

COUNCIL REPORT

To: Mayor and Council

From: Administration

Date: February 6, 2024

Subject: Visitor Centre Caboose Operations 2024

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Council directs staff as to next steps.

BACKGROUND:

At the Regular Meeting of January 22, 2024, Council received a draft Visitor Services Agreement for consideration for the operations of the Caboose Visitor Centre and in-town Visitor Centre located at the Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce. The proposed budget was \$43,000 and would see the Caboose Visitor Centre being open 8 am – 6 pm, 7 days a week, from mid-May to mid-September, and the in-town Visitor Centre being open during regular business hours Monday – Friday year-round. In addition, the Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce had indicated they had applied for Canada Summer Jobs funding through the Federal Government with the hopes of using it to staff the in-town Visitor Centre on the weekends and to host pop-up displays at local events.

Council requested a report back about whether it would be possible to open the in-town Visitor Centre on the weekends whether the Canada Summer Jobs grant funding was approved or not. The following are the options discussed with the Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce and have been separated into two categories – those that require further funding and those that do not:

Options that require additional funding:

- 1) In addition to regular Caboose operations, open the Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce office 8 hours a day both Saturday and Sunday. This option would require an increase of budget, which is estimated as follows:
 - a. Staffing = 16 hrs. x \$18/hr. x 20 weeks = \$5,760
 - b. Admin/Supplies = \$100 / month = \$400
 - c. Total = \$6,160
 - d. Total Service Agreement Budget: \$49,160

- 2) In addition to regular Caboose operations, open the Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce office at minimum 8 hours a week either Saturday or Sunday (or split between the two) from mid-May to mid-September. The estimated budget required would be \$3,080. Total Service Agreement Budget would be \$46,080.
- 3) Leave the agreement as is. District look at applying to South Peace Mackenzie Trust, and others for the proposed in-town visitor centre operations on weekends. Maximum \$3,080 would be required as an application contribution. The total Service Agreement Budget would be \$46,080.

Options that do not require additional funding:

- 4) Reduce the hours at the Caboose (Example: Open 10 – 4 Monday – Thursday, regular hours on Friday – Sunday) and reallocate 16 hours to the Chamber Office on Saturdays and Sundays.
- 5) Reduce the hours at the Caboose (Ex. Open 9 – 5 Monday – Thursday, regular hours on Fridays-Sunday) and reallocate 8 hours to the Chamber Office on Saturdays and/or Sundays.
- 6) Do not reduce Caboose hours and find other savings to use as a contribution towards grant applications to operate in-town visitor centre on Saturdays and/or Sundays.
- 7) Leave the agreement and operations as is. Open the in-town visitor centre on the weekends only if the Canada Summer Jobs application is successful.

Destination BC Grant Requirements

Staff mentioned during the last meeting that there may be requirements by Destination BC for operations at the Caboose. After discussion with their team, in order to receive the \$15,000 grant from Destination BC, the District is required to provide visitor services for a minimum of 660 hours / year. The Caboose has historically been operated 10 hours per day, 7 days per week, from Mid-May to Mid-September, which exceeds the minimum annual hours of operation for the grant. Representatives at Destination BC have said the hours can be split however the District chooses between the Caboose and the In-town Visitor Centre with no implications with the grant.

Visitor Statistics

Staff have pulled the last two years visitor data which represent relatively normal travel years since the pandemic. The decrease in visitation from 2023 to 2022 is considered to be attributed to the wildfire activity in the North East of BC this past summer. Visitor numbers are returning closer to where they were pre-pandemic, between 7,000-9,000 visitors per season.

| Year | # Visitors to Caboose | # Visitors turned towards Mackenzie | # Visitors to In-Town VIC |
|------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2023 | 5,954 | 177 | 428 |
| 2022 | 7,774 | 293 | 753 |

Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce

The Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce has indicated that they would not recommend reducing the hours or closing the Caboose to accommodate weekend in-town service. They shared that the Caboose has a steady flow of visitors throughout the week, and they feel it would be a detriment to the travelling public and to Mackenzie if we missed opportunities to share information with the travelers or encourage them to turn into Mackenzie.

As seen with many organizations in the community, the Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce has also indicated that it has been a challenge in some years to recruit staff to work at the Caboose Visitor Centre. They are hopeful that the in-town weekend operations will be easier to recruit and have heard anecdotally that there is interest in the community for work like this.

District Visitor Information Project

To compliment visitor centre operations, staff are currently working on ways to have hard copy visitor information available year-round throughout the community. Currently, a new visitor guide and community/trail maps are nearing completion with the intentions of making them available and marketed not only online, but also at any interested local business or organization for tourists (i.e.. maps and guides on display at hotels, restaurants, the mall, museum, arts centre, rec centre, with event hosts etc.).

It is important to note that even with funding available, there is no guarantee that staff will be available and alternative marketing and information sharing efforts should still be continued whether the in-town visitor centre is open or not on the weekends.

Conclusion

There are a number of options available to provide visitor information services on the weekends in Mackenzie. Based on the information discussed, upcoming projects, and the budget constraints the District is under, staff recommend choosing any of the options that do not propose an increase to the 2024 budget.

BUDGETARY IMPACT:

To proceed with options 1 - 3, staff would first look to find cost savings elsewhere in the General Government Operating Budget to offset, however, if not possible, the additional funding would be collected through a property tax increase.



COUNCIL PRIORITIES:

Economic Vitality

- The District is a leader on efforts aimed at diversifying the community's economy, supporting local businesses, and attracting new investment to the community. Diversification, a strong business sector and new investment are key to our economic vitality.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Emily Kaehn, Director of Corporate Services

Reviewed By: Corporate and Financial Services

Approved By: Chief Administrative Officer