016 to 6,347 in 2017 as a result of the mobile unit being set up at various events throughout the year. As of October 31st the roaming visitor stats for 2018 is at 14,194

Key Learnings

Some elements of the project were modified as the project progressed. Staff put together a power point video of pictures and information of the area to showcase on a big screen TV. For the first part of the project, the staff worked Wednesday to Sunday in the Visitor Centre for training and preparing the Mobile Unit to take out to the events. Sunday and Monday are considered to be important days as they were some of the busiest days in the Visitor Centre, as they are common days for some Lake Cowichan retailers to be closed which resulted in receiving more than normal visitors at the visitor centre. Most of the events attended were held on the weekends with the exception of the Sunfest week which started on the Tuesday with the Still Standing viewing on the big screen. The unit was left on the grounds at the front entrance for the duration of the Sunfest Week at Lake Town Ranch and was taken down the following Monday in the evening.

The Staff, volunteers, and the coordinator recorded many comments including:

- Complaints about closed stores on Sundays and Mondays
- Enthusiastic comments about the town
- Comments that the eateries cannot handle large crowds of people
- Several requests for short, motorized or walking, guided tours to the forest hot spots, through town, and on the trails and fishing charters on the lake.

In addition, the coordinator, staff and volunteers offered the following insights:

- The BC Ferry schedule is a critical element for event and visitor scheduling. The Nanaimo schedule offers significant challenges in cost and the result may be fewer visitors coming across from the main land to the island in future years.
- Traffic slowdowns due to construction and other congestion on the Malahat is also a factor.
- Amber's ability to speak some Mandarin and Mallory some French and German was a huge benefit in developing a rapport with these types of Visitors. This should be considered an important skill for such a position in future.
- Note* Chinese tourists are strongly adverse to people approaching them as they expect that they will be selling something. Dispelling this fear is critical to successful interactions especially with Chinese tourists.

- Having the staff and volunteers with the mobile unit and tablets and tables of handouts at the main entrance to events was viewed in a very positive light. As those that entered the grounds of the events were all welcomed by staff, volunteers and/or coordinator. This could result in visitors singling out Cowichan Lake as a place they enjoyed when they fill out the surveys on Destination BC Website.
- In response to the problem of a few shops and restaurants being not being open on Sundays and Mondays, the Staff and Volunteers handed them a list of those who were open, this is something that the Chamber will need to address with the business community in the future.
- A multi-language banner saying “Welcome!” should be added to the Mobile Unit and tables.
- Purchase a camera for the unit.

The Cowichan Lake District Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Centre worked hard on completing this project during 2018 and continuing to serve visitors through the visitor centre and mobile unit services.

Pictures of the trailer at the events in 2018



