

Presented by the BC Rural Centre in cooperation with the  
Kaslo & Area and Slocan District Chambers of Commerce

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS

How Others See Kaslo

## SUMMARY



# INTRODUCTION

First Impressions is a program first developed in the 1990s by the University of Wisconsin's Department of Extension, based on local folks — neighbours — sharing their observations of one another's communities. The hope was this would lead to “a-ha” moments, and trigger positive actions to make life better in the participating towns.

Over the years, hundreds of communities in North America have carried out First Impressions initiatives, none of them smaller than the villages of Kaslo, New Denver, and Silverton, located in British Columbia's West Kootenay region.

In October, 2017, at the request of the Kaslo & Area and Slocan District chambers of commerce, the BC Rural Centre agreed to lead a First Impressions project that saw six citizens each from Kaslo and New Denver/Silverton visit one another's towns, armed with 56 pages of questions on topics ranging from their retail experiences and encounters with locals to their observations on local health care; from housing and the local economy to the environment.

The results of these surveys were compiled by the Chambers, analyzed by the BC Rural Centre, then presented in public meetings, held on October 15, 2017 in Silverton's Memorial Hall, and the next day in Kaslo's historic Langham Theatre.

This document provides a brief summary of the community impressions made in Kaslo, as well as the public discussion that took place on the 15th of October in the Langham Theatre. It is our hope that the First Impressions experience will contribute toward a new spirit of community involvement, and assist in leading to concrete actions intended to help ensure the future resiliency and prosperity of Kaslo, as well as New Denver and Silverton.



# GENERAL COMMENTS

**ENTRANCES** Physically spectacular in all three directions — no clear *Welcome to Kaslo* or *Welcome to Historic Downtown* signs at bridge or corner of 4th Street and A Avenue. West entrance works well, there's nothing at the north, and the south entrance is lacking useful information.

**THE 5-MINUTE IMPRESSION** "Felt like skirting the edges of a dream town," "I noticed how lively the town was even though it's October," "Pleasant streets and charming buildings" were some of the comments, balanced against "ugly, disappointing entrance into town from Nelson, surprising given it must be the town's most important."

**HOUSING** Nice mix of heritage & newer homes, lovely landscaping. Some rundown-looking places, little sign of new construction, and an apparent lack of reasonably-priced rental accommodation and entry-level housing were seen as potential challenges.

**EDUCATION & COMMUNITY SERVICES** JV Humphries an impressive K-12 facility. The team noted the presence of Selkirk College, Perriwinkle Daycare, and the Lakeside Learning Centre as educational advantages. Noted the large number of NGOs, many of them providing important services — "Seems to be a high level of civic voluntarism." Arena, fire hall were noted.

**HEALTH CARE** "Impressive facilities for such a small place." Noted the absence of 24/7 emergency care, the lack of a dentist, and the distance from Abbey Manor to the clinic. Praised the number of complementary practitioners.

**THE ECONOMY** Tourism & regional services seem to dominate the local economy, likely creating mainly relatively low-paid jobs. Downtown is strikingly more active than New Denver's this time of year, with more bustle, stores, restaurants, and services. Kaslo InfoNet with its high-speed fibre offerings a huge plus. Suspect there may be a "hidden economy" — individuals & largely home-based small businesses taking advantage of fibre Internet. No sense Kaslo has a clear sense of economic direction or purpose. Like New Denver & Silverton, for some locals the status quo is just fine, *"less is more."*



# PROBLEMS & POSSIBILITIES

**PROBLEMS** While much larger than New Denver/Silverton, the challenge of attracting new residents, especially young families was noted — the school could take far more students. With no clear idea of what makes Kaslo unique, fiascos like the situation in Kaslo Bay are likely — the fact that arguably the most attractive & pivotal property in the community is in private hands & limbo is a huge deal. There isn't enough innovative housing to meet current needs and/or accommodate newcomers — a big problem for current & potential employers. The health care situation appears shaky. Several downtown businesses for sale, finding buyers is difficult. There's a lack of local capital. Generally Kaslo seems to have plenty of pent-up potential but lacks a central organizing concept that can stimulate & guide appropriate change. Downtown needs new/more signage; interpretive signs throughout the community are largely absent. Why doesn't the current sewer expansion plan include all of Lower Kaslo?

## POSSIBILITIES

- Agree on what makes Kaslo unique, then build a development strategy based on this (eg, *The CommuniCultural Capital of the Kootenays*).
- Create a development plan for the Highway 31A corridor in cooperation with New Denver, leveraging the area's natural and historical assets.
- Work to attract businesses that would be linked with the Highway 31A strategy.
- Create a Community Investment Co-op.
- Launch downtown revitalization to include new signage, the creation of public spaces, and a concerted effort to attract new businesses that complement the community's communications and cultural strengths — and by *communications* we mean high-speed fibre and the media it supports; by *cultural* we include recreational activities, food & beverage, and knowledge-based activities as well as the arts.



# WRAP-UP

*"So interesting to hear and get the ideas flowing on how to build upon what Kaslo already rocks at! Thank you!"*

First Impressions is a novel way to stimulate discussion around issues of importance to people who live in small, isolated communities and regions like Kaslo and North Kootenay Lake. No big city consultants. Just "regular folks" from neighbouring towns and areas, people who know first hand many of the challenges facing any remote British Columbia region or town in the 21st century, sharing their observations, impressions, and suggestions.

It's our hope that this relatively simple exercise will lead to positive action. It's up to individual citizens, groups of friends & neighbours, local non-profits, as well as local and regional government to decide what next.

Certainly the First Impressions team from New Denver/Silverton came away from their visit feeling Kaslo is bursting with potential. That the community's and surrounding region's problems are far outweighed by their potential. We agree. We hope this modest project will serve as a catalyst to help begin the process of realizing that potential.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- For general information on rural revitalization, visit the [Revitalization tab](#) on our website.
- How can we be of further assistance? We'd be happy to hear from you!

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