



BRITISH COLUMBIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Visitor Info Centre Task Force Community Visitor Info Centre Position Paper

November 2, 2004

Known to be in operation as early as March 1867 the British Columbia Chamber of Commerce (the Chamber) was re-established in 1951 with a mandate to promote, support and strengthen the provincial chamber network and the free enterprise system and to take an active leadership role on behalf of its members and the business community by initiating, coordinating and developing programs and policies to be presented to appropriate levels of government and relevant stakeholders.

The Chamber was registered in 1983 under the Society Act of British Columbia as a volunteer, not for profit association, and serves its members as the provincial federation of autonomous community chambers of commerce, boards of trade and selected corporations throughout the province. Its purposes are:

1. to promote, support and strengthen the provincial chamber network and the free enterprise system and democratic principles;
2. to develop programs, in conjunction with members, aimed at creating a high level of economic awareness and maintaining an entrepreneurial spirit at all community, educational and political levels;
3. to monitor legislation at all levels of government, prepare timely response to legislative proposals, and recommend improvement to existing legislation.

The Chamber now represents more than 28,000 businesses and 131 chambers of commerce and boards of trade throughout the province. We truly are "The Voice of BC Business."

Prior to 1986, communities throughout British Columbia operated tourist information booths independently of one another with little or no co-ordination of the centres on a province wide basis.

In 1984, the "Network" concept was recommended in a TIDSA study on information services in BC. The idea was accepted by the Ministry of Tourism, and a task force comprised of government and private sector tourism representatives was struck in 1985 to ratify the recommendations and develop the concept. In the spring of 1986, funding was provided by the Provincial Government to the Ministry of Tourism for the realization of the "Travel Infocentre Network".

Claude Richmond, the Minister of Tourism at the time, invited all tourist information providers from throughout BC to Vancouver for a gala launch of the new program. This was the first time these operators

had ever been brought together as a group. The plan that was unveiled was complex and multi-faceted. It introduced a corporate identity, a logo and colour scheme that was to be applied to all information centre buildings and signs as well as staff uniforms and nametags. There was also a new standardized training program, new highway signage and job creation programs.

This “franchised” system of tourist information outlets came just in time for the province’s biggest tourism industry opportunity – EXPO ’86. It was intended to provide a higher quality of service to the expected increase of visitors and in turn create short and long-term business benefits to the communities that applied to join. Visitors to BC during Expo and beyond would be able to readily identify and find centres that each offered a standardized level of professional and friendly travel advice and assistance.

Initially, the Ministry of Tourism and the BC Chamber of Commerce joined a partnership to create this “Network” of the existing community operated information centres. By 1990, there were 140 Travel Infocentres in British Columbia.

Over the years a variety of changes have been made to the Network program with Membership Criteria, Terms & Conditions evolving over time to what they are today. Logos were changed and some initiatives were added and others were deleted. The annual Network Conference continues to be held each year. The Ministry of Tourism evolved into the crown corporation of Tourism British Columbia. Communications between Tourism BC officials and individual centres speed up as mailings via Canada Post became facsimile transmissions and now e-mail messages, involving the use of an extensive Extranet system. The number of visitors being serviced by the Network has grown exponentially to where 1.55 million visitor parties were assisted in 2003. The title of the Network has changed to the Visitor Info Centre (VIC) Network.

All of these developments have been cutting edge tourism industry advances and British Columbia has thus been recognized throughout North America several times over as a leader in visitor servicing.

Today there are 109 community VICs throughout the province. The organizations that operate them are reporting a variety of challenges, a number that are so daunting they may threaten their continued existence. Some organizations have already closed their centres and others have reverted back to operating as independent tourist booths.

As British Columbia prepares for the next major tourism opportunity for our province – the 2010 Winter and Paralympic Games - it is critical that the original partners of this “Network”, namely the Chamber and Tourism BC, discuss the future of this program. Working as partners, we can work to achieve the future growth targets set for tourism in British Columbia and maintain our reputation as leaders in visitor servicing by striving to strengthen the VIC Network.

The Visitor Info Centre Task Force was formed in February of 2004 and was chaired by BC Chamber of Commerce Board member Craig Hodge and is comprised of BC Chamber Board members, chamber managers, industry reps and independent VIC operators. The task force met with representatives of Tourism BC, independent VIC operators and chamber managers who operate both large and small VICs.

The Chamber has heard, with increasing frequency, concerns raised by its members of the difficulties they face in continuing to operate community VICs in the face of limited budgets and the increasing demands this places on these limited resources. This paper will address these concerns and provide recommendations on how they can best be resolved.

The focus for much of the concern arises from the funding process and sources for VICs, specifically with regards to the timing and uncertainty that surrounds annual funding levels from Tourism BC, municipalities and Human Resource and Skills Development (HRSD). A key component of the concern regarding funding is derived from the lack of clear understanding regarding the evaluation process and the funding criteria utilized by Tourism BC when determining the level of funding to be provided to community VICs on an annual basis.

Demands on the VICs will increase significantly as we move closer to the Olympics and that is one of the reasons the Chamber created the Visitor Info Centre taskforce to look at how VICs can improve their operation.

The goal of the task force was to provide recommendations on ways to improve VICs operation and to allow them to be more sustainable while ensuring they can provide the highest level of service possible to our visitors as we move into some very important years for the tourism industry.

Given our mandate – to represent the interests of our members and to advocate a policy framework that promotes a healthy and vibrant economy in which all British Columbians can grow and prosper – we are pleased to present this position paper as an important part of the BC Chambers ongoing efforts to represent its members.

Tourism Industry in British Columbia

As a commodity BC has all the natural resources, attractions and currency advantages that lend themselves to a flourishing tourism industry. Indeed, tourism is becoming one of the fastest growing sectors of the BC economy. In 2001 tourism was worth \$9.2 billion, with approximately \$1 billion going directly into general revenue¹. Due to a number of unforeseen circumstances such as SARS and 9/11 this figure dropped to \$8.9 billion in 2003².

Despite this drop there is evidence that the tourism sector will enjoy a strong recovery with figures for 2004 expected to again be in the region of \$9.4 billion in revenue³. Further to this the provincial government has publicly stated its aim of doubling provincial government revenue from tourism within the next 10 years.

The BC tourism industry currently accounts for approximately 18,000 businesses offering a wide array of destinations and experiences. The industry directly employs more than 115,000 people; representing 7.2% of the provinces total workforce, an additional 152,000 people are employed in tourism related businesses⁴.

In 2002 tourism surpassed energy as the province's second largest earner of export income after wood products. Indeed tourism accounted for \$5.0 billion of BC's total GDP; this represents an increase of 35.5% (in 1997 constant dollars) over 1991⁵.

¹ Ministry of Small Business and Economic Development -

<http://www.cse.gov.bc.ca/ProgramsAndServices/Tourism/default.htm>

² Tourism British Columbia Three-Year Service Plan 2004/05 – 2006/07

³ Tourism BC Annual Report 2003/4

⁴ BC Stats

⁵ The Value of Tourism – Building Tourism With Insight, February 2003

The 2010 Winter Olympics represents a once in a lifetime opportunity for the tourism industry in BC. In recognition of this fact the provincial government placed Tourism 2010 as one of five key components of the 2010 Olympics economic strategy along with trade and investment, products and services, employment and volunteers and sport and legacy. This will provide unprecedented opportunity for the tourism sector, both up to and beyond the actual games themselves.

A key tool in achieving the goals of doubling tourism revenue to the province, as set out by the provincial government and Tourism BC, will be the services provided by community VICs. These services are essential to any provincial economic development strategy which is focused on ensuring that all regions of the province are able to benefit from the increased tourist volumes that will be generated by the unprecedented exposure associated with the Olympic and Paralympic Games. In addition to the Olympics the province will also experience international exposure and increased visitation through its hosting of the 2006 World Hockey Championships and the 2009 World Police and Firefighter Games.

The principal reason for the success of community VICs is the commitment of sponsoring organizations, primarily chambers of commerce, tourism bureaus and other community organizations throughout BC. Community VICs are managed and the majority of their funding comes from local organizations, primarily chambers of commerce, indeed in many cases chambers contribute close to 50% of operating costs - as demand on VICs increase in the run up to 2010 this situation is simply unsustainable.

Of the 103 full status community VICs in BC, 71 are operated by chambers of commerce, with the remainder operated by destination marketing organizations, regional districts and municipalities, visitor and convention bureaux and historic societies and museums. Additionally, there are 6 associate community VICs (3 of which are chamber operated) which provide a service to visitors but are not eligible for the fee for service funding from Tourism BC as they do not meet the Full Status VIC network criteria as laid out by Tourism BC. Tourism/Visitor Info Booths operate in 22 communities, 8 operated by chambers; they provide basic visitor services but are not corporately identified as VICs and do not receive funding from Tourism BC. As such chambers of commerce are essential in maintaining a VIC network across the province. In addition there are also 4 large provincial gateway VICs which Tourism BC owns and fund on a fee for service basis. These centres operate at key entry points to the province.

The tourism industry and local economies are the major beneficiaries of the services provided by all VICs. While sponsoring organizations understand the value of VICs, both locally and provincially, there is genuine concern over the cost of delivering VIC services at a community level on behalf of, and to the specifications of, Tourism BC. Sponsoring organizations are increasingly considering withdrawing from the program because they can not sustain the expense from limited budgets, particularly as demand requires many VICs to be open year-round.

Tourism Funding

The funding for community VICs is derived from a variety of sources depending on the particular arrangements at each location. These include funding from the sponsoring organization themselves, their local municipalities (although it should be noted that in many cases this money is tied to other services such as economic development or community events and therefore not strictly VIC funding). Many VICs also rely on funding from the federal government's HRSD programs to hire summer students, as well as their own membership dues, fund raising events, racking fees etc. Significant additional funding is also provided to qualifying VICs from Tourism BC through the Fee for Service program.

With this in mind it is perhaps worth taking a moment to look at the funding arrangements for Tourism BC itself. At present the provincial government levies an 8% provincial tax on hotel rooms, until recently Tourism BC received 1.65% of the tax collected with the remaining 6.35% being put into general revenue.

The nature and challenge of the funding structure does mean that Tourism BC's budget will fluctuate from year to year depending on hotel occupancy and room rates. As such we congratulate Tourism BC for their significant efforts to ensure that VIC funding remains constant. Although its revenue dropped last year as tourism declined, Tourism BC did not reduce the level of funding provided to community VICs.

The task force would also like to congratulate the government in heeding the call made by the Chamber's presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services in Campbell River on September 14, 2004 and that of many other organizations by announcing a doubling of Tourism BC's annual budget from \$25 million to \$50 million⁶.

Within the VIC program there are two very distinct types of VICs, the community VIC and the provincial gateway VIC. The funding provided to the gateway VICs is calculated based on their operating costs and their ability to generate significant revenue. In contrast, community VIC funding is based on the past abilities of the operator to meet Tourism BC's set of specifications and standards of service. Therefore community VICs are required to seek out other revenue sources in order to cover the cost of their community VIC while the Gateway operators receive an amount which is in line with their net cost of operation.

In 2003 Tourism BC spent \$652,964 on the 4 provincial gateway VICs (in addition the provincial gateway VICs also generated close to \$600,000 in revenue which is put directly back into the provincial gateway program) and \$1.15 million on the 109 community VICs. The provincial gateway VICs served 256,582 visitor parties and the community VICs served 1,295,220 visitor parties⁷. This works out to an expenditure by Tourism BC of \$2.54 per party at a provincial gateway VIC and .89 per party at a community VIC.

Community VICs are underfunded and Tourism BC's budget will continue to be strained as it requires more money for existing and new Gateway VICs and for marketing leading up to the 2010 Olympics. However there exists an issue which must be addressed when it is realized that the provincial government collects almost \$120 million in hotel tax, of which \$50 million will now go to Tourism BC, yet only approximately \$1 million (slightly less than 1%) will go to the front line community VICs to service the visitor. With so much riding on this golden opportunity it is important that VICs have access to adequate funding to fulfill their role of ensuring BC's tourism industry derives the maximum benefit available from the Olympic opportunity.

Tourism BC has developed two additional revenue source options for VICs - merchandise and the on-line reservation booking program. These additional revenue streams are an underdeveloped resource for many community VICs and could be better utilized by sponsoring organizations as significant additional revenue streams.

⁶ Premier's announcement to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities AGM in Kelowna, September 24, 2004

⁷ Tourism BC - Inform Bulletin, October 2004

British Columbia must invest money to market the province as a travel destination. Specifically, Tourism BC must continue to promote the year round and regional aspects of our tourism industry and most importantly we must have all the VICs operating at their full potential in the years leading up to the Olympics. Some VICs that are normally closed during the winter months should be open at these times, particularly leading up to the Winter Olympics. This will require a bigger commitment to tourism from all levels of Government, the VIC operators and industry stakeholders.

The Task Force recommends that

1. *Following the government's announcement of the doubling of the funds allocated to Tourism BC, Tourism BC now commits to increase the funding allocated to community VICs from \$1.15 million to a minimum of \$3 million dollars.*
2. *Sponsoring organizations should ensure that they fully utilize all revenue sources available to VICs and should work in partnership with Tourism BC on developing additional revenue sources to supplement their budget.*

Evaluation Process for Tourism BC funding

As VICs begin planning on ways in which they can capitalize on the opportunities presented by 2010 they will be looking to develop long term strategic plans to ensure their communities are well placed to reap the full benefits offered by the games. In order for VICs to be able to plan over the long term they require a degree of surety regarding their funding. VICs currently do not have this surety.

Community VICs do not all receive the same amount of funding from Tourism BC. A VICs funding is calculated annually by Tourism BC using a formula that takes into account visitor parties, months of operation, training (i.e. participation in Train the Workplace Trainer/In House Trainer, T/VC registrations received for staff and volunteers) and active participation in incremental revenue generation programs (i.e. SNBC retail product purchases in previous year and/or SNBC reservations made).

While the task force understands the need for a funding formula which reflects the level of visitor numbers and the service levels provided there is an increasing frustration that the information about how the rating is weighted and how a VIC is being assessed is not fully shared with the sponsoring organization.

This is of grave concern as a sponsoring organization does not know from year to year what funds they will receive and a board has no way of knowing if improvements it makes will translate into an increase in the funding it is awarded. For example if an operator spends money to increase the level of staff training and increases it's hours of operation it has no guarantee that this investment will generate an increase in funding from Tourism BC. Also, funding is based on the previous year's performance, so if the VIC operator makes improvements or plans to extend hours of operation any potential increase in revenue won't occur until the following year leaving a gap in their current operating budget.

The issue of uncertainty is exacerbated by the timeframe associated with the announcement of the fee for service allocations from Tourism BC to each community VIC. While the chamber understands and appreciates that it is necessary for Tourism BC to evaluate the VICs performance for the previous year and to prudently prepare their budgets for the year ahead. However, sponsoring organizations increasingly find themselves placed in a situation where they do not know the exact level of funding that will be made available to them from Tourism BC before they are required to finalize their budgets in preparation for the year ahead.

This is particularly problematic as many sponsoring organizations are disproportionately supporting the VIC from their general budgets. Without a clear understanding of the funding level to be received they must make an estimate for the level of funds required from their budget to be allocated to the VIC for the year ahead. This is often accomplished using funds desperately needed for other projects, services or community events.

The Task Force recommends that

1. *Tourism BC work with community VICs to create a more transparent funding formula which would allow VICs a greater degree of certainty regarding funding levels both on a year by year basis and over the longer term. We would like to see written criteria that allows operators to see where they need to improve and what level of funding they can expect if they meet the criteria; and*
2. *Tourism BC should look at ways of providing details of the funding to be allocated to VICs at an earlier stage in the calendar year.*

Municipal and Industry Relations

Funding from municipalities for VICs is considered by many VIC operators to be insufficient and unreliable. It is often provided to the operator on an annual basis with no long term commitment, and it is often seen by the civic government as a donation or grant rather than a partnership agreement. In many cases the service to be provided by the VIC is never clearly defined and these funds are often mixed in with economic development and in some cases community event promotion. Many operators also work on behalf of an entire region but receive no funding from neighbouring districts.

The economic benefit to local communities that are a direct result of a VIC are difficult to measure. As a result there is often a perception by local government and industry operators that VIC centres are just helping tourists passing through town. As a result many municipalities are redirecting these funds to their own economic development offices or in house tourism officers or for local destination promotion.

However, the “Value of the Visitor Info Centre” research carried out by Tourism BC, in partnership with sponsoring organizations, at 10 VICs between 2001 and 2003 has shown that many visitors extend their stay and/or plan a return visit to the region as a result of information and travel counseling received at VICs, creating a valuable economic impact for the local community and for the provincial economy.

VIC	Met or Exceeded Expectation	Learned New Activity or Destination	Extended Stay as a result of VIC	Return trip as result of VIC
2002				
Hope	97%	30%	5%	21%
Kelowna	99%	40%	13%	34%
Kamloops	95%	42%	14%	37%
Coquihalla	91%	6%	3%	19%
Penticton	98%	33%	6%	47%
Queen Charlottes	99%	59%	12%	82%
2003				
Salt Spring	96%	42%	6%	19%
Grand Forks	95%	40%	28%	66%
Pitt Meadows & Maple Ridge	100%	43%	3%	31%
Mt Robson	98%	29%	12%	23%

Table 2 – Visitor Info Centre Studies, Tourism BC

The Task Force recommends that

1. *Sponsoring organizations develop strong partnerships with municipalities that include multi year commitments and a clearly stated understanding of the expectations of both parties. These commitments should be multi-year to allow operators to make long term plans and improvements;*
2. *Tourism BC and the Chamber should conduct a series of presentations to relevant partners and stakeholders such as the BC Chamber AGM, Union of British Columbia Municipalities, Council Of Tourism Association, British Columbia and Yukon Hotel Association and Regional Destination Marketing Organizations on the importance of VICs, their spin off benefits, and the need for long term planning and financing; and*
3. *Sponsoring organizations should pursue the possibility of partnering with Tourism BC on a “Value of the VIC” report to demonstrate the very real benefits their community derives from their VIC.*

Capital Funding

Many VICs have been struggling for years with high operating and staff costs, consequently there has been a significant lack of capital investment in many community VICs throughout the province. This lack of investment is particularly evident when viewed in comparison to the level of capital investment in the 4 Gateway centres funded by Tourism BC. This disparity has meant that services and standards offered between different VICs are not consistent throughout the province; with many unable to offer such services as electronic booking services, RV parking, handicapped washrooms etc. In many VICs very little money has been spent on building improvements, equipment, or signage. As we near the 2010 Olympics it is important that improvements are made to upgrade facilities and to allow all VICs to exceed visitor expectations and develop an unparalleled reputation for excellence.

The government has acknowledged the need for direct investment in tourism in communities throughout BC with its announcement of a one-time grant of \$25 million to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) for investment in their own five-year marketing plan to enhance tourism throughout the province.

This announcement partially addresses a BC Chamber recommendation made to the Select Committee on Finance and Government Services in our pre-budget presentation on September 14, 2004 which called on the government to immediately establish a capital fund for VICs to access to invest in capital improvements in infrastructure to ensure all visitors to the province receive the same standards and services regardless of which VIC they access.

The government announcement states that this money will be local government's to administer and allocate in tourism infrastructure and marketing as they see fit. It is presently unclear whether there will be any more specific criteria laid out for how this money can be utilized to best serve communities throughout the province, or that these funds would be invested in community VICs. The BC Chamber will be working closely with UBCM and municipalities throughout the province to ensure that these funds are utilized for long term benefit and provide a lasting legacy to the community.

The Task Force recommends that

1. *The Chamber and Tourism BC work closely with UBCM and municipalities to ensure that the \$25 million UBCM grant provide capital improvements to community VICs throughout the province and that it is invested in accordance with each community's overall tourism development strategy; and.*

2. *Sponsoring organizations immediately begin working on proposals to be presented to their local municipalities for VIC infrastructure and marketing projects.*

Employment Programs

Labour is the biggest cost of running a VIC and most rely on the Human Resource & Skills Development (HRSD) Student Summer Program to help staff the centres. Over the years changes to HRSD rules and funding cut backs have made it harder for sponsoring organizations to qualify for funding so they can hire summer students. Once again one of the biggest concerns is the uncertainty over funding levels and timing of funding confirmation.

The VIC must decide its hours of operation, and determine its level of staffing by mid February in order to apply for Tourism BC funding. Once it has made this commitment the sponsoring organization applies to HRSD and then waits until May to learn if it will receive funding for staff. If the hiring is not approved by HRSD the sponsoring organization must make up the shortfall. In addition the approval to hire often comes just weeks before summer opening, and in many cases the student with the most suitable skill set may have found work elsewhere. This problem goes beyond just VICs as it affects the entire tourism industry as festival and event organizers, tourism operators and non-profits operators such as community museums all face the same dilemma.

The concerns currently faced by VICs in securing adequate staffing levels were exacerbated by the provincial government when it eliminated its summer student program in 2001. The provincial program was better suited to VICs as tourism ministry staff worked on behalf of the sponsoring organizations to make sure community VICs received priority funding. The elimination of this program meant that sponsoring organizations are now solely reliant on the federal program for its summer student funding.

Today HRSD has its own goals to achieve (such as finding work for street, or at risk youths); as such requests from VICs don't always get fulfilled. Indeed sponsoring organizations are increasingly concerned by the significant regional discrepancies that exist in the funding allocation of the HRSD program.

As important however, is that the HRSD funding which is currently available is strictly for summer students. As BC prepares to host the Winter Olympics and expand all tourism activities to become a world class, year round destination, the program should be expanded to acknowledge that BC is no longer limited to a summer industry. In order for VICs to operate year round it will be necessary for additional funding to be made available from September to May, where demand requires.

VICs that take advantage of the HRSD program often re-hire the same student over two, three or even more years as they benefit from staff members that have gained knowledge and skills over time. A VIC can operate with new students each season as long as there are others with a greater depth of knowledge to supervise and train them. HRSD has now started to discourage this rehiring practice by placing a greater emphasis on providing employment opportunities for different students each year. This will make it increasingly difficult for sponsoring organizations to meet the standards set by Tourism BC.

The Task Force recommends that

1. *The BC and Canadian Chambers, along with Tourism BC lobby the federal Government to;*
 - *remove uncertainty from its program to ensure VICs are adequately staffed year round as justified by seasonal demands and by allowing the rehiring of trained employees for the following season.*

- *give hiring approval no later than April for the summer student program; and*
- 2. *The provincial government re-introduce an student employment program which is focused on the needs of the tourism industry in BC and which provides priority funding to community VICs.*

An Emerging Challenge to VICs

The Ministry of Transportation recently instituted a summer program which involved students performing some maintenance of highway rest stops and some “meet and greets.” While the chamber welcomes initiatives which provide students with opportunities to develop skills and experience during their vacation it quickly became clear that these students spent most of their time servicing visitors and answering their questions. In addition the students also requested information and documentation from the local VIC which was consequently distributed to visitors who stopped in these rest areas.

While efforts to ensure rest areas are well maintained are welcomed, the task force believes that these initiatives are actually counterproductive to the government and Tourism BC’s aim of doubling tourism revenue in the province. By reducing the number of visitor who actually visit a VIC, fewer visitors are exposed to the high level of customer service provided by professional tourism staff and therefore reduces the likelihood of the visitor either extending their stay and/or returning to the province. So while the chamber welcomes the additional rest area maintenance staff, these staff should be trained to direct visitors to visit the local VIC so that information can be provided by professional and well trained VIC staff.

As shown by the “Value of the VIC” research conducted by Tourism BC there is a direct link between visiting a VIC and the chances of visitors extending their stay or planning a return trip. The benefit provided to local communities by the VIC is directly related to the professionalism of the staff who have undergone extensive training. An increase in the type of program outlined above will directly lead to a significant decrease in the number of visits to VICs and the subsequent economic benefits generated for the local community.

Indeed the continuation or expansion of this, or other programs which take away from the importance of the VIC, will lead to a return to the pre-Expo situation that the very VIC network was created to address, that of a variety of poorly trained staff with an unacceptable level of standards and service providing a variety of poorly coordinated services to an increasingly frustrated visitor.

The Task Force recommends that

The BC Chamber work closely with Tourism BC to ensure that all provincial government efforts to improve service to visitors are directed through Tourism BC as the agency responsible for tourism in the province.

VIC Board Representation

The BC Chamber has had a long and constructive working relationship with Tourism BC. Both organizations are committed to ensuring that BC becomes a world class year round destination and that all regions of the province are able to realize the full opportunities provided by the tourism sector.

While Tourism BC has rightly played the lead role in marketing BC as a destination to both domestic and international markets, with emphasis on increasing demand for all tourism products and services in all regions of the province, chambers of commerce have been the lead organization in providing a high standard of service to tourists through their role in community VICs. These complementary roles are

crucial in ensuring that BC continues to grow and attract new visitors while providing a level of service that ensures visitors both extend their stay and return repeatedly to the province.

Tourism BC has recently undergone some fundamental changes in its governance structure that has made it effectively independent of government and even more accountable to the tourism industry. In the past Tourism BC was a part of the ministry of tourism with government appointees on its Board, today it is a Crown corporation that operates under the direction of an industry led board of directors. Within this structure the BC Chamber is invited to nominate candidates for the board but has no vote or designated seat on the board.

While the Chamber believes that the changes outlined above have gone a long way to build a reputation for Tourism BC which is recognized both nationally and internationally, the lack of direct representation for VIC operators on the Board means a key resource for developing and expanding the sector in the province does not have a direct role in creating the strategic direction of the organization.

The Task Force recommends that

VIC operators be given a seat on the board of Tourism BC and that the BC Chamber make that appointment on behalf of the operators.

Conclusion

Research conducted by Tourism BC has shown that VICs play a key role as economic generators for their communities by highlighting the benefit of visiting their community but also to the province by not only encouraging visitors to extend their stay but also by encouraging many visitors to plan a return trip to the province.

We are seeing an increasing understanding that in order for the tourism sector to continue to grow and flourish in the province we will need to work on not only attracting visitors to the province through strategic marketing, but we will also need to ensure that we are able to offer a high level of service to the visitor when they are here.

The recommendations outlined in this report are intended to ensure that VICs throughout the province are able to play a key role in ensuring that all regions are able to benefit from a flourishing tourism industry, particularly in the run up to the 2010 games and beyond. Indeed VICs will play a key role in servicing Olympic visitors and in increasing visitations throughout the province.

A growing tourism industry is a vital component in diversifying local economies and to ensure communities throughout the province are able to grow and prosper. Integral to a growing tourism industry is the ability to attract new visitors to the province. However of equal importance is the ability to provide world class service to complement our world class destination.

The VIC network can meet this challenge if all the stakeholder partners – provincial, federal and local governments, Tourism BC, industry partners and the sponsoring organizations – come together to identify solutions to the issues identified in this task force position paper.