

# Business Vitality Initiative (BVI)

## Phase One **Summary** Report

### High Level, Alberta

June 2010





# High Level Assessment Summary

## The BVI

The **Business Vitality Initiative (BVI)** helps communities to assess their capacity to work with and support entrepreneurs, and to foster small business growth. The BVI measures the perceptions of community leaders, business people and citizens about the current business environment in their community and compares the results to an average of other communities to determine possible short and long term actions the community can undertake to improve its business friendliness.

The High Level BVI was initiated by a partnership between the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) and CIEL. The Rural Community Adaptation Program (RCAP) of Alberta Agriculture & Rural Development (ARD) funded it. The community sponsors were the Town of High Level and Community Futures Northwest Alberta, which selected the participants.

High Level is the twenty-second community in Canada that has taken part in the BVI, in addition to five communities in Australia.

This report summarizes the *Assessment Session* of the BVI in High Level, where a questionnaire and a focus group assessed the community's small business resources and potential on May 4, 2010. The phase 2 or *Focus and Action Session* will be open to the entire community with the purpose of setting priorities for improvement and jump-starting the community to action. That session will take place on Tuesday June 8<sup>th</sup> at 6 pm at Town Hall in High Level.

## Key Findings

From highest to lowest, section scores out of 100 were as follows: Opportunities and Attitudes, 59; Communication and Connectivity, 59; Role of Government and Organizations, 55; Infrastructure and Business Services, 55; Quality of Life, 48; Education and Training, 46; Innovation, 46; Leadership, Teamwork, and Networking, 46; Capital and Funding, 41; Markets and Marketing, 41.

Overall, High Level had a full survey score of 50 out of 100, 7% below the 22-community average of 54.

The BVI section results as shown on pages 3 and 4 show that particular strengths for High Level are its two highest scores in the *Opportunities and Attitudes* and the *Communication and Connectivity* sections.

The lowest scoring sections of the survey are *Markets and Marketing* and *Capital and Funding*.

In the Assessment Session, participants were asked to give three words to describe their community. According to many respondents, High Level is a *friendly, busy, and vibrant* community, although there were many concerns about the transient nature of the community and the appearance of the town. When participants were asked to identify key strengths not used to potential in the community, the top responses were *tourism potential, the people, and recreational opportunities*.

When participants were asked to name their predicted top economic drivers for the community in the next five years, the most common responses were agriculture, oil and gas, and small business/retail. When asked about untapped business opportunities in the community, *oil and gas, and lumber and forestry* were the top responses.

When asked for suggestions on how to improve High Level, the top responses were *downtown revitalization, reduction of the transience of the population, and arts and culture*.

### Sponsored by:

Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, Community Futures Northwest Alberta, and the Town of High Level.

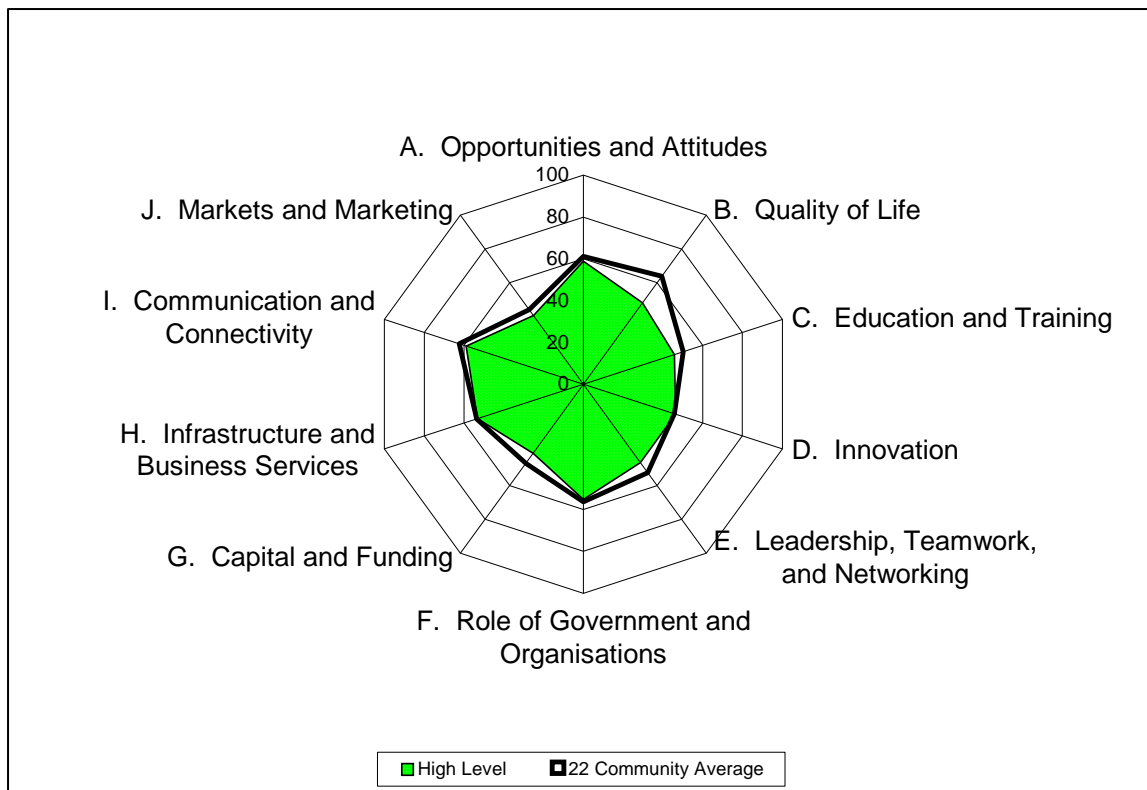
## The Assessment

The multiple-choice section of the two-part questionnaire asked the participants to rate their community by agreeing or disagreeing with a series of statements related to entrepreneurial capacity. Each statement was framed in a positive context (e.g. *marketing services in my community are affordable and accessible*). Participants were asked to rate the statement with one of the following: *completely agree*, *somewhat agree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, *completely disagree*, or *don't know*.

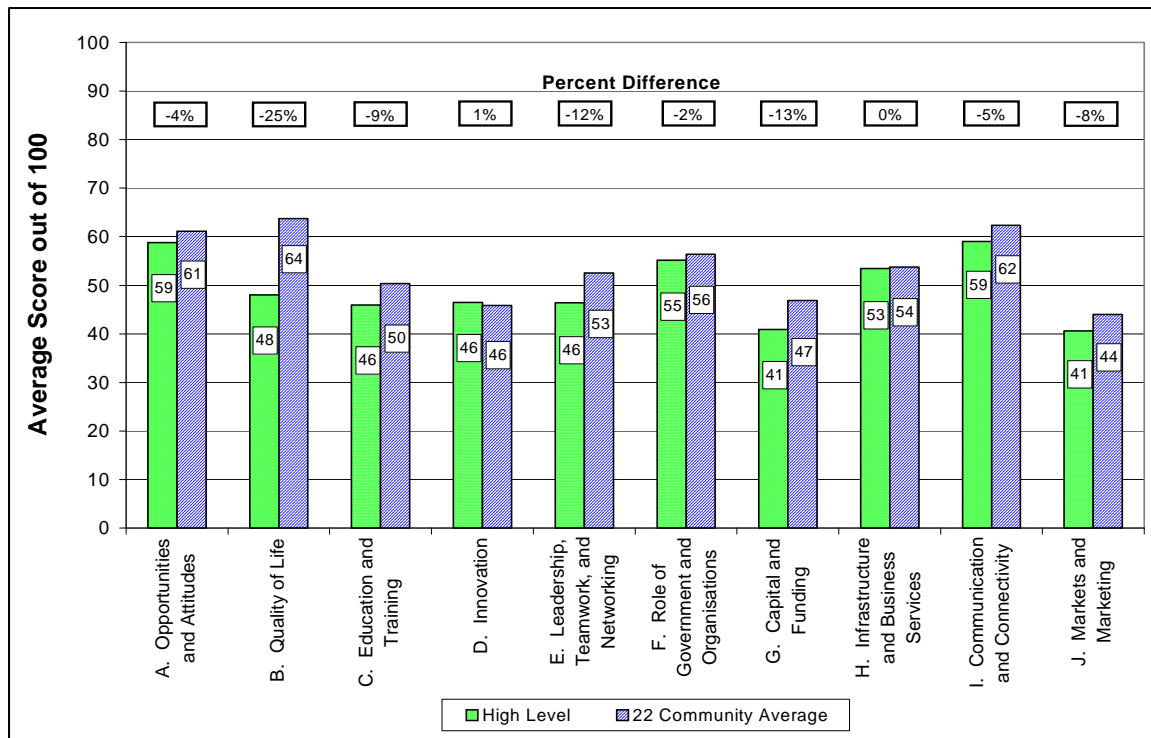
If all respondents *completely agreed* to a positively worded statement, the question score would be 100. If all respondents *completely disagreed* with the statement, the question score would be 0. A neutral response (*neither agree nor disagree*) would be scored as 50. A score over 50 would indicate that there is a perceived good capacity, while a score less than 50 would indicate a perceived lower capacity.

## High Level and 22-Community Average Section Scores

The full report on the High Level BVI consists of 70 pages of analysis of the ten BVI sections, illustrated by charts and graphs such as the one on the next page and the one below which shows the score out of 100 for each of the ten BVI sections. The area circumscribed by High Level's scores is shaded. The darker black line connects the 22-community average scores.



## High Level and 22-Community Average Section Scores



## Recurring Themes

The qualitative (written answer) section of the questionnaire collects information about the issues, strengths and weaknesses within the community. (e.g. *What are 3 words or phrases that describe your community? What is your community's greatest strength in terms of its markets?*), as well as additional comments in each of 10 sections. The following themes were particularly prominent throughout those sections of the High Level BVI.

- Oil/ gas & lumber anticipated to remain key economic drivers
- Young community with many business opportunities for those willing to hustle
- Labour issues and availability limit growth & expansion
- Downtown beautification (including lower highway) needed
- Communication between & amongst Town, Chamber, businesses, non-government organizations could be improved
- Not many opportunities – beyond sports – to engage young people in the community
- Transient nature of community and remoteness provide extra challenges (e.g. generating community spirit/volunteers, more expensive goods due to shipping costs)

# Recommended Short-term Actions

The following are some possible courses of action that the community could undertake to improve business friendliness.

Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer recruitment (“Beyond the same 10 people”)</li> <li>• ‘Buy Local’ Initiative</li> <li>• Youth &amp; young adult opportunity identification session(s) to identify recreational, educational, and business opportunities</li> <li>• Specific service skills upgrading programs to improve front line service</li> <li>• More basic business training (Business start-up, financing, accounting, etc.)</li> </ul>
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Downtown beautification initiative (e.g. building appearances, filling vacant buildings/lots, lower highway through town)</li> <li>• Community brand to differentiate, promote town ( tourism, physician recruitment, etc. – consider assets like First Nations, Vegas theme, Northern Lights, Gateway to NWT, etc.)</li> <li>• Publish/promote unfilled niches (e.g. Tim Horton’s, ladies clothing, Canadian Tire, business service centre, etc.)</li> <li>• More promotion of local businesses in local media (awards, features, profiles of start-ups, etc.)</li> </ul>
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A signature festival or special event</li> <li>• “What’s happening?” – Communications initiative to increase communication effectiveness of business to business, Chamber, Town, NGOs, to citizens</li> </ul>
Admin., Research, Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigate EDO or economic development function to promote, attract, etc.</li> <li>• Regional tourism opportunity identification to objectively examine assets (like First Nations, Vegas theme, Northern Lights, Gateway to NWT, etc.)</li> <li>• Research/assess value-added agriculture opportunities</li> </ul>

**On June 8, 2010, High Level residents will be asked to select priorities and form working groups around specific actions.**

## **Recommended Long-term Actions**

The following are some possible courses of action that the community could undertake to improve business friendliness.

Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer recruitment strategy</li> <li>• Buy Local Program</li> <li>• Skills training &amp; education strategy and ongoing initiatives (e.g. more localized training for trades, etc.)</li> </ul>
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Downtown beautification strategy</li> <li>• Cultural event strategy</li> <li>• Physician incentives and recruitment</li> <li>• Identify &amp; package winter recreation activities</li> </ul>
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy to get youth/young adults involved in building community &amp; community spirit</li> <li>• Broad community/regional leadership program beyond the elected representatives to build capacity/ links/ collaboration with Town, County, business, NGOs, First Nations</li> </ul>
Research, Admin. and Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performing arts/cultural centre &amp; museum feasibility study</li> <li>• Research co-gen potential</li> <li>• Sidewalk/paving strategy/plan</li> <li>• Research regional tourism strategy</li> </ul>

**On June 8, 2010, High Level residents will be asked to select priorities and form working groups around specific actions.**

# The Ten Highest Scoring Questions

		Score out of 100		
#	Question	High Level	22 Community Average	% Difference
A4	Successful businesses want to remain in the area.	80	82	-3%
I3	Quality communication services ( phone, cell phone, high speed internet, etc. ) are adequate for business.	74	61	21%
F1	The governing bodies ( town councils, regional district ) recognize that businesses are important and valuable for the development of the area.	73	74	-1%
I1	Informal business communication ( word of mouth ) is highly effective.	71	86	-18%
H5	A variety of buildings and commercial land is available to accommodate business expansion, attraction, or creation.	69	56	24%
C6	There are quality elementary and secondary schools in the area.	65	79	-18%
A2	Individuals are capable of thinking creatively and developing unconventional solutions and innovative business opportunities.	65	65	-1%
E1	Business and area groups/sectors have a voice in key local government decisions ( e.g. infrastructure improvements, transportation ) .	64	57	12%
A6	The area is facing a significant economic opportunity.	63	61	3%
B6	Quality residential accommodation is available and affordable.	63	60	5%

# The Ten Lowest Scoring Questions

#	Question	Score out of 100		
		High Level	22 Community Average	% Difference
C5	A pool of skilled labour is available to local businesses in the area.	23	37	-37%
D1	There are formal and informal forums ( conferences, workshops, association breakfast meetings ) on technology and technology applications.	24	29	-19%
J4	Businesses in the area /region jointly market their products and services as a group, locally and in other regions.	25	31	-19%
B3	There are frequent high quality cultural events ( e.g. festivals, concerts ) catering to a range of ages.	25	58	-57%
H1	There are vibrant, active downtown areas or community cores.	27	47	-43%
J3	The area has a distinctive or unique brand or marketing image.	28	41	-31%
G2	Local businesses can easily access formal investors ( venture capital or equity funding ) .	32	53	-39%
I4	Public transportation within the area is adequate.	33	31	3%
J5	People prefer to purchase local products and services.	34	42	-18%
E4	We collaborate and cooperate with neighbouring communities.	34	37	-8%

# The “Gut Check 12”

The following 12 questions provide a snap-shot of a community’s business vitality. These key questions can be used to inform future efforts aimed at improving business friendliness. They are taken from the 60 BVI questions.

Question Number	Question	Score out of 100		
		High Level	22 Community Average	% Difference
A6	The area is facing a significant economic opportunity.	63	61	3%
B5	Young adults ( 25-34 ) consider the area to be a desirable place to live.	41	50	-18%
A4	Successful businesses want to remain in the area.	80	82	-3%
C4	The education and business communities work together to provide convenient training for businesses.	40	41	-4%
A3	Citizens are motivated to learn new skills and to develop existing ones.	52	51	2%
F1	The governing bodies ( town councils, regional district ) recognize that businesses are important and valuable for the development of the area.	73	74	-1%
H1	There are vibrant, active downtown areas or community cores.	27	47	-43%
J2	Products and services are reasonably priced in comparison to regional and big city competitors	59	57	3%
J5	People prefer to purchase local products and services.	34	42	-18%
D3	Local businesses demonstrate creativity and innovation in seeking new customers.	59	52	13%
E6	There is a pool of talented leaders with diverse skills, cultural experiences and backgrounds who are available for leading area initiatives.	49	66	-25%
G1	Lenders are willing to take chances based on individual character and good business ideas	36	46	-23%