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Backgrounder

Local Issues Survey #1
May-Jun, 2007

Victoria's Downtown Core

Executive Summary

- ▶ Agency Research Consultants' first quarterly local issues survey about downtown Victoria attracted 295 survey participants.
- ▶ A variety of places to eat, go for coffee, or go for drinks was the greatest strength of the downtown core with an average rating of 8 out of 10. The cleanliness and attractiveness of downtown Victoria received the lowest average score with an average of 5.2 out of 10. Only 23% of survey participants rated this an 8 out of 10 or higher.
- ▶ Concern about property damage and vandalism worried the greatest number of respondents. This item averaged 8.1 out of 10 with 71% of survey participants rating this 8 out of 10 or higher.
- ▶ Fifty-eight percent of non-downtown residents made trips downtown at least once per week with the majority visiting daily. Shopping was the most often cited downtown activity. Of the 84% who mentioned shopping, 59% spent at least \$50 per month in downtown stores. Dining out was also popular with 77% reporting that they dined out downtown. Overall, 34% of the monies spent downtown on a monthly basis were on shopping, while 31% was on dining out.
- ▶ Being harassed by panhandlers was rated as a strong or very strong influencing factor on people's decision to visit downtown by 54% of survey participants. The visibility of street people was also an important factor with 50% of participants indicating this was a strong or very strong factor.
- ▶ One hundred percent of downtown business owners think they have lost customers as a result of empty storefronts and rundown buildings. This was an issue for only 2% of those with businesses located outside of the area. When asked about the effects of street people, crime and panhandling, 58% of downtown business owners incurred additional expenses to deal with this, whereas only 20% of non-downtown business owners stated this was the case. Small sample sizes, however, mean that all results from business owners should be interpreted with caution.

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Introduction

Agency Research Consultants (ARC) launched its first Local Issues Survey in May of 2007 to collect information from residents and business owners on topics of importance to our community. ARC believes there is a need for locally collected accessible information and is working to fill that need through this initiative. The surveys are administered online via the Agency Research Consultants website at www.agencyresearch.ca and promotional support is provided by the Victoria Times Colonist, the Business Examiner, Douglas Magazine and Business Victoria.

Survey Overview

Agency Research Consultants' first online Local Issues Survey explored issues surrounding Victoria's downtown core. Participants rated the strengths of the downtown area as well as their level of concern about a number of factors. Residents were asked about the number of times they frequented the downtown area and rated the extent to which certain issues influenced their decision to come downtown and spend money in the area. Specific questions were also included for those who lived downtown and business owners.

The discussion and tables presented in this report are from a select number of the questions included on the survey. Survey participants were also asked to provide their own comments and ideas regarding the revitalization of Victoria's downtown core. Relevant comments have been provided in text boxes throughout this report. A small sample of additional comments has also been provided in a separate section near the end of this document.

The survey collected opinions from residents and business owners from May 1st to July 4th 2007. A total of 364 persons accessed the survey through www.agencyresearch.ca. Of these, 295 began the survey and 284 provided complete responses. Overall response rates are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: May-Jun 2007 Local Issues Survey Overview

	N	Overall %	Valid %
Accessed the survey	364	100%	
Responded	295	81%	
Completed	284	78%	100%
Provided contact information	208	57%	73%
Requested result summary	216	59%	76%
Agreed to future surveys	173	48%	61%

Strengths and Concerns of Downtown Victoria

Respondents were asked to rate a number of items to indicate whether they felt each was considered a strength of Victoria's downtown area. Overall, respondents believed the greatest strength of the downtown core was the variety of places to eat, go for coffee, or go for drinks. This item received an average rating of 8 out of a possible 10. Interestingly, the lowest scoring item was that downtown Victoria was clean and attractive with an average score of 5.2/10. This has historically been a key element of Victoria's image. Survey results could either mean that this is not important to people or that this image is shifting. Averages and high scores for all items are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Downtown Strengths

	Average	8/10 or Higher (N)	8/10 or Higher (%)	10/10 (%)
Variety of places to eat, go for coffee, or go for drinks	8.0	212	72%	24%
Variety of businesses within walking distance of each other	7.6	175	60%	17%
Ease of transportation into the area	6.4	122	41%	11%
Lots of attractions/ things to do	6.4	103	35%	10%
Available amenities	6.2	99	34%	7%
Unique downtown culture	6.0	98	33%	9%
Vibrant nightlife	5.3	55	19%	4%
Clean and attractive	5.2	69	23%	7%

“Downtown is already vital and exciting. Very few cities can boast such a dynamic, robust and walkable downtown with such a wide variety of retail offerings.”

“There is so much beauty in the city - all the flower baskets, the gorgeous trees, the harbour area, the revitalization of the Market Square area has been very well done - overall it is a very attractive city - with areas needing attention.”

A total of 24 survey participants indicated they lived downtown. Central location played a key role in their decision to locate downtown with 83% of downtown residents rating this as either a strong or very strong factor. Downtown culture and the variety of shops and services were also important (75% rated these items as a strong or very strong influence on their decision). The affordability of living downtown was the least important consideration with 50% of downtown residents indicating this was of none or only slight importance. These results should be interpreted with caution as a result of the limited sample size.

When asked about their concerns regarding downtown, property damage and vandalism was rated highest with an average rating of 8.1 out of 10. Empty storefronts and rundown buildings closely followed this with an average rating of 8.0. Participants were least concerned about items related to slowing in the tourism sector. The lack/loss of major attractions and declining tourism both received an average rating of 6.4 out of 10. Also noteworthy was that almost half of all participants rated the visibility of street people and harassment of patrons/panhandling a full 10 out of 10. Averages and high scores for all items are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Downtown Concerns

	Average	8/10 or Higher (N)	8/10 or Higher (%)	10/10 (%)
Property damage/ vandalism	8.1	209	71%	44%
Empty store fronts/ rundown buildings	8.0	199	68%	37%
Visibility of street people	7.7	196	67%	48%
Harassment of patrons	7.8	196	67%	49%
Lack of parking	6.6	137	47%	23%
Declining tourism to Victoria	6.4	125	43%	19%
Lack/ loss of major attractions	6.4	111	38%	18%

“Deal with crystal meth problem...my car was broken into 5 times last year. I had to have an alarm installed to deter theft.”

“We have only recently retired and are in our early fifties, I can imagine how the seniors and tourists feel if we feel unsafe. We have learned to pick and choose very carefully where we walk.”

“This city seems devoid of direction and vision and is deteriorating. Look at the crumbling 'heritage' buildings, they are beyond reprieve, give up and get on with something worthwhile instead.”

Visiting Downtown

Fifty-eight percent of all survey participants indicated they made trips downtown at least once per week. The majority of these individuals visited downtown on a daily basis. Shopping was a key downtown activity with 84% of all non-downtown residents frequenting shops in the area. Seventy-seven percent indicated they dined out and 62% went out for drinks or coffee in downtown establishments. Of those who shopped downtown, 59% spent more than \$50 per month and 29% spent more than \$100. Sixty-nine percent of downtown diners spent more than \$50 per month and 28% spent more than \$100 each month. Survey respondents collectively reported monthly downtown spending in excess of \$45,000. Results are summarized in tables 4 to 6 below. Figure 1 displays total monthly spending by category.

Table 4: Frequency of Downtown Visits

	N	%
Daily	59	28%
2-3 times per week	35	17%
Once per week	28	13%
2-3 times per month	33	16%
Once per month	22	10%
Less than once per month	34	16%
Never	1	<1%
Total	212	100%

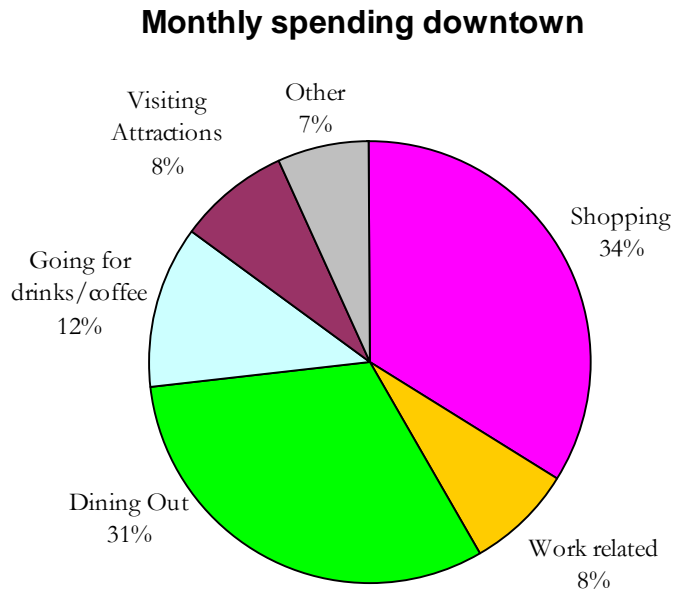
Table 5: Downtown Activities

	N	%
Shopping	177	84%
Dining out	162	77%
Going for drinks/ coffee	130	62%
Visiting attractions	84	40%
Working	63	30%
Other	52	25%

Table 6: Monthly Downtown Spending

	\$50 or more (N)	\$50 or more (%)	\$100 or more (N)	\$100 or more (%)
Shopping	104	59%	52	29%
Dining out	112	69%	46	28%
Going for drinks/coffee	26	20%	6	5%
Visiting attractions	19	23%	4	5%
Working	22	35%	11	17%
Other	19	37%	9	17%

Figure 1: Total monthly spending downtown by category



When asked about the influence of various factors on their decision to visit the downtown area, survey participants stated that harassment by panhandlers was the strongest deterring factor with 54% indicating this was a strong or very strong influence. This was followed closely by a concern over the visibility of the street population with 50% stating this was a strong influencing factor. The complete results to this question are presented in the table below.

Table 7: Factors influencing downtown visits

	Strong & Very Strong Influence (N)	%
Concern about being harassed (e.g. by panhandlers)	112	54%
Concern about the visibility of street people	103	50%
Concern about crime	84	40%
Lack of parking	68	32%
Lack of interesting attractions or things to do	42	20%
Too crowded/noisy	34	16%
Too expensive to eat/shop downtown	27	13%

“Downtown has no charm anymore. It is becoming just like any other downtown area in any other city with chain stores. There is nothing unique about it and this is one of the reasons I rarely go there now.”

“My personal rule is that if I have to run a gauntlet of panhandlers or if I have to step over bodies to get into a business establishment, I won't be patronizing that business. Being downtown after dark is an absolute "no way".”

“Stop increasing metered parking. It's too stressful shopping with a timer. Really decreases my spending potential.”

Business Owners¹

Survey respondents included 57 business owners or managers (19% of the total sample). Of these, 12 were representatives of businesses located in the downtown area. When those who chose to locate outside of downtown were asked about the factors that influenced their decision, the cost of rent was the reason they cited most often (42% of the sample). Full responses to this question are included in Table 8.

Table 8: Factors Influencing the Decisions of Business Owners to Locate Outside of Downtown

	Strong & Very Strong Influence (N)	%
Cost of rent for commercial/office space	19	42%
I wouldn't want to work downtown	14	31%
Lack of parking for customers	13	29%
Concern that the visibility of street people would affect business	12	27%
Concern about the potential for crime (e.g. property damage, vandalism)	12	27%
My customers don't frequent downtown	10	22%
Lack of major attractions/declining tourism	4	9%
Too much competition	4	9%

Owners and managers of all businesses were asked about the influence of a variety of factors. Even though there was only a small sample of downtown businesses, there were sharp differences among the reported effects of these issues when compared to businesses not located downtown. For example, 100% of downtown business owners reported they think they have lost customers as a result of empty storefronts and rundown buildings, while only 2% of businesses outside of the downtown core mentioned this as an effect on their business. Fifty-eight percent of downtown businesses have received complaints from customers about the lack of parking, while this was a concern for only 22% of those outside of downtown. When asked about the effects of street people, crime and panhandling, 58% of downtown business owners have incurred additional expenses as a result, whereas only 20% of non-downtown business owners stated this was the case. Complete results of this are located in table 9, below.

¹ Small sample sizes among this respondent group mean that all data should be interpreted with caution.

Table 9: Effects of various issues on businesses

	Not downtown		Downtown businesses		Overall	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Appearance of empty storefronts/run-down buildings						
Incurring additional expenses	2	4%	2	17%	4	7%
Had to change business practices	2	4%	3	25%	5	9%
Think I have lost customers	1	2%	12	100%	13	23%
Can confirm I have lost customers	2	4%	3	25%	5	9%
Received complaints from customers	4	9%	6	50%	10	18%
Received complaints from staff	1	2%	3	25%	4	7%
Decline in tourism/presence of attractions						
Incurring additional expenses	1	2%	1	8%	2	4%
Had to change business practices	2	4%	3	25%	5	9%
Think I have lost customers	1	2%	2	17%	3	5%
Can confirm I have lost customers	2	4%	2	17%	4	7%
Received complaints from customers	1	2%	1	8%	2	4%
Received complaints from staff	1	2%	1	8%	2	4%
Lack of Parking						
Incurring additional expenses	2	4%	2	17%	4	7%
Had to change business practices	3	7%	4	33%	7	12%
Think I have lost customers	4	9%	2	17%	6	11%
Can confirm I have lost customers	3	7%	2	17%	5	9%
Received complaints from customers	10	22%	7	58%	17	30%
Received complaints from staff	7	16%	5	42%	12	21%
Street people, crime, and panhandling						
Incurring additional expenses	9	20%	7	58%	16	28%
Had to change business practices	9	20%	6	50%	15	26%
Think I have lost customers	5	11%	1	8%	6	11%
Can confirm I have lost customers	4	9%	6	50%	10	18%
Received complaints from customers	7	16%	6	50%	13	23%
Received complaints from staff	4	9%	5	42%	9	16%

“Business should be stepping up to the plate, pressuring government to meaningfully address the problem of homelessness, and finding housing solutions and working towards a more rational and comprehensive approach to drugs and addiction.”

Additional Comments

This is a small selection of the comments that were received from survey participants.

“The most important thing is that we realise there are too many human beings abandoned to poverty and illness in this city. When and only when they are afforded care, housing and judicious medication will our community be healthy. It is that simple.”

“Fill up the vacant store fronts with something, anything. Have any art club or knitting circle or whatever occupy the space. Levy fines to any owner who leaves the space empty for more than one month.”

“Fewer tourists are coming, being taken downtown, because Victoria is in the process, and a very quick process it is, of becoming just another city of high rise buildings and a few 'have been' neighbourhoods.”

“To address the issue of homeless and transient people on the streets of Victoria, we need long term solutions which address underlying issues such as addictions, and a lack of low cost housing in the city. The most important thing that can be done to revitalize downtown is to provide homeless and transient people to access services, ie. employment and drug counselling, health services, etc. so that they have choices other than to congregate in the downtown core.”

“Make Government Street more pedestrian friendly in the summer months - possibly pedestrian only during certain hours (11am - 6pm?)”

“A free or reasonable (\$1) shuttle around downtown could be a real advantage... Parking costs should NOT be increased until something like this is in place.”

“Noise and air pollution from the uncontrolled exponential growth of the floatplane traffic negatively impacts the quality of life of residents, businesses and visitors alike. How do we expect to continue to retain and attract residents and visitors to a downtown overwhelmed by the 10th busiest airport in Canada?”

“Victoria desperately needs to grow up and realize it's full potential - position ourselves for what we really are - an example of a 21st century, contemporary West Coast city and culture. Dump the over-hyped and ridiculous notion of being a little bit of Olde Englande - an outmoded and outdated stereotype which long ago ceased to serve any real purpose. The Empire is dead, let that image of Victoria die along with it.”

“The only answer, in my opinion, is to amalgamate the 13 or so governments and regions into one and then they can afford to hire or elect and pay a manager/mayor who can put the weight of 350,000 people of the whole area behind a clean up.”

Demographics

Tables 10-11 below represent select demographic breakdowns for survey participants among both residents and business owners.

Table 10: Demographics for all survey participants

Gender	N	%
Man	116	39%
Woman	157	53%
No response	22	7%
Age	N	%
Under 24	6	2%
25-34	49	17%
35-44	45	15%
45-54	55	19%
55-64	66	22%
65 or over	54	18%
No response	20	7%

Table 11: Business owners/managers

Number of employees	N	%
1-5	34	60%
6-10	5	9%
11-20	7	12%
21-50	3	5%
51-100	2	4%
101-200	1	2%
Over 200	2	4%
No response	3	5%
Industry	N	%
Technical and professional services	14	25%
Trade (wholesale and retail)	8	14%
Arts and Entertainment services	4	7%
Finance, insurance, and real estate	4	7%
Health care and education services	5	9%
Manufacturing, transportation, and utilities	4	7%
Administration and support services	5	9%
Construction	4	7%
Accommodation and food services	2	4%
Travel and tourism services	4	7%
No response	3	5%

Conclusion

Agency Research Consultants' local issues survey on the downtown core has provided valuable information on the opinions of residents and business owners about social and economic issues that are at the forefront of discussions about the future of Victoria's downtown. This report has summarized our findings on this issue.

Agency Research Consultants is dedicated to providing information on important local issues. Our next local issues survey, on transportation within the CRD, is currently online at www.agencyresearch.ca.

For more information about the survey results contained in this report, or about our upcoming surveys, please contact us at info@agencyresearch.ca or by calling 885-0289.