

# Trendy city areas inspire High River shopping zone

## Former mayor promoting revitalization plan

Sarah McGinnis, Calgary Herald  
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A handful of shoppers stroll past historic stone facades and brightly painted murals in downtown High River.

While quaint shops sprinkle the streets, many stores are empty, as are some of the buildings.

But High River is working to transform the downtown core, and it's looking to trendy Calgary neighborhoods for inspiration.

"Consumers are changing and we need to create a shopping experience to meet their needs," said Dan Campbell, the town's former mayor and the man who is leading the charge to create a business revitalization zone in High River.

Business zones have thrived in Calgary. Neighborhoods such as Kensington and Inglewood are bursting with independent stores, and small businesses are clamoring to set up shop, said Campbell.

Their success stems from working together. By pooling money and resources, the BRZ acts as a spotlight for local businesses and a vehicle to address their concerns, said Campbell.

High River is particularly drawn to the success of Calgary's 4th Street BRZ.

Last year, 120,000 people attended the 4th Street Lilac Festival. The 16th annual event featured live music, diverse cultural restaurants and an upbeat atmosphere designed to make shopping fun.

The festival is the busiest day of the year for stores in the area, said executive director Jennifer Rempel.

"It is a chance to rediscover 4th Street," said Rempel, who added many shops have increased sales for up to two months afterwards.

That's exactly what organizers want to bring to High River, said the town's economic development and tourism officer Scott Kovatch.

There is "an appetite of urban dwellers for rural events and activities. There's a lot of statistical data that says folks from major urban centers are looking for small town rural experiences," said Kovatch.

Rempel, who was contacted when High River first considered creating a BRZ, urged organizers to build on local events such as the Little Britches Rodeo and Parade.

She warned creating a BRZ takes time and considerable effort.

Alberta Municipal Affairs must authorize all BRZ's.

Town council needs to approve the plan and a petition must be signed by 25 per cent of business owners in the proposed district.

Once established, every business within the zone is required to pay an annual fee. The funds are used for communal marketing, beautification projects or to host festivals to attract new customers.

High River has begun distributing its petition. It could take several months for the BRZ to be established, said Campbell.

Organizers are proposing a \$300 yearly fee to each business, which would give the group a \$45,000 annual budget.

"For \$300 you may only be able to purchase one newspaper ad or a couple of radio ads. If you had 150 individuals, you could have a year-long marketing campaign. There's more power in a group," said Kovatch.

The biggest challenge the High River BRZ faces is communication, said Campbell. Representatives from only 25 of the 150 businesses in the proposed zone attended a meeting this week.

Despite the low turnout, many store owners appear receptive to the idea.

"Anything that attracts people downtown will have a benefit on my business either directly or indirectly," said Verna Leman, who owns Hidden Charm Boutique.

Next door at Bat-Sheba Gift & Boutique, proprietor Meg Paulsen says something must be done to make High River better known.

"We have no identity. It's somewhere between western and modern. We need to do something to find an identity so people will want to come here," she said.

Rose Cottage owner Tom Coates likes the idea of a combined effort to address concerns such as increasing customer traffic or improving parking. He's worried, however, the BRZ could become too expensive for some small businesses.

"It always starts out affordable, but the costs could go way up if they have to hire a full-time manager," he said.

There are other threats to downtown businesses if High River doesn't act now, said Becky Webster, owner of Pekisko Trading Company. As the town grows, it becomes more attractive to big box stores.

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