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Re-Imagining Banff: Poll data in support of transformation

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Reimagining Banff: As Car Free with the Eco-Transit Hub

Industry presentation: Case Study

The purpose of this industry-focussed abstract is to present data from a national polling and local Banff engagement that supports a complex transformative initiative presently under way in Banff (Banff National Park and the Town of Banff) focussed on pivoting the destination toward a car free public transit low carbon emission destination. Banff National Park and the Town of Banff have existed as Canadian cultural and touristic icons for over one hundred years. Banff's location nearby to Calgary a city of 1.3 million and along the TransCanada highway means it has received high visitation throughout its history. Today it receives about 4 million visitors a year, the highest of any national park in Canada. Its regional, national and international popularity means it has struggled with balancing ecological integrity and human use to a degree that most other national parks will never experience. A key aspect of human use and arguably its most problematic is the accommodation of vehicle use to and within the park and townsite. The challenge of balancing human use and ecological integrity has long been an issue for Banff. The issue received light and clarity with the 1996 Banff Bow Valley Study which issued just over 400 recommendations to restore Banff to a higher degree of ecological integrity. Since then visitation has increased and while many of the recommendations have been implemented critics claim the situation has really not changed much at all.

The Context

Visitation for Banff in 2018 was 4.2 million and it is projected to increase to 5.3 million by 2035. There are about 24,000 vehicles a day in Banff on average which increases to 34,000 during peak periods throughout the summer. Complaints of congestion tend to focus on vehicles more than people. The need to address vehicle issues is well acknowledged. In 1979 intercept parking (parking situated outside of the Town to lessen traffic in the Town) was Banff policy, but it did not materialize. In 2016, a study reported a need for an additional 2,000 parking stalls to accommodate future visitation. All the while the Town of Banff is physical footprint is not

permitted to expand. Furthermore, the Norquay Ski and Sightseeing Area situated near to the Town requires road access that bisects a 168-acre wildlife corridor. Elimination of the road was part of the 1996 Banff Bow Valley Study but not achieved because it is essential to the operation of the ski area.

However, Banff is poised to undergo transformative change. A well-funded grassroots initiative is aiming to reduce vehicle traffic in the townsite, establish aerial transit to one of its three ski areas, and create an eco-transit hub to manage vehicle traffic in and around the townsite. However, the most significant component of this initiative is the implementation of dedicated rail line from Calgary to Banff. There are three major components to the initiative.

- i. Transit parking to facilitate a car-free downtown
- ii. Aerial transit to Norquay to open up the Cascade Wildlife Corridor
- iii. A dedicated passenger rail line from the Calgary airport to Banff

The first is to develop a 2500-stall transit parking lot in place of the previous CP Rail Station. All non-resident day use vehicles will be required to park at the transit lot(s). Shuttle service will exist to and around the downtown area which will be car-free. This aspect will transform Banff centre into a pedestrian resort destination. The second development is to close the six-kilometer road to Norquay Ski area which will then open up the 168-acre Cascade area into a genuine wildlife corridor. Norquay will continue operations via aerial transit (a gondola) from the town center to the resort area. The third consists of dedicated passenger rail line service from the Calgary airport to Banff. The line will operate up to eight shuttles daily and be financially accessible. It will include stops in a handful of communities between Calgary and Banff. The line is anticipated to facilitate a tourism corridor from Calgary to Banff in the coming years. The three initiatives combined represent close to a billion dollars in investment. Presently, there is a comprehensive national consultation program underway that will also be reported on in the session.

Data Collection

Data in support of this initiative was obtained in three ways and all three will be expanded upon in the session. Advanis of Edmonton Alberta was commissioned to carry out a national poll based on a telephone online hybrid methodology and a telephone survey of Banff residents. Despite the focus on Banff (park and town) national polling was required for two reasons. First, Banff is well understood, as the data will show, that it is Canada's national park and people from across the country demonstrate considerable ownership of the park and its evolution. Second, Banff is considered somewhat of a canary-in-the-coal-mine of national evolution, that is, what happens in Banff can certainly happen in other parks and therefore garners national attention. Polling included the following:

- a. 1300-person sample of Albertans
- b. 2700-person sample for the rest of Canada
- c. 400-person telephone survey for Banff residents

A fourth data collection method involved a community intercept survey carried out by Planvision Consulting Ltd. in Banff to further ascertain views of Banff residents.

Results

All data analysis is complete at this time and results will be presented at the session. However, an overview of results includes:

1. Canadians highly support Banff as an iconic Canadian destination and affirm it as part of the country's national heritage
2. About 30% of Canadians and 60% of Albertans have heard of Banff's crowding and vehicle congestion through the media and 24% of Canadians and 65% of Albertans claim to have avoided Banff due to perceptions of over crowding
3. Canadians support Banff's dual roles in ecological integrity and human use and strongly believe that it should remain accessible for Canadians and tourists alike
4. There is strong support across all categories for making Banff a more pedestrian friendly and car free destination

5. There is strong support for each of the three initiatives with passenger rail receiving the greatest support followed by the intercept parking lot and aerial transit to Norquay receiving the least
6. There is considerable variation among the three regions (Banff, Alberta, and Rest of Canada) with respect to support for initiatives that will be presented

The role of national, regional and localized data within the pursuit of this initiative will be discussed including data holes that would be ideal to address. The value of this session to TTRA audience in the professional stream is to present a once-in-a-generation scaled initiative that intends to transform one of Canada's oldest and most iconic tourism destinations.