



City of Abbotsford
**2024-2025 Business Retention
and Expansion Strategy —
Priorities and Action Plan**

November 2024



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Acknowledgments

The City of Abbotsford respectfully acknowledges that it is located on the traditional, ancestral, territories of the M̓athxwi First Nation, Semá:th First Nation, and the Leq'á:mel First Nation.

With much appreciation to Abbotsford's business community, the City of Abbotsford gratefully acknowledges the time and contributions provided by the following community partners and business stakeholders:

- Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce
- Abbotsford Downtown Business Association
- Abbotsford International Airport
- Abbotsford Innovation Network
- City of Abbotsford's Business, Innovation and Public Affairs Advisory Committee
- Community Futures South Fraser
- Fraser Valley Indo-Canadian Business Association
- Stó:lō Community Futures
- Semá:th First Nation Economic Development Corporation
- Tourism Abbotsford
- University of the Fraser Valley – College of Arts – Workplace Learning
- University of the Fraser Valley – Community Health and Social Innovation Hub
- University of the Fraser Valley – Faculty of Business and Computing
- University of the Fraser Valley – Food and Agriculture Institute

In addition, the City of Abbotsford extends its gratitude to all respondents of the April 2024 Business Survey and Focus Groups, and the sectoral representative participants of the May 2024 Ideation Groups.



Introduction to Business Retention and Expansion

Economic development research shows existing businesses are responsible for most economic and employment growth in any community. They are businesses that have made investments in the community, contribute to the vibrancy and resiliency of the community, and provide employment and tax revenues that allow the community to grow and prosper.

Early in their term, Abbotsford City Council indicated through their 2022-2026 Strategic Plan that an updated Business Retention and Expansion Strategy was required for Abbotsford. A Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) Strategy is generally considered to be one of the most effective economic development programs. This strategic approach focuses on working with existing businesses in the community and builds a trusted working relationship with them in order to support their continuing growth and future expansion plans.

While each strategy is unique, there are several common elements in the development of a successful BR&E strategy.

- 1. BR&E strategies are grounded in economic research including primary and secondary research, literature reviews, and industry research.** In developing this strategy, the consultants incorporated secondary research from Statistics Canada and Environics, conducted an online survey supplemented by focus group research, and reviewed examples of best practices in local economic development in a variety of communities across Canada.
- 2. BR&E strategies focus on understanding the needs and aspirations of local businesses.** The research components of this project included a business walk, stakeholder interviews, an online survey of the business community, and focus groups with representatives of key economic sectors in Abbotsford.
- 3. BR&E strategies focus on building trust and collaboration with local businesses, business organizations, educational institutions, and other levels of government.** The online survey, focus groups and ideation discussion groups that informed this strategy were purposefully conducted by external consultants in order to encourage frank and open dialogue and information sharing from the business community.
- 4. BR&E strategies set priorities and actions, allocate resources, identify deliverables and evaluate results.** This updated Strategy identifies priorities, resources, and evaluation metrics for Abbotsford's BRE approach over the next two years.
- 5. The BR&E strategy builds on and complements related strategies and the work of other departments within the City.** The Economic Development department works with a number of other departments within the City including Development Planning, Community Planning, Building Permits & Licences, Information Technology, Marketing, Communications, Special Events, Culture Services, Bylaw Services, Abbotsford Airport, Abbotsford Fire and Rescue Services, and the Abbotsford Police Department. These strategies and plans include:
 - 2016 Official Community Plan
 - 2022-2026 Strategic Plan
 - Abbotsford Police Department Project Agent
 - Abbotsford 2050
 - Building Department - Digital Strategy
 - Bylaw Compliance Strategy
 - City Centre Neighbourhood Plan
 - Culture Connect Strategy
 - Historic Downtown Neighbourhood Plan
 - Homelessness Action Plan
 - Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan
 - Transportation and Transit Master Plan
 - University District Neighbourhood Plan
- 6. A successful BR&E strategy set the table for a successful Business Attraction Strategy.** We know that successful local businesses in Abbotsford are the best ambassadors for attracting new businesses. They prove that a community has an environment and ecosystem that supports the ongoing development and growth of local businesses.

Abbotsford Economy

The City of Abbotsford is recognized as one of the fastest growing cities in British Columbia. Between 2016 and 2021, Abbotsford's population grew by 11.6% and today is home to over 160,000 residents. Residents and businesses call Abbotsford home due in part to the excellent quality of life that the community has to offer through an array of outdoor recreation, cultural, educational, social and entertainment opportunities.

With Abbotsford's population projected to grow to over 236,000 people by 2040, it is recognized that the City of Abbotsford must position itself through strategic and proactive efforts to positively influence and shape Abbotsford's current and future economic context.

Over 7,700 businesses have chosen to locate in Abbotsford and the City boasts a large workforce of over 80,000 people.

As it continues to experience significant growth in both investment and population, coupled with a diverse and well-balanced economy, Abbotsford is well positioned to achieve its vision of being the 'Hub of the Fraser Valley'.

In 2022, Abbotsford City Council developed a Strategic Plan for their 2022-2026 term. This Plan sets out the guiding direction for the work of the City and is comprised of four guiding principles:

- Inclusive and Connected Community
- Sustainable and Safe City
- Vibrant and Growing Economy
- Organizational Excellence and Integrity

As a key goal of this Strategic Plan, this Business Retention and Expansion Strategy Update commenced in 2023 to position and align the work of the City's Economic Development Department with a direction that supports the local business community. While Abbotsford's investment attraction interests have direct synergies with the community's business retention and expansion interests, investment attraction will form a separate body of work.

The City of Abbotsford's Business Retention and Expansion Strategy further serves to direct the work and activity of the City's Economic Development Department in alignment with other City strategies and plans. The result of this work sets the foundation for Abbotsford's 2024-2026 Business Retention and Expansion Action Plan.

Abbotsford Value Proposition

Strategic Location: Abbotsford is well-positioned within British Columbia’s Lower Mainland and the Fraser Valley, with connectivity to other major business centres, including Vancouver and Seattle, and are reachable in under a 2-hour drive. The Sumas–Huntingdon Border Crossing directly connects Abbotsford to Washington, United States and to international markets and trade opportunities. Abbotsford is also a strategic gateway to Asia Pacific and along the Pacific Northwest with direct access to Canada’s transportation and highway system, rail and port terminals. Abbotsford’s International Airport connects over one million people each year to domestic and international destinations across the globe.

Diverse Economy: Abbotsford is a dynamic employment centre with pronounced industry strengths and growth potential in agriculture, aerospace, advanced manufacturing, clean technology, construction, health care, information communications technology and transportation and warehousing sectors.

Infrastructure Investments: The City of Abbotsford has received over \$72 Million in funding through the Government of Canada’s Canada Community-Building Fund for essential infrastructure and community development projects. The Fraser Valley Highway 1 Corridor Program to add additional travel lanes to Highway 1 will improve the capacity, reliability and safety of this critical transportation link.

Multi-Cultural: As one of the most ethnically diverse communities in Canada, Abbotsford is an inclusive community that welcomes and is home to rich natural, arts, and heritage assets and programs. Almost 27% of residents were born outside of Canada and bring with them language skills and lived experience in some of Canada’s most important export markets.

Public Safety and Healthcare: The community is served by the municipal Abbotsford Police Department and by the Abbotsford Fire and Rescue Service. The Abbotsford Regional Hospital and Cancer Centre serves the eastern Fraser Valley area through a 300-bed acute care health facility and integrated cancer control facility.

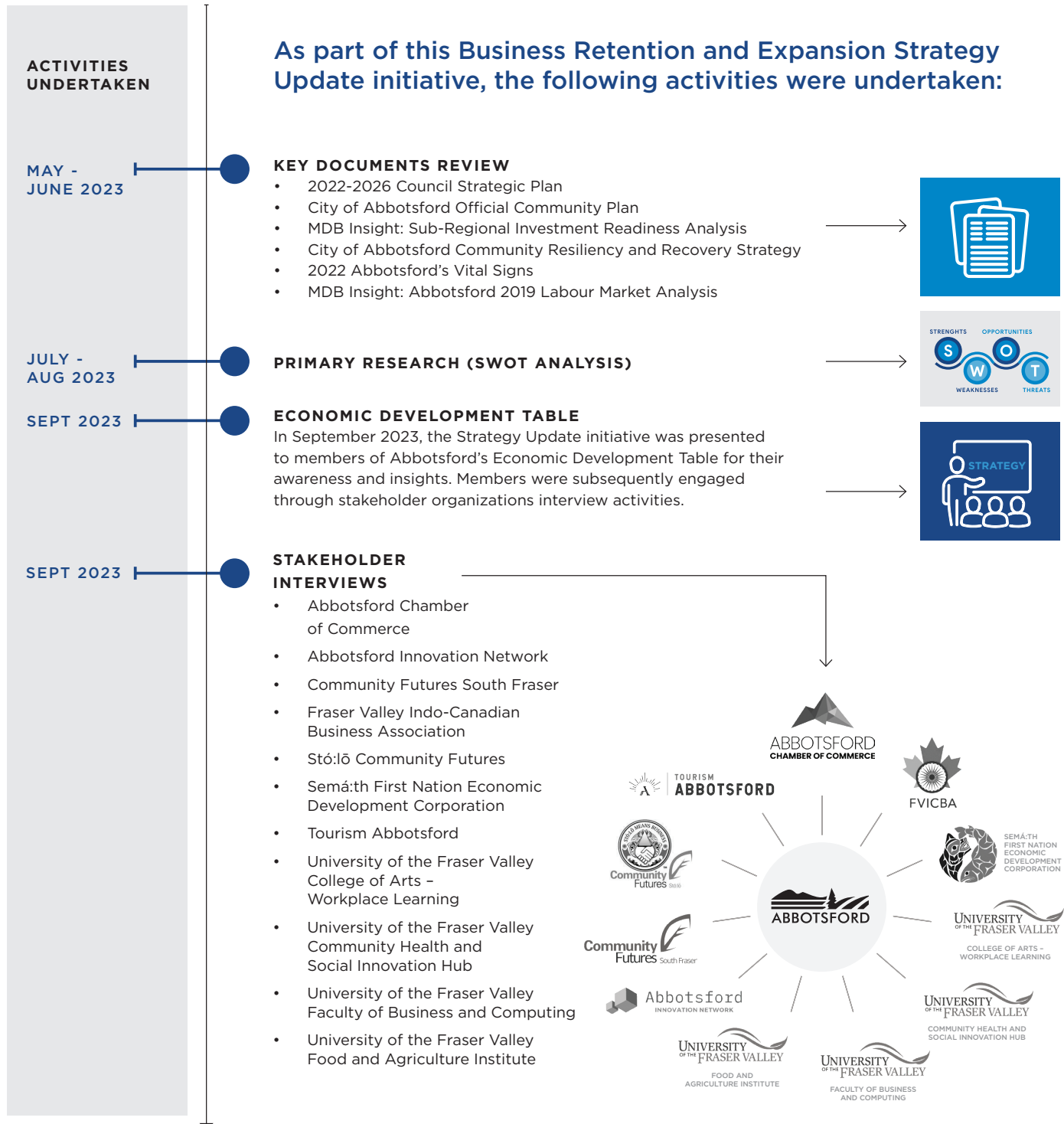
Lifestyle Attributes: Abbotsford is a welcoming community that features a wealth of active living experiences and opportunities. Our residents enjoy outdoor adventures, premier shopping attractions, top-tier sports and entertainment experiences, farm fresh local food and beverages, and vibrant arts and culture events throughout the year. Abbotsford truly offers something for everyone.



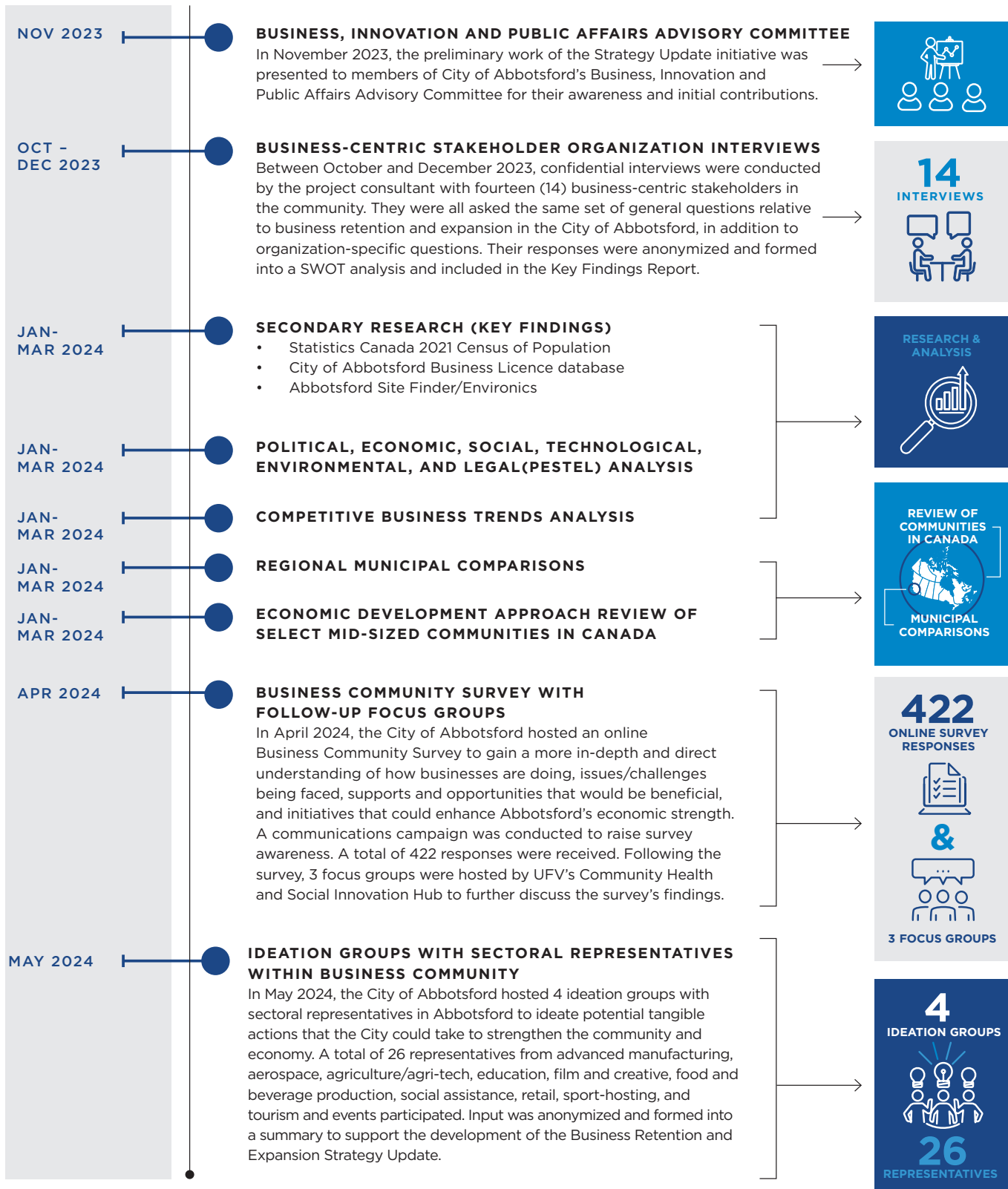
Strategy Activities and Business Community Engagement

As part of this Business Retention and Expansion Strategy Update initiative, the following activities were undertaken:

TIMELINE



Strategy Activities and Business Community Engagement



Economic Aspirations

The City of Abbotsford's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan provides the overall framework for the development of the BR&E strategy, with **Principle 3: Vibrant and Growing Economy** specifically identifying Abbotsford's economic development vision as a regional hub for creativity and innovation with a fully diversified economy. Specific strategy goals associated with Principle 3 include recognizing the value of innovation, supporting a vibrant and diverse economy, and investing in relationships that facilitate alignment.

The major themes that emerged through the BR & E research process regarding economic development aspirations are predominately in alignment with Council's Strategic Plan. **Participants want a simple, clear economic development vision that focuses on enhancing relationships with the business community and building on the City's existing sectoral strengths and assets.**

Our Vision

The City of Abbotsford is the Hub of the Fraser Valley. As the cultural and economic centre of the region, Abbotsford will be home to centralized services and agencies including health care, court services, transportation, university, airport, provincial and federal government, entertainment and cultural facilities, and commerce. We are diverse, inclusive, and connected; we are sustainable, safe, and healthy; we are a vibrant, prosperous and generous community.

Our Mission

We strive to continually improve the quality of life within our community by delivering key services for current and future generations.

Our Values

By living its values the City of Abbotsford strives to be an organization recognized for its excellence in city governance and employee, resident and customer relations. To provide excellence in service delivery, we have a role in understanding our business and fostering a corporate culture that sets the highest standard of integrity, professionalism and ethical behaviour. We act with character and integrity and do our best to understand the perspectives of Abbotsford residents while delivering services.

2023 STRATEGIC PLAN Advanced & Completed Priorities



Principle 1 | INCLUSIVE & CONNECTED COMMUNITY

- ✓ Secure funding for Montrose Transit Exchange
- ✓ Advance park amenities
- ✓ Develop Community Amenity Contributions and Density-Bonus policy
- ✓ Introduce McKee Neighbourhood Plan
- ✓ Implement Culture Connect Strategy
- ✓ Advocate (BC Transit/Translink) to extend transit to Skytrain in Langley



Principle 2 | SUSTAINABLE AND SAFE CITY

- ✓ Review Council Committees
- ✓ Apply to receive additional Federal Reaching Home Funding
- ✓ Implement Urban Forestry Strategy
- ✓ Advocate for funding for the Flood Mitigation Strategy
- ✓ Implement Homelessness Action Plan
- ✓ Implement Affordable Housing Strategy



Principle 3 | VIBRANT AND GROWING ECONOMY

- ✓ Advocate and support Agritech investment opportunities
- ✓ Continue to develop Abbotsford International Airport
- ✓ Explore revenue generating opportunities
- ✓ Update Intergovernmental Advocacy Strategy



Principle 4 | ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND INTEGRITY

- ✓ Develop a Retention Strategy
- ✓ Continue to modernize City services
- ✓ Enhance community engagement and access to information
- ✓ Review resource needs for organization

For Reference Only:

Defining Organizational Aspirations

- Advance from a position of strength and past successes
- See the future
- Make vision practical and achievable

The proposed 2024-2026 Business Retention and Expansion Strategy is grounded in the primary and secondary research and business community engagement activities undertaken as part of the background and development process. Collectively, the findings of the Strategy’s overall activities, along with Mayor and Council’s economic aspirations, have been applied to inform the draft Business Retention and Expansion Strategy. In developing the strategy, the following fundamental perspectives serve as the overall framework for the strategy.

1. Abbotsford is a regional economic and employment hub, and is in a strong economic situation.

Abbotsford is the largest city in the province outside of Metro Vancouver and is a regional economic and employment centre in its region. The city has a growing population, a diversified economy, an advantageous location near major markets, and a large number of regional economic assets.

The local economy is supported by a large skilled workforce and an entrepreneurial culture with strengths in agriculture, food and beverage processing, advanced manufacturing, green technology, construction, information communications technology, and construction. These economic strengths are the foundation of the business retention and expansion strategy that Abbotsford will need to leverage and champion to successfully position itself as a leading destination for investment, entrepreneurship and employment within a dynamic, evolving, and competitive business environment.

2. Access to a skilled workforce will become increasingly important for businesses.

As the Canadian economy continues to transition from resource-extraction to value-added, the ability to attract, retain and develop a skilled workforce will be critical to Abbotsford’s economic future.

Abbotsford is an affordable, family-oriented community that attracts and retains young workers through a combination of lifestyle, affordability and employment opportunities. The University of the Fraser Valley is a key partner in developing the increasingly skilled workforce that modern businesses require. Broader national and regional pressures affect the size and composition of our local workforce. Abbotsford will need to connect its talent pipeline strengths with the needs and opportunities of a growing business community.



3. Business owners and entrepreneurs believe in the future of Abbotsford and want to constructively engage with the City.

The majority of survey and focus group participants said their business and industry are growing, and they are willing to work with the City. They would like the City to focus on streamlining processes, providing additional information and resources, and to advocate on their behalf to senior levels of government.

A clear theme that emerged from the research is that businesses and residents are looking for the City to communicate their clear vision for the future of Abbotsford's economy. This vision should be built around promoting Abbotsford as the economic and employment hub of the Fraser Valley with a diverse and balanced economy with pronounced strengths in agriculture, advanced manufacturing, aerospace, clean technology, transportation and warehousing. These sectors benefit from Abbotsford's proximity to the USA border, Highway 1, rail and ports and Abbotsford International Airport make it an excellent location for export-oriented companies and a natural destination for foreign direct investment into Canada.

Businesses were also asking the City to produce promotional material that could help them attract and retain key employees. This material would highlight the City's high-quality lifestyle, affordability, amenities, education and healthcare facilities and recreational assets. This should include highlighting regional facilities including the University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford International Airport, Abbotsford Regional Hospital and Cancer Centre, Abbotsford Centre, and Tradex.

4. Business owners have expressed concern that crime and social disorder are negatively impacting their businesses.

This concern was raised in both the Abbotsford Downtown Business Walk and in the online Business Retention and Expansion survey. To address these concerns, the City has developed a multi-pronged approach that includes the Homelessness Action Plan, APD's Project Agent, and the Bylaw Compliance strategy. Economic Development staff have been working with external partners, including the Abbotsford Downtown Business Association and the Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce, to ensure businesses are aware of these City programs. These actions have included distributing ACCESS Street cards to businesses during the ADBA Business Walk, connecting ADBA with APD's Project Agent program, and sharing financial opportunities to address these challenges in the Table Talk newsletter.



1. Ongoing support for businesses working with the City.

As we know that Businesses are looking for assistance to navigate application and permitting processes, not only at the municipal level, but also at the provincial and federal levels. A “business concierge” program would provide an additional level of support for all businesses intersecting with the City. Along with a new online AI-based business concierge (chatbot), process reviews (within the Building Licences and Permits Department) would also be aligned to assist and track new businesses through their application processes, refer new businesses to the Economic Development department for additional assistance, and report on business licence statistics.

2. Enhanced online resources for businesses.

Survey respondents would like the City to provide enhanced online services for businesses for these services that are easy to find in a central location. This “one-stop shop” would provide:

- Access to all business-related information on City website (e.g. Business licence applications, zoning bylaws, Engineering services)
- information on federal, provincial and agency grant and funding programs for businesses
- Access to tools and training resources from business support agencies
- Extended service hours (AI chatbot)

3. Strengthening relationships with the business community.

In both the online survey and follow-up focus group research sessions, businesses expressed their interest in strengthening their relationship with the City. Specifically, the business community wanted regular opportunities to meet with City and other government officials to provide information on the needs of their businesses and industries so the City can advocate to senior levels of government on their behalf.

In order to this, the Economic Development Department will develop a continuum of business engagement tools that include:

- **New business welcome packages and visits.**

Economic Development is working with Building Licence and Permits to develop a new program to provide a digital “New Business Welcome Kit” that includes a Welcome Letter from Mayor and Council, links to business resources, and a key contact list to be delivered with every new business licence.

- **Annual business surveys through Let’s Talk.**

The annual Business Community survey would be designed to track the progress of the Business Retention and Expansion Strategy and to identify emerging issues with the business community in Abbotsford.

- **Economic Development Table and newsletter.**

The Economic Development Table is a monthly meeting of organizations with an economic development role in the community including the Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce, Abbotsford Downtown Business Association, BCD, Community Futures South Fraser, Fraser Valley Indo-Canadian Business Association, Fraser Valley Métis Association, Rotary Club, Stó:lō Community Futures, University of the Fraser Valley, M̓athxwi First Nation, Semá:th First Nation; Leq’á:mel First Nation and Tourism Abbotsford. The Table meets to share information, amplify each other’s work, and work on solutions to common issues amongst members. The Table Talks newsletter has over 800 recipients.

- **Business Walks to specific areas of Abbotsford.**

Business Walks are a standard economic development tool used to survey a large number of businesses in a specific area such as a historic downtown or an industrial area. They use teams of volunteers to administer a short survey (5-10 minutes), usually over a single day. The City and Abbotsford Downtown Business Association partnered to host a business walk in Historic Downtown Abbotsford in September 2023.

- **Industry-sector Bus Tours.**

Bus tours are an excellent tool for highlighting the contributions that specific sectors (e.g. manufacturing) make to the local economy. They are typically day-long tours of four to five selected local businesses and are usually organized in collaboration with industry associations and business organizations such as the local Chamber of Commerce. Participants typically include local elected officials, media, City staff, industry representatives, business organizations and members of the public. Local examples include the recent Manufacturing bus and Agriculture bus tour.

- **Business visits (on request)**

The Economic Development has an existing program for businesses who would like to invite City staff and elected officials to visit their facility to learn more about their business and issues.

- **Mayor and Council: Business Spotlight Program**

The Mayor and Council Business Spotlight program is a new initiative of the Business Retention and Expansion strategy, designed to build stronger relationships between the City and business community.

This program features monthly, 90-minute visits by Mayor and Council and City Staff to selected businesses in Abbotsford. The goal of these visits is to provide an opportunity for the City to learn more about the businesses and their industry, their experience doing business in Abbotsford, to address potential challenges, and to assist with growth opportunities.

Each month, Economic Development staff will select and arrange a visit to a specific business. These businesses will typically be larger employers, offer unique or innovative products and services, or are looking for assistance with growth or industry-wide challenges. Economic Development staff will provide a briefing note prior to each visit for Mayor and Council that includes background information on the business and a summary of any potential issues or opportunities the business wishes to discuss.

Proposed Business Retention and Expansion Goals and Strategy: Activities, Objectives and Evaluation Metrics

GOAL 3: Continue to strengthen relationships and communications with the business community

- Regular engagement with business-related organizations in the community
- Develop a comprehensive business visitation program
- Establish a set of business benchmarks and BR&E metrics
- Monitor and report on progress of BR&E Strategy

Action Items	Objectives	Metrics
<p>Engage in regular in-person meetings and communications with business organizations in the community</p>	<p>Provide consistent, timely and clear communications with the business community</p>	<p>Economic Development Table meetings</p> <p>Meetings with Chamber, ADBA, Tourism and other business organizations</p> <p>Table Talk Newsletter</p>
<p>Develop a comprehensive business visitation program (e.g. Business Walks, Business Visits, Business Spotlight)</p>	<p>Learn more about issues and opportunities facing businesses</p> <p>Develop deeper relationships with key businesses and sectors</p> <p>Build trust in local government</p>	<p>Business visitations scheduled</p> <p>Business Spotlight visits</p> <p>Council Blog posts</p>
<p>Annual Let’s Talk Business Survey</p>	<p>Benchmark and track progress on BR&E strategy and identify emerging issues</p>	<p>“Business Walk” metrics (Business sentiment, hiring/expansion intentions, etc.)</p>
<p>Work with external partners to create an annual “economic development” event.</p>	<p>Position City as leader in local economic development</p> <p>Provide updates on City strategy and planned activities</p> <p>Champion examples of local entrepreneurship and innovation</p> <p>Provide additional B2B networking opportunities</p> <p>Provide an opportunity for businesses to interact with Mayor and Council and staff</p>	<p>Number of attendees</p> <p>Number of partners</p> <p>Corporate partnerships</p>

Proposed Business Retention and Expansion Goals and Strategy: Activities, Objectives and Evaluation Metrics

GOAL 4: Facilitate collaboration between businesses and education/training providers

- Research employee attraction/retention issues for skilled labour and professionals
- Communicate workforce development needs with government, post-secondaries and training providers
- Create marketing collateral to assist employers with employee recruitment

Action Items	Objectives	Metrics
<p>Host Workforce development panel as part of economic development summit</p> <p>Create lifestyle/employee attraction marketing collateral</p>	<p>Develop and build partnerships with UFV, school district, post-secondary institutes, industry associations and government agencies</p> <p>Identify labour needs and skills training gaps</p> <p>Grow a dynamic talent network that supports and strengthens Abbotsford's business community and economy</p> <p>Highlight affordability, quality of life and local amenities to help recruitment of skilled labour and professionals</p>	<p>Workforce development panel for Economic Development Summit</p> <p>Workforce development plan</p> <p>Marketing plan and collateral created</p> <p>Web metrics</p> <p>Feedback from employers</p>

Conclusion

The City of Abbotsford is committed supporting businesses that have established themselves in Abbotsford, welcoming new investors and businesses, and bolstering the city's economy.

Principle 3: Vibrant and Growing Economy in the City of Abbotsford's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan clearly highlights Council's support of the business community and commitment to developing Abbotsford as a regional hub for creativity and innovation with a fully diversified economy. Specific strategy goals associated the Principle 3 include recognizing the value of innovation, supporting a vibrant and diverse economy, and investing in relationships that facilitate alignment.

The major themes that emerged from engagement sessions with stakeholders, the on-line survey, and focus groups regarding economic development aspirations are in alignment with the overall goals of Council's strategic plan. Businesses are looking for opportunities to engage with the City to work towards accomplishing common goals, for streamlined and efficient municipal processes to support the growth of their businesses, to develop programs and policies that foster economic growth, assistance accessing business assistance and funding opportunities, and for the City to advocate on their behalf to senior levels of government.

Over the next two years (2025-2026), the City of Abbotsford will mobilize this Business Retention and Expansion Strategy Update, and continue working with the business community to ensure local and regional stakeholders remain informed about the status of this Strategy Update's tactics and actions.



City of Abbotsford **Economic Development**

 abbotsford.ca/economicdevelopment

 econdev@abbotsford.ca

 604-864-5586