STRATEGIC PLAN
For Revitalization of the Watson Lake Economy

Watson Lake Economic Revitalization Commission
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To all Residents of Watson Lake

This is your STRATEGIC PLAN for the ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION of WATSON LAKE, which can serve the community for years to come. This is a community based grassroots Plan, involving the whole community. Every resident of Watson Lake had the opportunity to not only input into the creation of the Plan, but also to comment on the Draft Plan to ensure that we hadn’t missed anything.

What can you do to help your community and make this Plan a reality?

We all have different skills, strengths, assets, and talents. The question now is, what can you contribute to help us together make this Plan a reality for our community? In this very competitive modern world economy, by all of us quickly working together, we can overcome the challenges, including those competing for the same business that we are.

Living Document and Work

This does not encompass all the ideas we will pursue, and indeed this will be a living constantly changing document. So, if you have any further creative ideas to revitalize the economy of Watson Lake, do not hesitate to send your ideas:

By mail or in person to the Town of Watson Lake Office  c/o The Watson Lake Economic Revitalization Commission

Thank you to all of you who have so enthusiastically embraced a vibrant Plan, and submitted your creative ideas to make such an exciting future for Watson Lake possible. Now let’s move forward together: a world of opportunities lies at our feet!
A. Watson Lake

The Town of Watson Lake is the Southeastern gateway into the Yukon and to Northern BC. It is the major transportation hub, and the only major supply centre in the region for hundreds of miles, especially for resource extraction and tourism related industries. A number of local businesses, and major national and international company branches in Watson Lake, provide access to thousands of products and services to companies, governments, and individuals operating in Eastern Yukon and Northern BC. As a transportation centre, it has a major airport that scheduled service jets can land at, and is strategically located at the junction of the Alaska Highway and Stewart Cassiar Highway, and is the gateway to the Yukon, Northern BC, and even the NWT, and is the mid-point for trucking changeovers on the route of resources to tide water. The Community also has a First Nation with an active business arm that valuable partnerships can be made with.

B. Values

Watson Lake residents love their community and living here. All residents had an opportunity to input into this plan. They want to maintain many components that make the quality of life so important to them:

- Small town atmosphere
- Flowers and beautiful Wye Lake Park
- Positive outlook and community involvement
- Place where people still care about their neighbors
- Positive recreational activities

C. Mission and Goals of the Commission

**Mission**

*To revitalize the economy of Watson Lake to improve the quality of life of the residents.*

**Goals**

1. *To achieve as many benefits as possible from expanding mining and transportation activity in the region, and also to look at every potential business development, while fostering sustainable development.*

2. *To facilitate the expansion of the local businesses and new entrepreneurs, and work to reduce the barriers to this expansion.*

D. Strengths for Potential Economic Development

Watson Lake serves a significant mining presence in its hinterland, including two operating hard rock mines, Wolverine (Yukon Zinc) and Cantung (North American Tungsten), Fireside Minerals barite mine, and potentially the world’s largest lead-zinc deposit under development by Selwyn-Chihong Resources, and MacTung. There are many mining exploration companies active in the area, including, but not limited to Golden Predator, Veris Gold, Overland Resources, Largo Resources, China Minerals, TerraLogic, Archer Cathro, Northern Tiger, Northern Dancer, Silver Corp, Imperial Metals, Endurance Gold, Kobex Minerals and Redtail Metals. Situated on the world famous Alaska Highway, and a long
distance in four directions from any major supply centres, Watson Lake is an important centre for tourists, business travellers, and trucking.

These tourists are attracted to and stay longer because of beautiful surrounding wilderness, good fishing lakes, a golf course and ski hill, Jaedyn Park and water slide, a rodeo grounds, the only Northern Lights Centre (Planetarium Science Centre) North of 60°, and the world famous Sign Post Forest.

Because of local climate conditions, the region also hosts the best forest resources in the Yukon, and has been home to many sawmills, a log cabin manufacturing plant, and wood products currently being supplied to the mines. There is also a strong vibrant base of local outfitters.

To attract professionals and major industries and their employees, Watson Lake has an exceptional quality of life including a new hospital, a clean environment, probably more recreational facilities per capita than most places in Canada, and lower taxes, lower housing prices, and lower student/teacher ratios than where most potential employees/residents would come from. It also has a full service airport, a substantial Northern Living Allowance, excellent schools and a Yukon College campus, a library and rec centre with free internet service, no parking fees, a renowned hot springs nearby, rich aboriginal (Kaska) heritage, an excellent health care system, student financial assistance for College and University, and most importantly, friendly and welcoming people.

E. Weaknesses/Barriers to Growth/ and Threats to Economic Development

A major impediment to economic development, mentioned by many citizens and businesses, is the lack of housing and rental units. Citizens also suggested some things are insufficient: water and sewer infrastructure, doctors, training opportunities, and late night restaurants and other services for travelers (including opening a tent campground in town). Some suggest the need for less red tape and regulations, and more flexible highway commercial zoning and commercial zoning off into the side streets. A number of residents suggest that residential and highway commercial lots need to be cleaned up to make the Town more attractive.

It is identified by many that alcohol and drugs pose serious threats to a potential workforce, and that there are inadequate drug/alcohol detox services to deal with these problems. Fly in and out mines have employees and suppliers from outside the Yukon. It is also noted by a number of residents, that the Town unjustly has a poor reputation, and more good news stories need to get out. The Mountain Pine Beetle is only 80 km south of Watson Lake and moving north, threatening our forest resources.

Finally Watson Lake is captive to the same boom and bust economy as the rest of the Yukon, with major fluctuations dependent on world metal prices, the world economy, and attendant disposable funds for tourists and mining companies looking for investors.

F. Actions Taken to Deal with Weaknesses, Barriers, or Threats

Actions have actually already been taken by the Commission and/or Council, towards addressing or mitigating all the threats/ barriers/weaknesses (listed above), identified in the public consultation.

A major water and sewer infrastructure program is now underway. The Commission has had Council approach the Yukon Government about having more medical professionals in Town. Land use zoning (including commercial) is currently underway with public hearings, so that citizens can obtain actions on their zoning concerns. A late night restaurant proposal is now being developed by the private sector.
The Yukon Government Alcohol and Drug Services is currently itself undergoing a new strategy, which is perfect timing for an increase of the services in Watson Lake. The Commission brought the Director of Alcohol and Drug Services (ADS) to Town, to view the present situation and hear about the critical needs from local people. Council, based on the Commission’s recommendation, wrote to the Yukon Government to request more full-time resident personnel to deliver ADS services in Watson Lake. The Director of ADS has recently reported to the Commission a number of steps that he is taking to help address the problems that we identified. The Commission also made a recommendation related to enforcement of laws related to substance abuse.

The Commission has been very active in having people submit training ideas for the Watson Lake College campus new five year plan for the area. We also attended and input Watson Lake feedback into Yukon College’s major strategic planning session in Whitehorse. The Commission has also found and distributed information on new training funds available (some of which have already been taken advantage of). The Town has been represented at, and provided input into, a workshop on preparing for the Pine Beetle arrival. The Commission also facilitated a public information session on the Mountain Pine Beetle.

In regards to the barrier of fly in-fly out mines, the Commission has been very active. It has arranged for all the operating mines to visit Watson Lake and tour Watson Lake mining suppliers. The mines were often pleasantly surprised at the vast array of quality products and services available through Watson Lake. The Commission is organizing visits (such as the successful visit to Cantung Mine) to these mines for Watson Lake businesses, so they can see what the mine really needs, and their specific purchasing procedures.

The Commission is also working on a pamphlet identifying the many benefits of living in Watson Lake (as outlined in Section D on Strengths) that the mines can give to the large proportion of their work forces who do not live in the Yukon. The Commission has also proposed that the mines provide a bonus for employees to move to the Yukon, to Watson Lake.

The Business Directory will provide the mines and other resource extraction and tourism businesses in the region better access to Watson Lake products and services.

The Commission, Council, and many Watson Lakers are working to improve the Town’s image by encouraging the media to cover the many positive stories and successes in Watson Lake.

The Commission also introduced a tourism friendly initiative to local business.

The Commission is also investigating the adequacy of tent camping opportunities in Town, so campers have easy access to purchasing locally.

In regards to a major constraint, housing, both the Commission and Council have taken major steps. Because this challenge is so critical, the Commission has actually created a Housing Sub-committee (which meets as often as the Commission) and has dealt with a number of items. The Commission has also investigated the Sa Dena Hess vacant lots and RCMP surplus housing.

The Town is in the process of negotiating a development protocol with YTG, that will facilitate the Town being able to work more effectively to deal with land development. The Town Council has also followed the Commission’s recommendation, and written to the Yukon Government, asking them to create (or reinstate) incentive programs to encourage private developers to build rental units and other affordable housing. (This would assist not only the Watson Lake housing shortage, but the shortages throughout the Yukon).
The Council (on the Commission’s recommendation) has also written to the Yukon Government strongly urging them to develop at least 10 lots this summer in Watson Lake.

Council, on the Commission’s recommendation, has invited CMHC to come to Town and to give their presentation/workshop on how the municipality can develop a Housing Action Strategy for Watson Lake.

The Commission has also hosted a session on Resource Access Roads, so important to opening potential local mines.

The Commission is waiting in anticipation of its application through the Town to CanNor, which would bring hundreds of thousands of dollars to Watson Lake, to implement some of our infrastructure improvement recommendations, like the expansion of some of our parks and trails.

G. Possible Actions, Initiatives, and Projects

Below are a number of potential actions, initiatives, and projects arising out of the Commission’s deliberations to date and the public consultations. Which of these projects might proceed and when, depends on a number of factors including community priorities, a proponent, funding, government assistance when needed, and conditions at the time. When these are resolved, the who, when, where, required actions, and timelines can be determined.

(i) Projects or Initiatives already commenced

1. Scheduled Air Service to Watson Lake

When there was scheduled jet service to Watson Lake, it was possible because there were two large operating mines (and a number of sawmills) using the flight for their shift changes. The Commission has had numerous meetings with the mines and airlines, discussions with outfitters, and feedback from the community at large, to try and create a model that would bring scheduled air service back to Watson Lake. To date, the mines have not agreed to change from their present BC carrier, which takes employees from various communities in BC right into the mine sites. All the many suggestions from the community have been followed up, but none have convinced the airlines that there is sufficient business to economically warrant scheduled service.

2. Potential Hydro or Wind Energy Projects

The Commission has explored these alternatives with Yukon Electrical and Yukon Energy. Potential feasibility studies may arise. A hydro project on the Liard River is being explored that might bring clean energy and significant revenue to the community.

3. Watson Lake Business Directory

This project is in progress in conjunction with the Watson Lake Chamber of Commerce and the Yukon Government Department of Economic Development.

4. A Vegetable Green House Proposal

The Commission distributed the proponent’s proposal to the various funding agencies in Whitehorse.
5. **Ensure Watson Lakers have fair access to Territorial & Federal funding programs**

The Commission distributes information on these programs to Watson Lake residents/businesses, and has brought all the major funding agencies to Watson Lake, to improve access for Watson Lakers.

6. **Account Receivables protection for Watson Lake Businesses (especially large mining receivables)**

The Commission has investigated this, and has information available for Watson Lake businesses. We have also requested that the mines have a unique special faster payment time on receivables from Watson Lake businesses.

7. **Summer Concert Series**

Many communities have Summer Concert Series in places similar to Wye Lake Park. The Arts in the Park in Whitehorse draws close to a 100 people a day. Such events in Watson Lake may be able to utilize bands enroute to Dawson City or Whitehorse. This creative suggestion from a citizen has been passed on the Recreation Advisory Committee to look into.

(ii) **Potential Projects or Initiatives (requiring funding)**

**SHORT TERM PROJECTS**

8. **The Benefits of Living in Watson Lake**

A major proportion of mine employees do not live in the Yukon. The Yukon and Watson Lake lose huge tax benefits, as all these employees’ taxes are paid to other governments. The Commission has developed a Request for Proposal for a simple but professional pamphlet outlining the tax, recreation, education, and other benefits of living in Watson Lake (including items outlined in Section D on Strengths), to be distributed to all these employees. All that is needed is Government funding to research and produce this pamphlet.

9. **Expansion of Trails and Parks**

Residents have identified the Town’s beautiful trails and parks as a strength, and encourage their expansion. Funds for research, interpretation, durable signage, and trail and park expansion would be money well spent, to keep tourists in Town longer and spending more money in Watson Lake. Such trail and park signage could also direct tourists to other attractions such as:

- The Sign Post Forest
- The Northern Lights Centre
- The Historical Lend Lease Display at the Airport
- Jaedyn Park
- Wye Lake and the Golf Course etc.

10. **Bird Banding Station**

The Watson Lake Region has a unique centre in the Albert Creek Bird Banding Station. This could be far better utilized to keep tourists in town another day. Improvements to the road, an RV turn around, picnic tables, and interpretative signs and materials would dramatically improve its ability to retain tourists in the area. This would help the off season hotel and restaurant business.
11. **Product Survey Instrument for Mining Needs**

Mines purchase millions of dollars in products, but local businesses are not sure which products the mines need. If they knew, they could stock more of those products in inventory, and have them on their products available list, so mines could buy in the Yukon instead of BC or Alberta.

When asked for a list of these products, some mines suggested that they would more likely fill out a product check list, because they would only have to tick off items, which they could manage the time to do. This project would hire mining experts to develop, (in consultation with Yukon mines), a check list of all the major products used by mining and exploration companies in the Yukon. (This would be useful to Watson Lake and all of Yukon).

12. **Survey of Housing Incentives in Other Jurisdictions**

The project would hire a housing expert to investigate and enumerate the many housing incentive programs existing today in Canada and the Unites States by provinces, territories, states, and municipalities, and to recommend which would be best suited to solve Watson Lake (and the Yukon’s) desperate housing needs.

13. **Housing Forum**

If Government would fund a co-ordinator and other minor costs, a Housing Forum could be held to bring all the stakeholders together to improve the housing situation. This would include Yukon Housing, CMHC, CIBC and other mortgage providers, those wishing to sell or buy lots, the Town with a list of lots available, and developers etc.

14. **Watson Lake Housing Strategy**

CMHC has a program to help municipalities develop housing strategies, which Town Council has expressed an interest in. This project would hire a consultant to work with CMHC, Council, and the Commission to prepare a draft housing plan for Watson Lake.

**LONG TERM PROJECTS**

15. **Forest Resources Initiatives**

The Council, on the Commission’s recommendation, has written to the Yukon Government asking them to remove the barriers to forest tenure. When this has occurred, a number of ideas proposed to the Commission warrant feasibility studies:

a) A pellet plant  
b) Co-gen plant  
c) Sawmill  
d) Fence post plant and other wood products  
e) Other products for mines

16. **Museum**

Watson Lake is one of the few communities in the Yukon without a museum. Even Burwash and Keno (with about nine residents) have museums to keep tourists in town longer! A
museum could be based on any of the possible themes below, or even better, have a wing for each or several of the following themes:

- Historical
- Geology
- Natural history (flora and fauna)
- First Nation culture (Kaska)
- Alaska Highway (large historic trucks etc.)
- Lend Lease Program and Air History (with old planes)

17. **Upgrade the Northern Lights Centre**

As the only Science Centre/Planetarium North of 60°, there are limitless opportunities for its expansion, use, programming, equipment, and research. Some examples are:

- A large engaging interactive display (such as a replica of a space shuttle)
- A beautiful diorama depicting the planets or northern lights
- New kiosks
- Pave the parking lot

18. **Downtown Revitalization and Beautification**

Many communities have received Yukon Government help to beautify their community with streetscapes, sidewalks, picnic tables, attractive signage, parks, parking etc. This major project would be split into two parts. First a group would be brought together for an extensive study of previous beautification initiatives and new ideas. Then, major funds would be needed for the implementation of recommendations arising from that Planning Stage.

19. **Recreation and Fun Events**

Concerts, Rodeos, Ski and/or Snow Board competitions, and other sports tournaments, especially in the winter, all make significant contributions to the local economy. This is primarily the purview of the Recreation Board and Department, who may need assistance to make more of these projects a reality.

20. **Fishing Derbies**

This is a potential economic revenue generator, suggested by a community member, which would be worth assisting if a proponent steps forward.

21. **Major Trucking Centre**

Being the halfway stop between increasing mining activity and tidewater, and a major stop on the Alaska Highway, Watson Lake is ripe for a major 24 hour trucking centre, with restaurant, washrooms, repair centres, homes for transfer drivers, storage for mines and so forth. Some of these services are already provided in Watson Lake.

22. **Mining Vendor Trade Show**

Some mines have requested that we bring all the vendors of mining products and services together in Watson Lake for a *VENDORS’ TRADE SHOW*. This way, all the mines could send their senior executives and buyers for the day, and see what the Yukon has to offer, that they are now buying further afield in BC or Alberta. If funding for a co-ordinator were available, this project could go ahead.
23. **Eco-Tourism**

There is a tremendous underutilized eco-tourism potential in the region. If a proponent steps forward, a feasibility study on expanding this aspect of the local economy would be very useful. This would help diversify the economy from the boom and bust nature of resource extraction.

24. **Natural Gas Distribution in Town for Heating**

By providing pumped natural gas throughout the community, the Municipality of Watson Lake, or some other proponent, could substantially reduce heating costs of residents and businesses. If an applicant comes forward, funds would be required to study the economic feasibility of this major initiative.

25. **Bylaw Review re Economic Development**

Bylaws can enhance or inhibit economic development. A potential project is hiring an expert to review our bylaws, and to recommend new ones that other communities have used to promote economic development.

26. **Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Incubators**

A significant portion of the economies of towns today is based on innovation in today’s rapidly changing technological world. Ways can be considered to assist innovation and research in the workplace and for inventors.

There are a lot of opportunities for entrepreneurs to provide new services in Watson Lake, that don’t exist now. But being a first time entrepreneur can be scary, or at best, a daunting challenge and risk. We need to look at ways to grow and support new entrepreneurs. Possible initiatives could include entrepreneurship camps for youth and entrepreneurship forums or workshops. Another potential support for new entrepreneurs, which has been used in many communities, would be an incubator building, so that they don’t have to start out with the huge cost of building infrastructure, before they are established and have some cash flow.

27. **Conference and Meetings - facilities and promotion**

Whitehorse, Haines Junction, and Dawson City achieve significant revenues from Meetings and Conferences. Watson Lake has just as many good meeting spaces as Dawson City and Haines Junction, and more winter eating places. What we don’t have, is a convention person or Tourism Association constantly promoting these facilities, and attracting these meetings. The big spaces in Town buildings and other facilities, like the Rec Centre, Council Chambers, and The Northern Lights Centre etc. could also be examined for any equipment or minor modifications that could be made to better attract meetings and Conventions.

**H. Conclusion**

A number of initiatives have already been taken to remove barriers to economic revitalization. With the strength and resilience of Watson Lake people, enthusiastically working together in a concerted effort to make some of the creative potential projects in this road map a reality, exciting days lay ahead for Watson Lake.