

# Business Retention and Expansion Overview our project



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## **Program Name**

Bridgewater Development Association Business Retention and Expansion Initiative

## **Location of the program**

Bridgewater is located in Lunenburg County on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. The LaHave River runs through the town and is focal point of the town, with retail and service businesses on both sides of the river. The population of Bridgewater is 7,620. Big Box stores and chains such as WalMart, Canadian Tire and Boston Pizza have located just outside the town limits during the past few years which has challenged local retail businesses to find new ways to compete. Residential growth, such as apartment buildings, assisted living, independent living, single and multi-family dwellings have either been constructed or are proposed over the next few years. This growth has been a boost to the economic growth of the town.

On January 10, 2006 the Bridgewater Development Association (BDA) began the process of implementing a BREI initiative in the Bridgewater area in an effort to identify issues and concerns that impede growth and opportunity for businesses in the area with a view to creating a workable Action Plan to address the needs of existing businesses. During the BRE process, a list of some 900 businesses was compiled. These represented businesses in the town of Bridgewater or within a five-kilometer radius. Bridgewater is well known as a service centre for the immediate target population of approximately 47,000 in Lunenburg County. Several notable employers such as Michelin North America (Canada) Inc., Bowater Mersery Paper Co and Resolve Call Centre are located in Bridgewater. South Shore Regional Health and the South Shore Regional School Board are among the largest employers in the town.

## **Objectives**

The Bridgewater Development Association's Business Retention and Expansion Task Force identified the following as objectives for its BRE program:

1. To show existing businesses that they are important to the community.
2. To focus attention on the growth and expansion of our local businesses.
3. To help build community by using the volunteer visitation approach.
4. Identify impediments to business growth and work to eliminate those where possible.
5. Assist local businesses in remaining competitive in a world market.
6. Educate the community on business needs.
7. Recognize and act on growth opportunities.
8. Foster local business to business opportunities.
9. Position local retail businesses to be competitive with Halifax Regional Municipality.
10. Attract and retain youth in our business community.

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11. To build support and understanding for the business community by using the volunteer model.

### **How the BRE program improved our business climate**

Involving 19 people on the Task Force representing the business community, development organizations, Town Council and Education contributed to the feeling of trust by businesses for this BRE Program. Task Force members helped recruit an additional 40 volunteers who participated in the training to become Visitation Volunteers.

The BRE Task Force selected a Volunteer Visitation Coordinator, a Public Relations Coordinator, a Milestone Coordinator and a Business Resources Coordinator. Through our Public Relations Coordinator, we purchased weekly advertising space with Lighthouse Publishing in the local newspaper, the Bulletin. This advertising featured two Task Force members for each advertisement and gave the public and business community advance notice that a visitation volunteer would be contacting businesses to set up an appointment to carry out a survey. One of our advertisements featured a business who had been interviewed early on in the process and he gave a testimonial about the program and encouraged other businesses to agree to be interviewed. Another advertisement recognized the volunteers and showed a group photo of many of the volunteers taken during one of the volunteer training sessions. Advertisements also directed readers to the Bridgewater Development Association's website which contained special sections about the BRE program, photos and information about each of the Task Force members.

Three training sessions were held for volunteers preparing to interview businesses. Volunteers, many from the business community, were paired up as two volunteers visited each business. Public presentations about the progress of the BRE program were made to the Bridgewater and Area Chamber of Commerce and to televised meetings of the Bridgewater Town Council. Several news articles were carried in the local newspaper about the BRE program. Updates of the progress of the program were given each month to the thirteen board members of the Bridgewater Development Association. A number of updates were circulated by the Bridgewater and Area Chamber of Commerce to their membership network. Most community and business development organizations in the area were involved on the task force or as visitation volunteers. They in turn kept their respective boards and superiors up to date with the BRE program.

With this systematic approach to keeping the community at large, the business community and organizations informed, and the involvement of so many volunteers, a positive buzz was created in and around the community about the goals of the BRE program and its potential benefit to the community.

Following the compilation of the results from the 82 business surveys completed, a Taking Action on Business Retention and Expansion Workshop was held to work on an Action Plan resulting from the BRE program. Thirty-seven people from the business community, visitation volunteers and development organizations participated. A Roll Out of the Business Retention and Expansion Action Plan was held in the local movie theatre. This event was carefully and very

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professionally organized and presented. It attracted 135 people on a Saturday morning. During this event, twenty additional volunteers signed up to help with the implementation of the BRE Action Plan.

The provincial newspaper, local newspaper and the regional radio station covered the story of this event.

All of the above has created a confidence in the area by the business community. Businesses have become involved in the program through the task force, visitation volunteers and by being interviewed. More businesses have asked to become involved in helping implement the longer-term plan. During the past year, much development and growth has begun and continues in the Bridgewater area. We believe that the BRE program has helped instill confidence in the area. While the BRE program has not been the only motivator, it has helped. Over the past few weeks since the Roll Out of the BRE Action Plan, it is common to hear people in neighbouring communities say that "Lots of positive things and growth are happening in Bridgewater". The BRE program has certainly contributed to this.

The foundation has now been created to ensure that Implementation of the Action Plan gets off to a good start. Each day since the February 10, 2007 Roll of the Action Plan, we have people asking to help. Wow! This is an enviable position to be in for any community.

### **Special and Unique features of this program**

The Task Force created a plan and timelines for carrying out this phase of the BRE program. The timelines plan is attached. We followed the timelines and the BREI program very closely. The commitment by volunteers on the task force, the leadership team and the visitation volunteers was infectious, professional and ensured that positive outcomes were happening throughout the program. Community and business members were talking about the program throughout the whole process. Businesses were welcoming in agreeing to set appointments for the 1.5 to 2 hour survey.

Our Volunteer Visitation Coordinator did a very professional job of recruiting, training and scheduling volunteers. Business members on the Task Force also recruited co-workers as visitation volunteers. A very detailed volunteer guideline package /binder was prepared by the coordinator and served to be a useful tool in making the project very professional. Each volunteer was issued a supply a business cards to leave with businesses. The training session was detailed yet concise and very professionally delivered by the Visitation Volunteer Coordinator. A clickable highlighter, with the caption, "Thank you from BRE volunteers" and the name and contact for the project were given to volunteers for themselves and to give to the businesses they interviewed.

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Promotion and advertising in the local media made the community aware of the BREI Program and kept everyone informed. A special section was set up on the BDA website at [www.smartbridgewater.ca](http://www.smartbridgewater.ca) to keep businesses, the public and volunteers up to date.

Task Force members, under the direction of the Business Resources Coordinator, identified Red Flag or emergency issues and dealt with them within days and weeks of the interviews. Data collected has been input into a data collection tool developed by the BDA for this project. A chart or diagram has been prepared for each of the responses to questions on the business questionnaire. On December 15, 2006, a Taking Action on Business Retention and Expansion four-hour workshop was attended by 37 people. The workshop was open to businesses that had been interviewed, Task Force members, Bridgewater Development Association members, visitation volunteers and the general public and development organizations. A cross-section of this group attended. The purpose of the Taking Action on BRE workshop was to identify what should be included in an Action Plan based upon responses by businesses to the questionnaire. Fred Morley, President, BREI (Business Retention and Expansion International) addressed the workshop and indicated that he was very impressed with progress of this BRE initiative.

The BDA has one staff member, Ida Scott, who is BREI certified and who led this project. However, the Task Force volunteers and the visitation volunteers are the ones who made this project. The interest, enthusiasm, dedication, quality and quantity of work, which these volunteers did, was simply amazing. The involvement of so many people spread throughout the community and the promotion created a buzz within the community and brought a positive focus on local businesses.

The Task Force members have had many very productive meetings through the past year. Following the Taking Action workshop, Task Force members prepared an Action Plan for implementing actions recommended by businesses during the BRE survey process. On February 10, 2007 a Roll Out the findings and an Action Plan.

The Roll Out was held in the Empire Theatre, Bridgewater. During the event, attended by 135 people, we showcased up to five businesses and the BREI President through video clips on the Empire Theatre screen as an example of some of the business successes, to thank volunteers, profile the work of development organizations and most importantly Roll Out an Action Plan which has been determined to be achievable and for which we have confirmed participants for implementation of the plan. A flash presentation presented on the big screen outlined the action plan. Several Task Force members delivered portions of the Action Plan which were interspersed with the business video clips. All of the community and development organizations were given a short time to give a snapshot overview of the roll of their organization and they also had information booths set up. The Roll Out event was professionally filmed. The flash presentation and business video clips as well as the filming of the event are being edited for CD or DVD and will be used as a resource for the implementing the Action Plan and for promoting businesses in the area on the BDA website. Our hope was realized in that this very professional and



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memorable Roll Out has moved participants to support and help with the implementation of the Plan.

**How our program would apply to other communities**

Some of the components of our BRE program which can apply to other communities are:

1. The systematic approach we used to build community, to interest businesses and to deliver a very professional program on time and as promised is worth transferring to other communities.
2. Involve people on the Task Force who are willing to work toward the goals of the program and not their own agendas.
3. Having people on the task force willing to do the work and not just talk about it. We identified doers.
4. Select people for the Task Force who have credibility within the community.
5. Prepare timelines and adhere to those as close as possible.
6. Have well planned and run Task Force meetings.
7. Hold well organized and efficient volunteer training sessions.
8. Show this as a professional project all the way.
9. Be consistent in the approach to the delivery of the program.
10. Do what you promise every step of the way.
11. Respect and thank your volunteers in as many ways as is possible from start to finish of the project. We continually thanked volunteers throughout the program. During the Roll Out event at Empire Theatre, we showed photos of volunteers during the training sessions and the Taking Action Workshop. Each of their names was projected on the theatre screen and each was presented with a framed appreciation certificate which was presented during the Roll Out by Fred Morely, BREI President and Howie MacKenzie, Bridgewater Development Association Chairperson.
12. Thank businesses for their participation. Make them feel important. Our volunteers thanked them, we gave each business being interviewed a small gift and we publicly thanked businesses through a newspaper advertisement. Names of businesses who participated in the survey were shown on the theatre screen during the Roll Out event.
13. Involve as many people from the business community as possible.

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14. Involve as many community and business development organizations as possible.
15. Keep everyone informed throughout the process.
16. Be open to ideas and suggestions but stay the course to meet the objectives set out by the Task Force.
17. Remember why you are doing this program. Keep the retention and expansion of existing businesses the focus.
18. Continue the implementation phase with the same professionalism and dedication as the identification phase.
19. Again, deliver as promised.