

City of Snoqualmie Economic Development Commission

Business Visitation Program

Summary of Initial Interviews- October 18, 2017

In 2017, individual members of the Economic Development Commission of the City of Snoqualmie met and interviewed owners and directors of numerous key businesses in the community as part of a new communications outreach and feedback effort. These interviews collected responses to several important local business climate questions related to the character of each business within the community and elicited specific feedback regarding the City's role and perceived performance in assistance to and promotion of existing businesses. The information obtained from these initial core interviews can be used to inform and begin a formally organized process leading toward regular and expanded interaction and communication between existing businesses and the City of Snoqualmie. The primary goal of the business visitation program is to promote and maximize a mutually beneficial local business climate and thereby further elements of the City's economic development goals.

To provide a cross section of the community, a total of fourteen (14) businesses were selected for this initial group of representative interviews. Four (4) of those interviewed are located in historic downtown Snoqualmie, three (3) are Ridge merchants in the Neighborhood Center, five (5) are in the Business Park, and two (2) are in the surrounding Snoqualmie Ridge area. The size of the fourteen businesses ranged from two (2) to seven hundred (700) employees. Business types included retail, restaurant, grocery, manufacturing, technology, recreation, property management, energy service utility, brewery, and school district.

Compiled Interview Results: Each interviewed business was asked to respond to initial background information, as directly follows, then a series of uniform questions below. The responses to the initial background information are listed alphabetically and then the responses to the uniformly asked questions are condensed to provide a degree of appropriate anonymity.

- Company name?
- Name and position in the company?
- Short History of business in Snoqualmie:
 - Opening date of business?
 - Number of employees?
 - Do you know the number of employees that live in Snoqualmie?
 - Do you know the average distance your employees drive to work?

Corners Gift Shop Peggy Lefley, Owner – opened 2015; 2 employees, 1 in Snoqualmie, 1 from North Bend.

Finaghty's Brian, General Manager – opened 2008; 15 employees, 5 in Snoqualmie, 6 in the Snoqualmie Valley, 4 in Renton, 3 in Issaquah.

HO Sports Company Inc. CJ Vlahovich, SR VP/GM – moved in in 2014; 53 employees, 4 in Snoqualmie, others various with average commute of approximately 15 miles.

Infusion Debbie, Co-owner – opened in 2015; 20 employees, 10 or so in Snoqualmie, 1 in North Bend, 2 from Maple Valley, 1 from Tacoma.

MK Property Services, LLC Mike Kirkland, Broker/Owner – Opened 1990; 15 employees, 4 in Snoqualmie; average commute is 30 miles.

PSE Brian Lenz, Community Service Manager – opened in 1904, moved group here in 2017; 30 employees to grow by an additional 180 by end of year 2017 – most of the employees live in Snoqualmie.

Ridge Market, IGA Jessica Brookman, Store Manager – opened in 2008; 32 to 40 employees, 5 in Snoqualmie; average commute is 12 to 15 miles.

Snoqualmie Falls Brewery & Tap Room Dave Eiffert, Co-Owner, General Manager and President – Opened in 1997; 30 employees, 4 in Snoqualmie/North Bend; average commute is 15 miles, most live south in Maple Valley, Covington, Kent and Auburn.

Snoqualmie Valley School District Joel Aune, Superintendent; Ryan Stokes, Assistant Superintendent, Business Officer, and CFO; Jeff Hogan, Assistant Superintendent, Teaching and Learning – opened in 1947 (serves 7000 students); 700 employees, including part-time, many of the lower paid employees live in the Valley, but most teachers live elsewhere but would prefer to live here and be part of the community, bus drivers need to be able to live here because of the strange hours and split shifts.

Snoqualmie Valley YMCA Nate Smith, Executive Director – opening 2012; 60 to 70 employees, depending upon season, about 40 to 50 live in Snoqualmie or close by.

Spacelabs Tricia White, Senior Director, Global Human Resources – opened in 2013; 350 employees – about 20 live in Snoqualmie.

Technical Glass Products Jeff Razwick, CEO – Opened in 2008; 120 employees, less than 5 live in Snoqualmie, average commute is 15 miles, furthest is Everett and Cle Elum, most employees live in Maple Valley, Kent, and Auburn.

The Club at Snoqualmie Ridge James Hochrine, General Manager – opened in 1999; 75 employees in winter and 140 in summer, less than 3% live in Snoqualmie, from Maple Valley about 40%, Issaquah about 30%, others include Sammamish, Renton, Seattle.

Zetec, Inc. Wayne Wilkinson, General Manager – founded in 1968, moved part of group here from Issaquah approx. 2007; 135 of the Company’s 220 employees work in Snoqualmie.

Question 1: What aspects of Snoqualmie enticed you to bring your business here?

- Open available land, plotted our employees on a map and found that Snoqualmie was best location at the time, reverse commute for most of employees at the time.
- Snoqualmie Ridge did not have a community store at the time and there was a significant opportunity to become that.
- Good building available and a reverse commute.
- Growth, demographics, and opportunities.
- Small town charm, live and work.
- To be located just off the I-90, transport of goods into ports simple and easy, land was at the time reasonable for construction, found Snoqualmie to be centrally located to workforce at the time.
- Real estate opportunity 20 years ago.
- Location: move our operations closer to where employees live or at least provide a reverse commute. This strategy is thought to reduce risk by decentralizing operations and work force. Floor space costs are generally less outside core city areas.
- Newer development, no compete, small biz, hometown feel.
- Opportunity for more bars on the Ridge at the time.
- Attracted to Snoqualmie Ridge because the occupancy costs were significantly less than prior location in Issaquah.

Question 2: How “business friendly” in your company’s opinion is Snoqualmie?

- 9 out of 10. For the most part city employees are friendly and caring about business with the city.
- City welcomes business.
- It feels like there is a lack of support, like the city does not want us to be here.
- Pretty good.
- Overall pleased.
- No concerns.
- Positive atmosphere.
- “Decent” evolving into “better”- used to be a “?” but today it is much better.

- Snoqualmie’s support of the Green Power initiative by winning the major prize; have been helpful and insightful in PSE’s acquisition and planning for the new PSE Tech Center on a tight schedule.
- The city welcomes new business.

Question 3: Can you provide us with some positive aspects of the city for your business?

- Investment in downtown phase 3 improvements over last 6 years, the RR museum and station has been a good source of tourism.
- To a large degree the city is transparent to business members.
- Parking, lighting and surround business.
- This is a really nice community, beautiful surroundings, safe, walkable. Do not let that change to be “just another “commuter town; good public services, especially the Fire Dept.
- Decent ridge main street for lunches and work get togethers.
- Overall, the city is very good to work with; especially Dan Marcinko and Bob Larson.
- Feel of small town, generally feel like we are heard, mayor is friendly.
- Downtown improvements, the city listens to concerns and issues.
- Like the small-town environment, but it has most of the benefits of a metropolitan area nearby.
- Parking will be certainly easier and less costly than Bellevue.
- We continue to have a positive partnership with the City.
- City has done a great job with block party; police do a great job with driving people (bar).
- Would like to continue to foster good relationship with both Police and Fire Departments.

Question 4: Any negative aspects of the city regarding your business?

- The downtown is not visible enough to tourists visiting the falls; problem of visibility of downtown restaurant and the city’s restraint on signage.
- High B&O tax; Sewer and water costs go up most years and now a significant increase with the recent change.
- Single biggest drawback is the traffic situation at I-90 and the Parkway; also, transportation with the Valley lacks coverage; without transportation teenagers tend to loiter at retail businesses and theft is significant.
- ROA fees are high and would like to see more for what we pay (may refer to fees charged by the Ridge Joint Committee, not the Ridge Homeowner’s Association).

- Very sensitive issue, concerned about speaking up in regard to permitting; Perteet is very hard to work with as is the fire department as to code; seems to be they go beyond what is legally required, beyond the law, the environmental code, and the International Business code; end up with costly changes and hard to be able to justify those when they go beyond what is required. Also, some concerns about turnaround time for planning, permits, and inspections, given the amount of fees that are being paid on a big project, and now combined with other big projects in town, should city hire more personnel in permitting?
- Wish the city acted more like a partner, like it was in partnership with business; we don't feel like a partner.
- Water and sewer bill is very high; infrastructure (traffic) getting off the Ridge in particular heading to I-90, getting worse with growth.
- None at this time.
- Sustainability with current resources vs continuous tax increases.
- Could do better job with snow removal.
- No recycling (Ridge business – bar/restaurant) is our #1 complaint.
- Having trouble hiring interns, no place to live, big impact on employee turnover which is costly; minimum wage in Seattle and the lack of public transportation makes it difficult for us to improve our business.

Question 5: Do you have concerns about the future of your business in Snoqualmie?

- Downtown business seems to be seasonal and struggle in winter.
- Not really, but did move part of our operations to another state closer to the product sources.
- Concerns about impact of the new Safeway, may need to rethink our niche, testing new ideas.
- Competition for talent from Seattle mega businesses; there needs to be a solution for the I-90, Highway 18 interchange – waiting until 2026 is not an option for a very congested and dangerous situation.
- Concerns with our ability to hire and retain employees due to long commutes, competition with minimum wage in Seattle, and lack of housing.
- Ability to afford rent is a determining factor.
- Similar concerns of all that have businesses in the region: recruiting and staffing.
- No.
- No.
- Concerns about new complex and rent being ½ the price; Big Star studios being forced out will directly hurt our business (Ridge restaurant bar).

Question 6: Do you have other divisions of the business not located in Snoqualmie?

- Yes.
- Yes, in a way (6).

Question 7: If yes above, do you have plans to move the division here?

- No.
- Does not fit our style.
- No.
- Possible expansion plans.
- No.
- No.
- Current plans for 180 employees at PSE Tech Center in 2017. PSE will continue to monitor its business needs and opportunities.

Question 8: What would help you make that decision? (in above Question 7)

- Expanding would be easier if we felt like we were treated more like a partner; city needs to improve how they handle permitting and fire code issues- overzealous.

Question 9: Are there synergistic companies/suppliers that could relocate to Snoqualmie to make your company more productive/profitable?

- Plans for Riverwalk and further downtown improvements should help downtown businesses.

Question 10: Is your current broadband supplier meeting your data needs?

- Would welcome the competition and hope for lower costs; same response; current supplier is Comcast and an internal network that work well.
- Comcast is, yes.
- Might be a good idea, maybe could partner with others who already have fiber optic (school district).
- We would highly support this, would help attract more high tech to the area and have a positive impact to local businesses already here.
- Fairly well.
- Currently yes, with Comcast.
- Yes.

- Yes.
- Barely.
- Have Comcast, very slow, want to use I-pads to take restaurant orders, but too slow.
- Comcast is an issue as the whole building is Century Tel; don't even have a phone; Cost of living is a major issue, rents are too high.
- Despite the many positives of being in Snoqualmie and excellent broadband service, we are concerned that the permit process seems slow.

Question 11: What could the city do to help you with:

Promoting your business?

- Would like to see the Kiosk idea to help visitors find businesses.
- More Ridge events, community outreach programs for the Ridge.
- More regional advertisements for city events.
- City could do better signage to promote Ridge businesses from Parkway. The highway signs out on parkway are too dark, need solar lights; use banners during PGA events; banners promoting vendors in City.
- City could help with signage including lower cost at the freeway.
- Would like to improve the signage for current location with a new monument sign and hope the process will be relatively easy.

Helping you have more employees to live in Snoqualmie?

- More apartments, more affordable pricing.
- Add affordable housing and improve traffic at I-90.
- Transportation and affordable housing.
- Promote the advantages of living and working locally (include Snoqualmie, North Bend and Fall City in this effort); we are a very large employer here -How can we work together to inform the local community about the types of jobs we have available, for example, we have a continual need for non-exempt labor, both regular and temporary; it would be mutually beneficial to fill needs locally.
- Help with more available and affordable housing; help with better commutes via the I90 interchange; help with public transportation.
- They actually all live here.
- Continue down the path of bringing everyday necessities so families do not need to leave and travel to get day to day needs; like the addition of the Safeway complex.
- More affordable housing available.
- Hard to get employees, too expensive, concerns with new businesses coming in will suck away staff and be harder with recruitment; need more job fairs, very concerned.

- Urgent need to fix the SR18/I-90 interchange. While 15%-18% of employees live locally, nearly 20% of firm's employees live in Maple Valley and 25% in Issaquah.

Make doing business easier in Snoqualmie?

- Better signage.
- Suggest we research B&O rates in other cities and re-consider our pricing, that would help business.
- Lower sewer and utility rates; continue to complete phase 2 of ridge.
- Believe our success is to evolve to fit the need, rather than how easy the city can make it to do business here.
- Off-site meeting space.
- Consider charging nonprofits a lower utilities rate rather than the same one for commercial businesses.
- Generally happy to be here. The areas of improvement we would like to see is if the city was more business friendly and treated businesses more like a partnership/customer of city services; "how can we help each other". Cited some acrimonious dealing with permitting and fire code as being overzealous and cumbersome and going beyond the law, which can be really difficult for business to understand. Certainly, want to comply with the code and the law, but to go beyond, especially when it is material to a business, is hard to understand, doesn't feel like a partnership.
- Fairly good.
- Continue to promote affordable housing in the Valley.
- Not happy that we were TOLD about a big reclaimed water project which would require us not to water the golf course for three weeks during the peak dry season and just prior to the Boeing Classic which is a major event that benefits the city and retail as well; wish we could have discussed it first like a partner and worked together for a mutually acceptable calendar; afraid to speak up on some of these issues because of fear of retaliation on future projects.
- Need to work on rent control (no regulations), can't compete with corporations.
- Disaster planning with the Snoqualmie Fire Department.

Other –

- Meet local public service leaders at least annually, meet each other, understand each other's needs and how/when we might interact; don't wait for an emergency to meet.
- Property management (Ridge) is really bad.

- Need for more hotel choices as we entertain many clients from all over the world, few stay at the Salish, the rest is going to Issaquah. Finding that having the new hotel option on the Ridge will be beneficial for their business and adds convenience for clients not currently being met inside the city.

Question 12: What can the Economic Development Commission do to assist in any aspect of these questions?

- Further promotion of business re-location to the Snoqualmie area; the Downtown Merchants Association is on the right track to help business evolve.
- Circulate the answers to this collection of interviews.
- Referrals, help businesses help one another, collaborations, sharing and hosting demonstrations.
- Technical education that is available locally; would be interested in getting involved with this; could help us develop a good talent pool for us and opportunities for them; supportive of the Snoqualmie Hills project, or something like it; create more of a market for tourism; add one more restaurant; would consider partnering with the Y for fitness options.
- Interchange at I-90 and 18 is the largest concern as added housing and business growth continue to bring more cars and people.
- Continued outreach with a focus on Economic Development of the area with market awareness of the opportunities seen.
- Economic Development Commission, Ridge and Valley need to work together, frustrated this is not vendor driven.
- Finding local employees; are looking forward to the City's upcoming Community Job Fair.

