

Business Vitality Initiative (BVI)

Phase One Summary Report

Castor, Alberta

December, 2008

Sponsored by the Paintearth Economic Partnership Society



Financially supported by:





Castor 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.

Larry Davidson, on behalf of the Paintearth Economic Partnership Society, the community sponsor, selected and invited the community participants. These participants were to be 50% business people, 25% local leaders and 25% citizens, representing a diversity of interests, ages and perspectives in the community. On November 13, 2008, twenty-six people attended the Phase 1 session of the BVI in Castor.

Castor is one of four Alberta communities selected to participate in a pilot of the BVI funded by Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD). ARD has partnered with CIEL to deliver the BVI to assist with economic development in rural Alberta.

This report summarizes the Phase 1 or *assessment* phase of the BVI. The phase 1 session used a survey and a focus group to assess the community's small business resources and potential. 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. The date of that session is Thursday, February 5, 2009.

Key Findings

From highest to lowest, section scores out of 100 were as follows: Quality of Life (70), Infrastructure & Business Services (65), Capital & Funding (61), Communication & Connectivity (55), Opportunities & Attitudes (54), Government & Organizations (52), Leadership Teamwork & Networking (49), Markets & Marketing (49), Innovation (43), Education & Training (40), The total score for all sections was 54.

Castor scored equal to or above the 16-community average in five of 10 sections. A particular strength for Castor was its score for the 'Quality of Life' section of 70 (8% above the community average), which was the highest scoring section of the survey. Also notable is that Castor's score for the 'Capital and Funding' and 'Infrastructure and Business Services' sections were much higher than the community average—37% and 21% respectively. The lowest scoring section of the survey was section C, 'Education and Training' which had a score of 40 (7% below the community average).

Participants were asked to give three words to describe their community. The majority of responses were positive. According to respondents, Castor is a *friendly, safe, pretty* community. When participants were asked to identify key strengths, the top responses were *community involvement/spirit, health services, and the caring and co-operative* nature of its citizens.

When participants were asked why they live in Castor, *country lifestyle, work, and family* were mentioned most. When participants were asked to provide directions for improvement for their community, increased community participation and beautification of the town were mentioned most often.

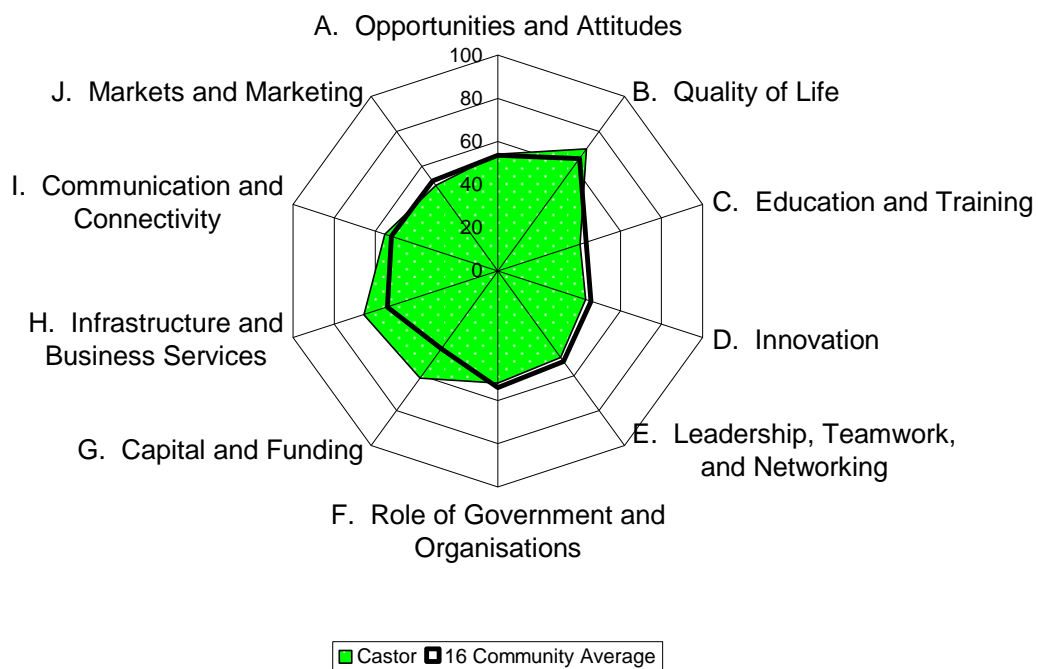
The Assessment

The quantitative 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*, *don't know*.

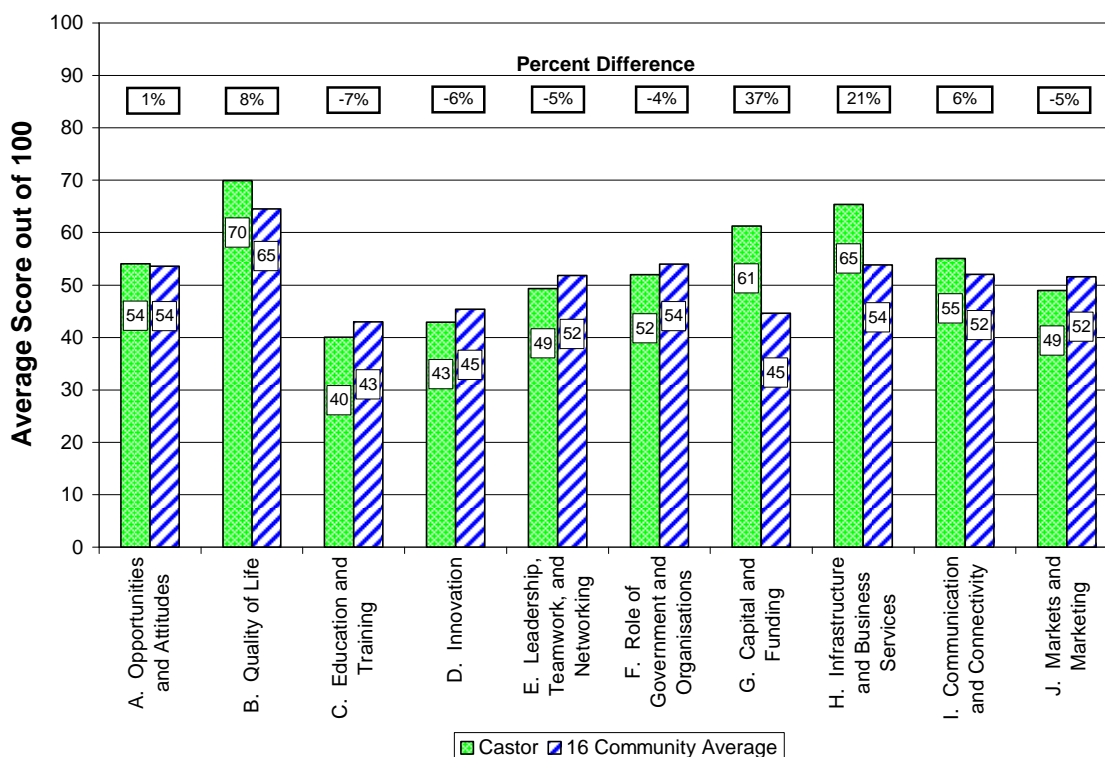
If all respondents *completely agreed* to a positively worded statement, the question score would be 100. If all respondents *completely disagreed* with the statement, the question score would be 0. A neutral response (*neither agree nor disagree*) would be scored as 50. A score over 50 would indicate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

Castor and 16-Community Section Scores

The full report on the Castor BVI consists of 92 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 10 BVI sections. The area circumscribed by Castor's scores is shaded. The darker black line connects the 16-community average scores.



Castor and 16-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 Castor BVI.

Strengths

- Friendly, caring community
- Low cost of living
- Good schools
- Community spirit
- Attractive setting
- Health care
- Agriculture

Improvements Needed

- More businesses
- More jobs to attract young people and young families
- Business association n or chamber
- Better marketing
- Community plan, brand
- Beautify main street

Recommended Short-term Actions

The following are some possible courses of action that the community could undertake to improve business friendliness, derived from feedback and results.

Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategically publicize available business niches & possibilities (Bakery, plumber, web design, etc.) • Opportunity identification forum for young people to identify business, education, social and recreation opportunities • Youth entrepreneurship initiatives (e.g. entrepreneurship in schools, Junior Achievement, etc.)
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main street beautification (also clean up commercial & residential clutter) • E-commerce, business start-up, financing and other basic courses offered • Better, more strategic use of newspaper to communicate Castor events to community and beyond • Apprenticeship options/info sessions
Network- ing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business association or chamber • More social and community events (possibly building on farmers' markets with fair or rodeo, etc.) • Networking sessions amongst businesses, council and others
Admin., Research, Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research adult education demands and online learning possibilities • Business succession initiative (e.g. matchmaking, mentoring – possibly to introduce youth/young families to opportunities)

**On February 5, 2009
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, derived from feedback and results.

Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community leadership program • Develop post-secondary presence in town to increase education, innovation Ongoing physician recruitment/retention program • Business recruitment & retention strategy/program
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and market Castor brand capitalizing on advantages & unique qualities identified in BVI (e.g. cost, safety, schools, health facilities, rec. fees, outdoor recreation, etc.) • Commercial real estate strategy that looks to increasing available land (including recovering contaminated land) and land inventory • Better, more strategic use of newspaper to communicate Castor events to community and beyond
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional networking & cooperation strategy with Coronation and beyond (e.g. working with Coronation Chamber) • Strategy top market goods & services from region co-operatively • Buy local strategy
Research, Admin. and Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop community vision and plan with much local consultation • Twinning Highway 36 • Investigate feasibility of year-round sports facility

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Highest Scoring Questions

Question	Score out of 100		
	Castor	16-Community Average	% Difference
B10. The community is a safe place to live.	96	91	6%
B2. There are quality elementary and secondary schools in the community.	95	79	21%
H4b. Insurance services are easily accessible and affordable.	94	82	15%
H4a. Banking services are easily accessible and affordable.	92	83	11%
B6. The community is physically beautiful, and environmentally safe (i.e. pollution, water quality).	91	89	3%
H2. Parking near core business areas is accessible and affordable.	91	81	13%
I1a. Word of mouth is utilized.	91	90	1%
B11. Successful businesses want to remain in the community.	88	82	8%
B12. Individuals are capable of persevering and being committed to their business, remaining in the community even during hard economic times.	88	70	26%
G3a. Banks are utilized for business needs.	88	79	11%
G3b. Credit Unions are utilized for business needs.	86	77	12%
B1. A quality health care facility is accessible, well serviced and within a reasonable distance.	86	67	27%
I1e. Mobile phone services are accessible and utilized.	86	63	35%
G8d. Revolving Loan Funds (i.e. lines of credit) are accessible to expand or start a business.	85	66	30%
G8f. Loans \$5,000 to \$200,000 are accessible to expand or start a business.	85	70	21%
H5. Existing infrastructure (i.e.. Power, water) is good quality, well maintained, serviced, and modern.	83	71	17%
I1f. Basic Internet Services are accessible and utilized.	83	83	0%
I2. Quality communication services (phone, fax, high speed internet) are affordable to business.	80	72	12%
G8e. Micro Loans (up to \$5,000) are accessible to expand or start a business.	80	75	7%
I1g. High speed Internet services are accessible and utilized.	80	55	45%

Lowest Scoring Questions

Question	Score out of 100		
	Castor	16-Community Average	% Difference
I4d. Train services are available between communities.	0	20	-100%
I4a. Air (commercial) services are available between communities.	1	29	-96%
I3b. Taxi services are accessible and utilized within the community.	3	40	-92%
D7. Skilled and knowledgeable scientists and researchers do academic and/or practical work in my community or region (Not necessarily about the region).	13	26	-52%
I3a. Public transportation services are accessible and utilized within the community.	16	31	-49%
D8. There are formal and informal forums (conferences, workshops) on technology and technology applications	20	26	-25%
C8. A pool of skilled and trained labour is available to local businesses.	23	35	-35%
C1i. University programs are utilized.	26	35	-25%
C1h. College programs are utilized.	26	26	2%
G5. People who are interested in expanding or starting a business are skilled in raising funds	26	27	-4%
J5. The community has a distinctive or unique brand or marketing image	27	44	-39%
J9. Businesses in the community /region jointly market their products and services	28	32	-12%
F8b. Training programs and services assisting business people are utilized.	28	50	-43%
I4b. Air (private) services are available between communities.	28	48	-41%
F8a. Counselling programs and services assisting business people are utilized.	28	48	-42%
A1. There is an up-to-date community vision or plan which reflects the community's values and attitudes and represents all groups within the community.	29	45	-36%
C1a. Business plan development programs are utilized.	30	53	-44%
G4. Business capital is available to anyone committed to a venture, regardless of credit history or any other factors	30	21	46%
I3d. Carpooling system is accessible and utilized within the community.	30	25	20%
C1c. Advanced business skill development programs (i.e. financial planning, marketing, accounting, communication) are utilized.	31	39	-22%

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 100 BVI questions.

Question	Score out of 100		% Diff.
	Castor	16-Community Average	
A2. The community is facing an economic crisis.	45	62	-28%
B7. Young adults (25-34) consider the community a desirable place to live.	50	49	2%
B11. Successful businesses want to remain in the community.	88	82	8%
C7. The education and business communities work together to provide convenient training	33	41	-20%
C11. Citizens are motivated to learn new skills and to develop existing ones.	42	51	-17%
F2. The governing body is committed to recruiting or attracting businesses to the community, and may use strategies or incentives to do so.	59	58	2%
F3. The governing body is committed to help existing businesses or creating new businesses through policy and action.	57	49	16%
G5. People who are interested in expanding or starting a business are skilled in raising funds	26	27	-4%
H1. There is a vibrant, active downtown area or community core.	54	50	7%
J5. The community has a distinctive or unique brand or marketing image	27	44	-39%
J6. People from outside the community see it as a desirable place to live.	65	69	-5%
J8. People prefer to purchase local products and services before those from out-of-area.	54	43	25%