

Community Futures Fraser-Fort George COVID-19 Outreach Program:
Regional Specific Insight: Robson Valley
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The Robson Valley region interviews included 12 businesses in each of the municipalities of McBride and Valemount, and 29 businesses in the regional district area covering the communities of Albreda, Tete Jaune Cache, Mount Robson, Dunster, Croydon, and Dome Creek. Each of the communities in the Robson Valley have different dynamics, foci, and industry strengths. As such, our conversations were with a wide range of businesses: historical general stores, innovative solo entrepreneurs, and large national and international businesses. The diverse business owners included those who have an idea or passion and want to make it a reality; those wanting to expand, grow, and franchise; and those who are content with a business that fits around their desired lifestyle.

“Yeah, I find **I can be as busy as I want** with it, if I promote it. And even if I'm not promoting it, people are still requesting.”

The businesses interviewed were predominantly self-employed micro-businesses (under 5 employees) and the majority self-declared as women-led. Retirement-aged and family-run businesses are also significant contributors to our sample, which cover a wide range of sectors, with many businesses offering cross-sectoral services. The services or goods supplied are largely ‘hyper-local’ with only a few businesses demonstrating reach outside of the valley and a small percentage reaching national or international markets.

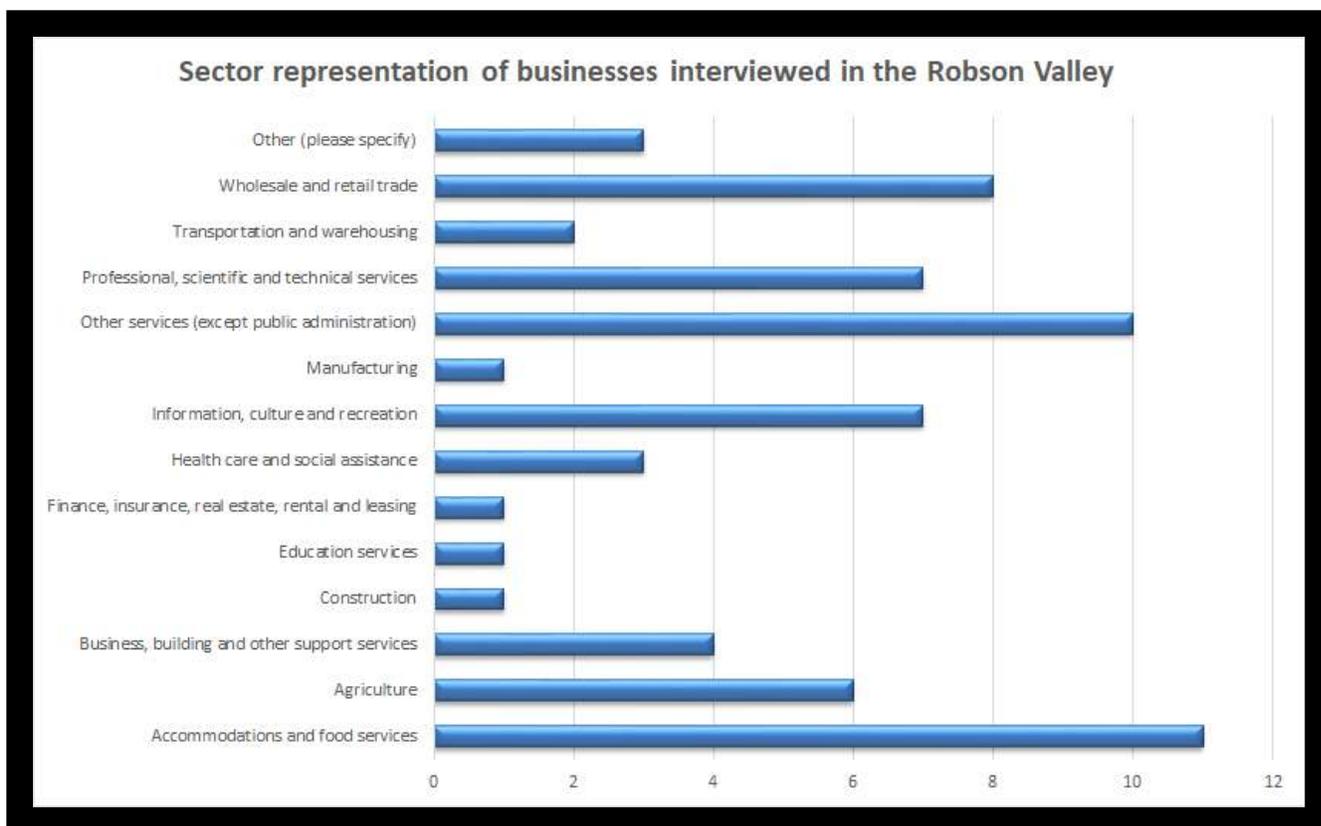


Figure 1: Sector representation of businesses interviewed in the Robson Valley (n=53)

The majority of business owners in the Robson Valley demonstrate a high degree of independence and feel a lot of responsibility for and accountability to their customers, even acknowledging that their business forms part of the community identity and sense of place.¹ This may be due, in part, to strong relationships in small rural communities but can also be attributed to the fact that the average age of the businesses interviewed in the Robson Valley is well over 25 years.

“We are not just a business; our customers see us as a way of life.”

Living in small rural areas does foster independence and an adaptive mindset. Most folks we spoke with are not looking for a handout but rather ways to adapt. Some business owners have been able to leverage different skills for their success and survival through the pandemic.

¹ The term is used in urban and rural studies in relation to place-making and place-attachment of communities to their environment or homeland. Groat, ed., L. (1995). *Giving places meaning: Readings in environmental psychology*. San Diego: Academic Press.

“We [tourist resort] had to unfortunately shut down for the season, **but I was able to make it up doing different things**, by doing other mechanical work. **That's the adaptive part**, right? If you have skills or skilled trades that's your option, because people still need their vehicles

When we asked businesses in the Robson Valley how they were getting on, we heard a strong resiliency of spirit: "When I close the business, it will be **on my own terms**, not because of some invisible organism." But we also heard about the significant impact of COVID-19 on the region, especially in terms of interactions and customer foot-traffic.

“So yeah, so it's severely impacted the way we operate... we just can't, you know, interact with our people. And **the truth is, that's the point of the business, its interacting with people.**”

The figure below provides a visual representation of how Robson Valley businesses say they are doing. Many businesses remain cautiously optimistic about maintaining their business: 42% say they are doing ok and another 17% adopted the attitude that “We are taking it day by day.” However, 21% said they need help and are worried about “**how long can we stay afloat?**” and 4% said that they are closing.

“We are trying to remain hopeful and optimistic and planning to open. But at the same time, **as things change, we change; we try to change with it.**”

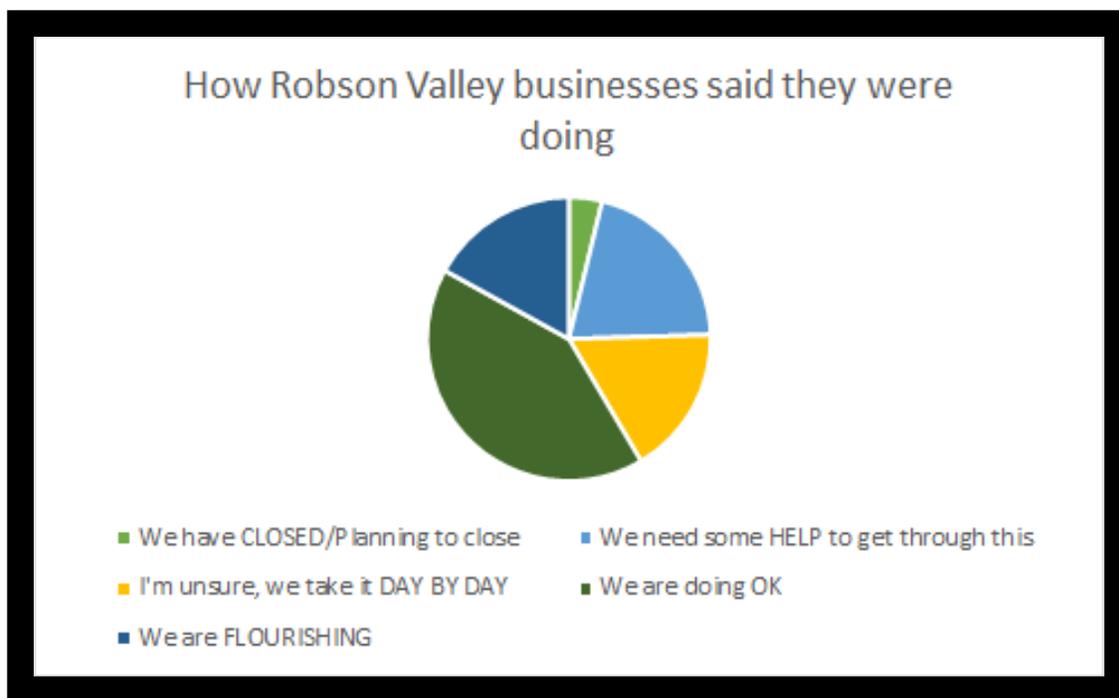


Figure 2: How Robson Valley businesses said they're doing (n=53)

A particular challenge for the region involves the availability and accessibility of supplies. Supplies to rural locations was a pre-existing systemic barrier to business opportunities, and the significant challenges with transportation and supply availability were only exacerbated by COVID-19.

"I don't know, you know, how we're going to meet the needs of getting the supplies we need just to get through the day."

"Turnaround time for orders is out of my control. I can do my part as usual, but I depend on receiving the goods. And where I used to wait 2 days, now it has been as much as a month."

Supply insecurity led to additional financial burden and stress on top of that caused by the upkeep with pandemic protocols and lack of foot-traffic. Backordered stock, delayed deliveries, increased shipping costs, and the need to order in larger volumes (up to 10 times more than normal) meant owners were financially on the hook for stock that might not arrive, could go bad/spoil, or just not sell. Not to mention all the time spent trying to source new suppliers.

"I dug for new suppliers and shipping costs went up...Yeah, for most of the suppliers, not only were you shelling out more on bigger orders each time but then it would cost more to bring it in."

Most businesses said they had some form of risk management plan in place, as far as emergency preparedness was concerned, but they were reflecting on the current systems in place. Taking it day-by-day was the most common approach to helping their business survive the pandemic.

"There's a lot of stuff that's not working right now. We have to let go, we have to stop trying to prop things up and making them stand when we already know they're going to collapse. We have to invest in new way of thinking, like a new future."

A common theme from all businesses was that they were all (whatever the state of their business) looking for direction and communication from trusted and reliable sources. There was an overload of irrelevant information, which caused a great deal of distrust. When asked about the sources of reliable and trusted information, Robson Valley businesses realize there may be benefits to larger memberships and partnerships, when available, but also take a pragmatic approach when it comes to trimming costs in times of trouble.

"Like anybody confused and isolated is very, very, very, very vulnerable... It's hard when you're confused and no longer have trust. So, you have to trust inside."

"You know, there's definitely benefit from being part of an association to get information, that kind of thing. But at the same time, if there is no money, there is no money to pay for those. I mean, I actually have dropped some of my memberships. Because the benefit, or the cost, didn't show" and saying **"a lot of people just like relationships, but they're not making partnerships."**

Independent BC: Small Business and the British Columbia Economy² suggest that *"Locally owned businesses recycle about 3 x more of their revenue back into local economies than national chains"* so it is clear that our local businesses in the Robson Valley are inextricably interdependent to our communities and the health and well-being of our social systems will be adversely affected without them.

² Source: https://ccednet-rcdec.ca/sites/ccednet-rcdec.ca/files/ccednet/pdfs/independant_bc_small_and_the_british_colombia_economy.pdf

It is clear from the sample of businesses interviewed that no one-size-fits-all plan or solution will work in our diverse valley. However, business owners were thinking of a range of practical and holistic responses when asked what might be useful to them to aid recovery. Many were focused on long-term sustainable solutions rather than quick fixes.

“The government should be focusing on planet recovery not status quo recovery.”

And that

“I need to make some updates on the business side of the store. And **that means moving things may be more online having a better online presence**. So, redoing my websites like that has not been touched since I bought the store or about the business. Just at the time, I wasn't thinking it was a priority like I was really focusing on is getting established and putting getting my feet on the ground. And so now I think with, again, the current situation that the world is in, people are buying more online, due to the fact that they maybe don't want or can't be out in public. And so, **I need to be able to offer those options to the clientele**. And that takes a lot of time.”

“And that's what I mean, like we've, **we've relied so much on systems that we forgot, we forgot we can be self-sustainable, we can do this**. And that's what I mean. For me, it's just been I knew that, but **it's now like pretty clear that these systems, all systems are not working anymore as well as they could be.**”

“Well, I think that the government is putting too much pressure on the situation.
There's no trust in relationship and in humans”