



British Columbia
Social Procurement Initiative

Local Stories: Procurement for Community Well Being

CONNECTING WITH SOCIAL VALUE SUPPLIERS

COWICHAN VALLEY REGIONAL DISTRICT

“We are hoping social procurement will take the dollars we are spending and make them go further in terms of community benefits. It aligns with our corporate strategy to increase the level of economic resiliency , security and prosperity for residents of the communities we serve.”

Contributor:
Erin Annis

Procurement Manager,
Cowichan Valley
Regional District

LOCATION:
Cowichan Valley
Regional District

POPULATION:
83,739 (2016)

PROJECT:
Request for
Information
(Social Value
Vendor
Directory)



REQUEST FOR INFORMATION FOR SOCIAL VALUE VENDORS (RFI)



The Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) is comprised of nine electoral areas and four municipalities, including the Town of Lake Cowichan, the Town of Ladysmith, the City of Duncan, and the Municipality of North Cowichan. According to the 2016 census the region has a population of 83,739.

Through the Regional District's corporate purchasing card program, staff may conduct a variety of discretionary buying below a policy threshold of \$5,000. Annual purchasing card expenditures through this program are approximately \$1.5 million. Within this lower value, discretionary, purchasing the Regional District has identified the opportunity to incorporate social procurement considerations by aligning their purchasing card spending with suppliers who have social or environmental values within their operations.

Incorporating social procurement into this type of spending not only creates small wins that can add up quickly in terms of community benefits, but it also helps increase awareness amongst suppliers in the community about social procurement and the opportunity to do business with government.

To support staff in identifying suppliers with social or environmental values, the Regional District worked with the BC SPI team to develop a questionnaire to gather information about how suppliers are incorporating these values into their business operations

“As a local government spending money it is important for us to be mindful of how those dollars are being spent and to broaden our definition of what has traditionally been considered best value. Through social procurement we are able to say that best value includes social and environmental factors, not just price and quality.”

The responses received could be matched with overall purchasing needs and contribute to the creation of a database that staff could access when making purchasing card or other lower value discretionary purchasing decisions.

With respondents' permission, details from the database could also be shared across the region with other BC SPI members, providing potential business opportunities with governments and purchasers.

Additionally, building this early-stage relationship with social value suppliers and introducing them to the systems and processes used by the Regional District helps to build awareness and potential opportunities to respond to and deliver on larger contract opportunities in the future.

SOCIAL PROCUREMENT

The Regional District joined the British Columbia Social Procurement Initiative (BCSPI) in 2018 and has trialed social procurement in a number of pilot projects.

Developing a procurement policy to promote social equity is an action under objective #1 of the Regional District's 2020-2022 Strategic Plan to support increasing the levels of economic resiliency, security, and prosperity for residents of the Cowichan Region.



Credit: Tourism Cowichan

PROCUREMENT PROCESS

The Regional District issued a Request for Information (RFI) in the form of a fillable PDF template. This was adapted from an existing BCSPI template to incorporate specific social procurement objectives and focuses identified as a priority for the Regional District. The template was split into five main parts:

- **General business information and overview:** Collection of generic information about each respondent, including business name and location, general contact information and incorporation type.
- **Goods and services provided:** Collection information about industry sector and types of goods or services provided.
- **Communities served:** Specification of the communities and regions served by the respondents' business or organization.
- **Ownership & certifications:** Whether respondents' operations were majority owned by equity-deserving groups. This section also allowed respondents to share any certifications held. For example, fair trade, living wage or B-Corp.
- **Social procurement principles or practices:** Collection of information about the respondent's social and environmental values, with the following focus areas:
 - Diverse employment policies and practices
 - Training and apprenticeship opportunities
 - Supply chain considerations
 - Other community benefits

	Social Procurement Principles or Practices	Yes	No	N/A	Describe where applicable
Diverse Employment policies and practices					
1	Does your enterprise work with employment support services within the communities you operate?				<i>Answer prompt: identify the employment support services that you engage with to address workplace needs</i>
2a	Does your enterprise employ people who are known to face barriers to employment?				<i>Answer prompt: Describe</i>
2b	Does your enterprise have policies and/or stated objectives that guide the practice of hiring people known to face barriers to employment?				<i>Answer prompt: Outline your HR policy or practices that promotes and supports inclusive hiring and employment practices</i>

The RFI and instructions on how to submit a response were posted on the Regional District's purchasing portal and on the BCSPI website. In order to raise awareness and generate interest, BCSPI worked with Regional District staff and a network of local Chambers of Commerce and economic development organizations to deliver an information session for respondents. The information session was designed to share more about the RFI process and the Regional District's social procurement objectives. BCSPI also provided additional marketing support through its newsletter and social media channels and municipalities within the Regional District shared the opportunity throughout their communities. Using the resources available through the Regional District's BCSPI membership meant that the monetary and resource cost of the RFI process remained low.

“We’ve raised awareness internally about broadening the definition of best value. Now we are starting to see staff looking for social value and commenting on social impact opportunities within their procurement projects.”

OUTCOMES

The Regional District received nine submissions to their first RFI process. Although this number may not initially seem significant, the practice contributed towards raising staff and the local community's awareness of the Regional District's social procurement objectives, and is therefore being considered a success.

The Regional District is planning further RFI releases in the future to continue building their social value supplier database and promoting the values of social procurement to its staff and the community. Social procurement is a new concept in the region and the RFI process complements the Regional District's piloting of social value in larger tender opportunities as they begin to introduce these new practices within their organization and to suppliers in the region.



LESSONS LEARNED

- The COVID-19 pandemic has made engaging with suppliers more challenging than it otherwise would be. The RFI process had to be conducted virtually when ideally the Regional District would have preferred to hold an in-person event or meetings to promote the opportunity.
- Even though a potential revenue stream from government could provide valuable support during tougher economic times, smaller local businesses do not traditionally consider doing business with government as an opportunity and further education and awareness-raising is required.
- The Regional District found that using a social value questionnaire-based approach in both the RFI process and also in other tender documents has led to better quality responses. This approach allows respondents to answer pre-determined questions and provide a short description about their values. It helps them to understand what the Regional District is seeking in terms of social and environmental value, and makes social value criteria easier to respond to for smaller local suppliers who are often already contributing benefits to the community but not necessarily sharing this information.

ADVICE TO OTHERS

- **Education and communication is the key to success:** Awareness raising and storytelling about social procurement are required both internally within an organization and externally in the community. As the Regional District and other BCSPi members in the region carry out more pilots and begin to include social procurement considerations in policy, this will provide ongoing educational opportunities and begin to create a larger culture shift towards true best value purchasing that creates not only economic value but also community benefits.
- Governments can review their spending to see where opportunities exist and focus outreach and engagement efforts in those areas where they can create meaningful impact. Try to connect with potential suppliers directly to discuss valid opportunities. Only share things you're actually intending to purchase with the supplier community.

Credit: Tourism Cowichan



“Be patient and flexible. It’s a journey, not a sprint. Keep learning and trying, not everything you do is going to succeed but eventually, you’ll find something that lands - and it may not always be what you expected!”

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