

BC Wildfires 2017 – BCEDA Economic Disaster Recovery Program

Economic recovery is a critical area of focus for recovery as many community leaders have suggested that getting the local economy operational helps to spur community recovery. Without jobs and income, few residents will remain in the affected area. Local businesses need to open their doors as quickly as possible, local workers need access to those facilities, and all of the public services, infrastructure and utilities that help support business activity need to be operational to facilitate the movement of people, goods and services. Local government, utilities, and public safety personnel need to partner with local businesses and their intermediaries to make all of this happen.

What is the Economic Disaster Recovery Program (EDRP)?

The British Columbia Economic Development Association (BCEDA) has activated the Economic Disaster Recovery Program to work with communities impacted by the wildfires. We are fortunate to have such a broad membership of economic developers, local and regional governments, First Nations, Chambers of Commerce, Community Futures, private sector and senior governments.

Many of our members are trained in business retention and expansion; business and investment attraction; workforce development; opportunity identification and performance metrics. Increasingly they are also being trained in the area of business and economic recovery. They work with a range of stakeholders on a daily basis, and are able to align themselves with government, the private and non-profit sectors. As a result, they are the ones that need to be empowered to lead business and economic recovery in their community. They have the ultimate accountability.

It was because of this accountability model that we are preparing a phased approach to assist now and in the immediate future with both a business hotline and then followed up by an economic recovery plan process for the individual impacted communities. The hotline will be the first step in this process.

Background

In 2012, the British Columbia Economic Development Association established the Economic Disaster Recovery Program following the Burns Lake Mill Explosion. With the financial support of the Province of BC, and the assistance of the International Economic Development Council, BCEDA developed a program to send a team in to Burns Lake to work with the community, stakeholders and businesses to develop an economic recovery plan. Following this work, BCEDA then was asked to assist the International Economic Development Council and the US Department of Commerce in refining the US Economic Recovery Framework. BCEDA was the only Canadian participant during a three day planning retreat in Washington, DC.

Following the 2013 Floods in Alberta, BCEDA was asked by the Government of Alberta and Economic Developers Alberta (EDA) to assist in the Economic Recovery process for eleven different communities. Funding was provided to BCEDA to assist in this task and to cover the cost associated with the teams and report development. At the same time we trained EDA to be able to run a similar program if a disaster ever happened again. Using the information and lessons learned in the work following the floods, EDA

then did implement an excellent program following the fires in Fort McMurray. EDA was provided with \$500,000 to implement the Fort McMurray hotline and to send a team in to develop an economic recovery plan (completed 9 months after the wildfires).

While each disaster is unique, the basics are the same. Residents, Businesses and Communities are impacted and the support needs to be given to help them recover. Programs must be developed to meet the immediate needs of the community.

EDRP – Wildfires 2017 Program

The BCEDA Economic Disaster Recovery Program for the fires of 2017 consists of several different components. Each component is being implemented at different times of the disaster (during, following return, during recovery). It should also be noted that as of July 16th that over 60 communities, regional districts and First Nations have been impacted.

Phase 1: Resource Development Using a variety of different tools, BCEDA has developed a list of resources to help businesses during and following the disaster. These resources include Tips to Prepare for Evacuation and a Manual that offers information pertinent to the current situation. This includes information on evacuation centres, support programs for business, insurance, financial assistance from lenders, etc. BCEDA is doing its best to keep this resource updated as programs change or new ones are announced.

Phase 2: Business Hotline In partnership with Fortis BC, BCEDA has established a toll free Business Hotline. The hotline will register the businesses, collect key data on immediate impacts, and additional information that will help the communities prepare for recovery.

The goals and objectives are to:

- Communicate with businesses using a dedicated toll free number for those in the impacted areas;
- Collect updated contact information;
- Collect information on their specific needs after the wildfires;
- Provide resources to help with their identified needs;

The hotline will be marketed through a Province wide Press Release, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the regional and local government websites. We will also place information pieces in the emergency centres for businesses to be made aware of the line. We will utilize the Canadian Red Cross, who we are in communication with, as well as provincial agencies to help circulate information on the hotline. Operators will handle incoming calls, and will be provided with this overview as well as the following:

- Flow chart of how to manage the calls
- Map of the affected areas, including the restricted zones;
- Resource Guide, with details on all aspects of the recovery efforts and resources available to both business owners and individuals (updated as needed);

- Resource guide for those under evacuation alert
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

Training will be provided for each agent on how to use the system developed by BCEDA in partnership with Executive Pulse.

Phase 3: Community and Business Visitation – Economic Opportunity Recovery Teams

This phase is a critical final piece towards recovery. It is also the piece that requires everyone to work together with one ultimate goal – economic recovery. This phase will utilize the findings from the hotline and assistance will need to be extended to more than just those communities evacuated. Several communities have been isolated as a result of the wildfires and as such they have lost the benefit of economic generation that is typical during this time of year.

From what BCEDA has been able to determine with the communities impacted to date by the wildfires, not one (as is not uncommon) have an approved post-disaster economic recovery plan articulating best practices for getting the local economy up and running after such a significant economic disruption. While each community has an approved emergency plan that forms the centerpiece of municipal emergency preparedness and response in BC, department-specific recovery plans are often lacking.

Typically, when disaster strikes, the services of first responders are critical and provide for resident and community safety. Police, wildfire, emergency and military personnel are deployed immediately to restore order and deliver critical resources to the crisis at hand. Immediate efforts appropriately center on the affected individuals and families, buildings and infrastructure.

As many first responders leave and communities begin “returning to normal,” attention must then be given to how the disaster has affected businesses and their ability to compete. How do community leaders create and implement effective economic recovery efforts? How do they best support their local business community? How can they better position themselves to inform external audiences that the community is still a safe to visit and potentially live and invest?

Answers to these questions will become critical to each of the impacted communities in the very near future as they return home and start the recovery process. Once immediate recovery activities are in place, focus needs to turn towards further understanding short, medium and long-term business needs and to creating relevant strategies and tactics that could accelerate economic recovery. Business and economic recovery must begin prior to broader economic development programs such as investment attraction.

Communities affected by disasters move from response to recovery by addressing permanent infrastructure repairs and by rebuilding or repairing homes and to ensuring the needs of the workforce are taken care of. The Province of BC plays a role in working with the workforce in many impacted communities. The role of economic development is to focus on meeting the needs of its business community. This is done by developing a renewal plan to accelerate economic recovery while re-evaluating existing policies and strategies that may be hindering economic recovery efforts.

Specific objectives of the program and the establishment of Economic Opportunity Assessment Teams will include:

- Gathering in-depth information on the current economic situation from the community utilizing a variety of focus groups, stakeholder meetings and one-on-one interviews with stakeholders and the business community;
- Accessing unbiased expertise in disaster recovery as it relates to economic development;
- Better integrating resilience into municipal programs;
- Gathering qualitative information from key community stakeholders and business owners on pre-existing conditions prior to the wildfire, direct and indirect impacts, actions taken to date, and identification of resource gaps/needs;
- Identifying potential opportunities for future action to assist the Municipality with its immediate, short, medium and long term economic recovery efforts.

This formal economic assessment process, dependant on available resources, will be led by BCEDA along with a specifically-recruited Economic Opportunity Recovery Team (EORT), consisting of highly experienced professionals in disaster recovery nationally and internationally.

Collectively, this largely volunteer group will be committed to:

1. Conducting a pre-assessment review of each impacted community, First Nation, or region: historical facts, economics, demographics, socioeconomics, etc.,
2. Participating in an in-person site assessment and stakeholder engagement (timing to be determined, including the length of time in the community). This will be done likely in the fall/winter 2017/2018.
3. Completing a subsequent review of business and stakeholder feedback, identification of key challenges and opportunities, and developing realistic recommendations for economic recovery.
4. Development of a detailed report summarizing the research and outlining each recommendation along with an action plan.