CITIZENS’ AGENDA FOR BC’S ECONOMIC FUTURE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to extend our thanks to the partners, hosts, participants, survey respondents, and advisors who contributed to the Our Future Our Voice Youth Forum, and the province-wide 100 Community Conversations. In total, over 70 youths attended the Youth Forum, 747 of BC’s residents took part in a Community Conversation, and an additional 421 British Columbians completed the online “Views on the Future of BC’s Economy” survey. Their contributions were compiled to create this Citizens’ Agenda.

SFU Public Square’s Marissa Lawrence (Provincial Outreach Coordinator) and Mark Friesen (Community Outreach Coordinator) were instrumental to the success of the 100 Community Conversations and Provincial Tour initiatives. They were also principals in the analysis and writing of the Citizens’ Agenda for BC’s Economic Future and 100 Community Conversations final reports.

Daniel Savas was invaluable to the design process, research, and development of the “Views on the Future of BC’s Economy” survey, as well as the overall data analysis for 100 Community Conversations. Daniel worked closely with the team to ensure the key narratives and actions identified by participants were accurately reflected and to provide content for the final reports.

The SFU Public Square staff—Janet Webber, Program Manager; Jackie Pichette, Research and Communications Officer; Jasmine Lew, Design and Communications Coordinator; Chang Song, Program Analyst; Kate Affleck, Volunteer Coordinator; and Research Assistant, Connor Curson—and a team of dedicated volunteers all played important roles in the design and successful execution of the 2013 Community Summit.

Our most particular thanks go to Dr. Stephen Jarislowsky whose continuing record of philanthropy and civic leadership stands as one of the best examples of global citizenship and democratic engagement.

Thank you to our sponsors and partners; The Vancouver Sun, Vancity, FortisBC, TELUS, and our colleagues at the SFU Centre for Dialogue.
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From July through October 2013, SFU Public Square organized 100 Community Conversations as part of the 2013 Community Summit on BC’s Economy. The aim of hosting 100 Community Conversations, which were self-organized, was to encourage British Columbians to probe provincial economic issues, and to provide direction for the development of a long-term economic vision for BC. The Citizens’ Agenda for BC’s Economic Future reflects what BC’s residents expressed during the 100 Community Conversations, the Provincial Tour, and the Our Future, Our Voice 2013 Youth Forum.

The preliminary findings for this research were presented in the discussion guide for the Forum on BC’s Economy, and summarized in a broadsheet that was distributed at the outset of the summit.

The views expressed in this Agenda are provided to stimulate further discussion and learning. They do not necessarily reflect the views of SFU, or SFU Public Square, its funders, or its partners.

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KEY NARRATIVES

Seven key “narratives” emerged from the discussions that took place in communities around the province, which reflected British Columbians’ hopes and fears about the future of BC’s economy. They offer perspectives on the challenges British Columbia faces in seeking an economy that creates wealth, promotes social equity, and protects its environment.

In thinking about the future of BC’s economy, citizens expressed optimism because of the many assets they feel the province possesses, and because there appear to be countless opportunities to build upon solid economic, social, and political foundations. However, doubts about the province’s ability to fully realize its economic potential due to existing obstacles emerged, as did concerns for the lack of preparation and direction on how to address the challenges that lie ahead.

Examples of specific actions and strategies are listed under each narrative. Due to the volume of data from 100 Community Conversations, not all suggested actions or strategies are outlined here. However, every effort was made to capture the intended meaning from the respective participants, hosts, and organizations.
Leveraging BC’s Natural Capital

British Columbia is blessed with an abundance of natural resources to develop to its economic benefit; an enviable location on Canada’s west coast that gives strategic access to multiple markets in North America and Asia; and natural beauty that attract tourists and talent from around the country and the world. Natural capital is fundamental to BC’s ability to build and maintain global trading relationships, which in turn provide economic benefits for our citizens.

There is little doubt that BC’s natural capital will continue to be a key economic driver. However, citizens insisted that trade-offs must be considered when determining the most productive and sustainable ways of leveraging BC’s natural capital. Prosperity is intimately linked to how BC moves forward, but participants raised concerns over climate change, and the risks of over-exploitation of and over-reliance on natural resources.

Over-Reliance on Natural Capital?

Hyperfocus on utilizing natural capital to drive economic growth will make the province too dependent on the demands of the external market. Participants fear this will leave BC vulnerable to the boom and bust cycles of commodity trading worsened by the instability and uncertainty of international markets; of particular concern was the negative impact on local economies of resource-based communities around the province. Over-reliance on resource extraction in the short-term can also compromise the availability of natural assets to future generations. In addition, participants raised concerns about the province’s continued focus on resource development projects geared towards export markets, to the exclusion of building and reinforcing BC’s other non-resource based sectors. The film industry, green energy, BC’s knowledge economy, technology, services, and food production, along with natural capital value-add industries, such as renewable energy and environmental engineering, contribute much to the economy and have great potential to be even greater long-term contributors to the province’s wealth and prosperity.

Photos courtesy of (from left to right) Carl Chapman, Green Energy Futures, & D-Stanley
Suggested Actions:
• Diversify our economy and our trade relationships; reduce our reliance on the declining US market and turn instead to Asia’s new and emerging economies (e.g. China, India, Southeast Asia) poised to dominate global trade in the coming decades
• Develop strategies for establishing more value-add industries, such as manufacturing and processing
• Acknowledge inherent Aboriginal title to BC’s natural capital and harness the invaluable knowledge and stewardship of our province’s First Nations
• Encourage green alternatives by creating unique opportunities for entrepreneurs through subsidies, incentives, and tax exemptions, and introduction of a development fund to incubate renewable or alternative energy technologies

Environmental Sustainability
Participants across the province agree that the over-exploitation of BC’s natural capital is to the detriment of the environment, but feel that strengthened environmental regulatory administration will positively influence resource-based wealth generation while bolstering environmental sustainability. Regulations must ensure a balance between protecting the environment and achieving BC’s economic goals.

Suggested Actions:
• Maintain and increase the Carbon Tax; expand its reach of application
• Enforce higher taxes on over-sized vehicles and provide tax incentives for hybrids
• Stop urban sprawl by adopting smart urban planning of high-density, livable neighborhoods
• Encourage adoption of ’BC’s environmental standard’ with newcomers and trading partners; educate immigrants on BC’s environmental values as these may not hold the same significance for other cultures; and demand strict labour laws and sustainability standards from our foreign partners
• Apply the provincial government’s “5 Conditions for the Gateway Pipeline” to all potential resource development projects to ensure environmental protection, proper consultation, and accommodation of Aboriginal peoples and clarity for all businesses and investors seeking to create wealth from our resources
• Increase regulation and enforcement in areas of weak environmental protection
• Address the issue of cumulative impacts before expanding resource development
• Integrate environmental values and sustainability into BC’s education curriculum
Tourism

Beautiful British Columbia, known as a four-season tourist destination, offers visitors opportunities to see wildlife, mountains, forests, and oceans, while experiencing uniquely Canadian charm. Participants identified tourism as another sector that can leverage the province’s natural endowments. However, many participants expressed deep concerns that BC is not taking full advantage of the economic benefits of the tourism generated by the province’s natural capital.

"[We need] better long-term management of our natural resources, incentivize the creation of recycling industries in BC, help to create a stronger international brand for BC tourism."

- Facilitate investments that encourage long-term sustainable economic growth such as: invest resource royalties in recycling, waste-to-energy, or other green technologies; shift tax breaks to renewable industries; create a plan that outlines the costs of transitioning from gas and coal to new energy options; and introduce incentives to the construction industry that encourage the use of recycled materials or impose more expansive recycling fees.

- Reform institutions and funds to ensure responsible investment such as: utilize a policy or programming approach that would expand options for ethical investments; increase public understanding of fund investments; establish trusts or funds for BC resource-dependant communities to help mitigate downturns in global demand; reform institutions such as the Pacific Carbon Trust to ensure that all regulations designed to account for cumulative impacts work cohesively to ensure sustainable development of BC’s natural capital.
Suggested Actions:

- Increase funding available for branding in regions of BC that are focused on eco, cultural, or historical tourism
- Encourage provincial tours that showcase BC’s diversity and expand tourism benefits to more remote and rural communities
- Loosen insurance requirements to allow for financially viable tourism businesses

Building and Sustaining BC’s Human Capital

BC’s economy benefits from having a highly skilled workforce comprising talented, well-educated individuals who bring a variety of talents to the work they do in creating wealth for the province. And, because of its attractive natural capital, BC is able to attract skilled professionals from around the world who seek to work and live here, permanently or temporarily. In turn, BC’s culturally diverse human capital allows the economy to leverage the benefits of an open society and prosper from a plurality of worldviews. Potential for wealth generation also lies in the connectedness of new Canadians to markets and networks in their countries of origin.

However, global competition and technological advancements place relentless pressure to produce and create wealth in this fast-paced world, and it is incumbent upon BC to continually invest in education and skills training. The inescapable interrelationship between education and skills must be acknowledged more fully. Moreover, an aging population, the high cost of living in key areas of the province, and the loss of skilled workers to other regions of Canada signal the challenges of building and retaining human capital, which is a must for promoting a vibrant and sustainable provincial economy.

Education

BC must assess post-secondary education systems for their access and affordability, and aim to rear engaged, well-rounded citizens—not just good workers—while ensuring that current and predicted labour skill mismatches and shortages are addressed.

“Provide incentives to rural communities that provide opportunities in education and community services for international students. Encourage students to stay for a minimum amount of time to give back to communities.”
Post-secondary academic education and skills training should no longer be viewed as separate learning avenues, where a student must choose one path or the other. Instead, educational opportunities should be varied; support the lifelong learning goals of individuals who seek to be both informed citizens and skilled workers and who are likely to face multiple career paths throughout their working lives.

Suggested Actions:

- Implement alternative education methods such as: experiential learning, outdoor education, and field specific and experience-based courses for secondary schools
- Ensure First Nations history is taught to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal British Columbians
- Shift away from standardized testing towards assessing critical thinking skills
- Ministry of Education should support and require secondary and post-secondary exchange programs between rural and urban communities to bridge the urban/rural gap and expand literacy on the provincial economy
- Make key secondary school curriculum improvements at the provincial level to include basic entrepreneurial skills, financial management, and work-experience opportunities
- Introduce flexible provincial curriculum such that training and education opportunities best serve local realities and needs
- Allow post-secondary students to focus on their studies rather than immediate debt repayment; establish an income baseline that needs to be surpassed before an individual is required to repay student loans
Workforce Development

BC faces a series of workforce development challenges. In rural BC, it is often difficult to provide meaningful careers and to keep people employed. Young people who see little prospect of employment tend to relocate and pursue training and education opportunities in larger employment centres.

Similarly, new immigrants can experience prejudices in BC’s small towns that undermine the open society BC promotes, driving them to move to urban centres where they are more likely to find a more accepting environment.

Another demographic is also struggling to find their place in BC’s workforce: seniors. With BC’s rising cost of living, “Freedom 55” is less attainable than ever for older British Columbians, many of whom are finding themselves without work and facing an age-biased market.

BC also faces an out-migration of skilled workers in search of financial gain, employment satisfaction, and job security elsewhere. At the same time, many industries in BC are turning to temporary foreign workers because they are experiencing labour shortages. BC must trigger new opportunities for building business through making strategic investments in education, skills training, and targeted immigration, and forestall the loss of workers to more financially attractive or socially accommodating jurisdictions.

Participants stated that small and medium businesses (SMEs) are integral to the resilience and future growth of the province’s economy and offer an opportunity for economic activity in all corners of the province in a way that large-scale development projects cannot. However, a particular challenge for SMEs is succession planning, which could be addressed through education and by making resources available for members of the workforce, such as youth and immigrants, to prepare them for leadership positions.

“Streamline certification of skilled immigrants: government/ministerial support to address barriers to skilled immigrants accessing jobs, both internationally and inter-provincially.”
Suggested Actions:

- Develop an integrated workforce strategy that recognizes global talent
- Establish provincial and federal tax credits for businesses that hire new graduates and involve the private sector in post-secondary planning
- Increase business and union cooperation in trades programs and apprenticeships to increase employment rates for new graduates
- Take greater strides to nurture forward-thinking professionals who can innovate in emerging niche sectors likely to gain market share in the future global economy (e.g. green energy, local food, digital arts, etc.)
- Provide BC’s entrepreneurs with resources such as education and development funds, to assist them in obtaining ownership over their intellectual property, and to encourage innovation
- Encourage investment in new startups, especially in rural areas of BC, by offering tax incentives
- Create regional centres of excellence across the province where businesses can collaborate, allowing better business relations outside of the lower mainland
- Unlock the potential that rests in the Aboriginal workforce in BC by improving educational outcomes and ensuring workers and professionals benefit more broadly from their participation in and contribution to BC’s economy
- Develop a long-term plan to address labour shortages through the temporary foreign worker program
- Address the integration and inclusion of immigrants by reducing barriers for recognition of foreign credentials and making small communities more welcoming and inclusive
- Undertake a concerted effort to engage youth in economic planning, politics and entrepreneurship
- Address succession planning for small business in smaller communities through entrepreneur training, and by training youth and immigrants to take over small and family run businesses

Building and Renewing BC’s Economic Infrastructure

BC has invested heavily in economic infrastructure over the past half-century. From hydroelectric dams, transmission lines, telephone wires, and fibre optic cables to roads, bridges, highways, transit systems, wastewater and water systems, health care centres, and schools, this infrastructure supports and enables the BC’s economy to run smoothly. Moving goods, people, and ideas around the province and abroad, and keeping our workforce educated and healthy, are key to BC’s capacity to create wealth and sustain prosperity. Strong and stable government, with a sound fiscal outlook, helps sustain the investment.

However, BC’s infrastructure is aging; it needs upgrading, replacement, and expansion—particularly in rural BC and many Aboriginal communities. Participants conveyed their awareness of the urgency
of renewed investment in existing and new infrastructure if British Columbia is to compete in the
global market. Without additional investments in BC’s infrastructure, the risks of undermining BC’s
economic development and prosperity will be significant.

Participants advocated strongly for providing internet technology and communications
infrastructure throughout the entire province, coupled with opportunities for skills training and
education. They also stressed the need for transportation that is both intermodal and affordable.
Participants suggested this combination would allow more equal distribution of economic
opportunity across the province, and would ensure BC’s diverse population would have access to
jobs and business opportunities.

BC also needs more strategic economic supports that provide stable foundations for BC businesses.
Government subsidies for and investment in secondary manufacturing, as well as fair pricing for
natural resources, such as water that is extracted for commercial use, could further growth and
development of the manufacturing and value-added industries.

Of course, a critical part of the equation, and a great challenge, is how to pay for these essential
infrastructure developments. Participants questioned, what economic activities would be required
to generate revenues sufficient to enable the provincial government to pay for investments in
infrastructure, programs, and services. They also wondered whether British Columbians are ready
to accept the tradeoffs inherent with development LNG and the renewable energy sectors, expanding
pipelines and the ports, etc.
Taking on the challenges facing BC’s economic infrastructure also means addressing public debt in a period of sluggish economic performance and public resistance to pay increased taxes. It also means dealing with competing policy priorities, such as rising health care costs and an aging population that brings with it a tsunami of health care needs versus increasing demand for education and skills training to overcome labour shortages. The tax regime in BC is a critical part of this picture. Although keeping the tax structure competitive is important for ongoing investment, investing in infrastructure fuels economic growth and reinforces provincial ties, bridging the spatial and economic gaps between regions and people.

Suggested Actions:

- Invest in public infrastructure, such as public transit, to strengthen and stimulate the economy, and to connect regional economies
- Acknowledge infrastructure challenges in rural BC municipalities and Aboriginal communities, and work in unison to better attend to their economic and social needs
- Invest in communication technology (high-speed broadband and mobile networks) outside urban areas
- Take urgent action on some projects, such as LNG development, before the opportunity is lost to global development to expand the provincial treasury
- Explore economic opportunity of road tolls as a means to address infrastructure challenges
- Consider options for tax reform, such as replacing the PST with a value-added tax, and ending revenue neutrality and exemptions to the Carbon Tax

Addressing Social Inequality

British Columbia’s economic development, wealth creation, and prosperity have provided countless benefits to people across the province for generations. However, British Columbians do not benefit equally. Systemic poverty, rising levels of child poverty, growing income gaps, a shrinking middle class, and continued disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations suggest social inequality is a phenomenon that is significant in BC; one that requires immediate attention.

Increasingly, British Columbians have a tough time maintaining their financial well-being; high personal debt is becoming the norm amidst the rising costs of living. Many participants expressed concern about the affordability and accessibility of housing in BC and rising healthcare costs represent significant challenges that require proactive and preventative measures. Increasing demands on social programs put undue pressure on BC’s social infrastructure, yet access to services shapes the social fabric of the province.
Social inequality has direct, negative impacts on BC’s economy; it has the power to drain human resources and force migration of human capital out of province. It reinforces and manufactures social divisions—rich versus poor, young versus old, urban versus rural, aboriginal versus non-aboriginal, new Canadian versus long time resident—and prevents collaboration on finding solutions and moving forward. When resentment, blame, and guilt get in the way, people are less likely to advocate for more inclusive economic decisions and programs that take into consideration the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples or immigrants for example. In this light, it is clear that opportunities for building a prosperous, well-functioning BC economy require social equality such that everyone benefits from wealth creation and prosperity.

Many of the conversations were underscored by the theme of inclusive, holistic approaches to community development as a means to improve overall quality of life and promote healthy, safe communities for all BC residents. When it comes to funding for service provision, participants suggested tax reform might be an option worthy of consideration—from the standpoint of ‘fairness.’ The proportion of taxes paid by individuals in different income brackets and businesses in different sectors, should be examined, and clearly presented for open discussion.

**Suggested Actions:**

- Take action to reduce the rising number of poor and marginalized residents in the province: develop and implement a living-wage policy or ensure wages are indexed to inflation
- Create a poverty reduction strategy: provide universal or affordable childcare, school breakfast programs, and better support for early childhood education
- Distribute wealth better by developing a sharing economy: through co-ops, land trusts, and labor unions or through greater profit sharing in large sectors and companies
- Achieve more inclusive economic activity: provide accessible skill and employment training for Aboriginal youth, and improve recognition of foreign credentials
- Re-think healthcare to make it more efficient, proactive and preventative: explore privatization or public-private healthcare systems; initiate electronic patient information systems; and include universal dental care
- Improve access to counseling and rehabilitation to treat addiction and mental health issues
- Provide tax deductions for residents adopting healthy living options (e.g. gym memberships, fitness equipment, or trainer fees)
- Introduce long-term community-based health strategies which could prevent acute health problems and be less expensive than conventional healthcare solutions
• Introduce measures to address unaffordable housing: provide property tax grants for those with low incomes; re-think housing by-laws to allow for inexpensive housing options in the form of micro-suites; implement mandatory municipality-specific rent control

• Re-design communities to be more inclusive and engaged: provide free transit on designated days; subsidize access to sports and culture activities for children; promote and make physical activity programming easily accessible for seniors

• Inspire community members to take ownership over the local ecosystem

• Increase tax on foreign-owned properties

• Reinstate a progressive income tax system so that the highest earners pay a greater share of taxes

• Create opportunity for peer-to-peer crowd sourcing such that individuals may voluntarily share wealth or income

Leveraging Innovation and Diversity in BC

BC benefits from many innovative ‘niche’ sectors that are in their infancy; new industries that have the potential for global reach; and an incredibly diverse population. As prospects for economic growth, many participants indicated that these untapped opportunities have potential to alleviate the economic, social, and environmental uncertainties facing the province. Examples of niche businesses in BC include salmon farming, container shipping, aquaculture, screen-based (film and television) industries, green building technologies, and renewable energy sources like geothermal. Additionally, the province boasts substantial expertise in nutrition, healthcare, mental health and social services. These sectors and areas of expertise are just some of BC’s comparative advantages that have the potential for global recognition and for offering new opportunities for wealth generation.

Participants suggested, however, that BC is not taking full advantage of the innovative capacity and diversity that exists in the province. Firstly, there are relatively few global head offices located in BC, thereby limiting access to large pools of capital for investment. Secondly, BC’s productivity is low relative to the rest of Canada, suggesting limitations on the capacity to generate profit. Thirdly, support systems for new entrepreneurs are lacking. Fourthly, although BC benefits from a diverse population poised for global trade with its international ties, the province is not reaping all of those benefits.
Suggested Actions:

- Create an environment that encourages global corporations to establish head offices in BC; incentivize based on the percentage of Canadian employees hired.
- Leverage global connections to increase investment in local emerging, knowledge-based industries, or export of BC expertise and industries.
- Market and export BC’s environmental protection knowledge.
- Invest in research and development to maintain a leadership position in new or existing sectors, such as wood manufacturing, or in underutilized renewable energy sources, such as solar, tidal, and geothermal.
- Create marketing and branding that focuses on all of BC to attract long-term investment in lesser-known locations.
- Streamline the approval process for major projects, so that BC is better prepared to receive and consider project proposals.

Local Economic Development

Participants recognized that BC’s current economic prosperity depends on global trade, international markets, a vibrant national economy, and an engaged federal government. British Columbians, however—especially those in rural communities—increasingly crave self-reliance, which requires strengthening and developing local economies and communities. British Columbians are aware of the province’s shared natural capital, and increasingly demand affordable alternatives, such as opportunities to purchase local food or energy from renewables such as solar, tidal, and wind energy. This perspective pits demands for greater local control of economic levers with a local economic focus against centralized planning with a focus on global export markets.
Local economic development is a targeted response to the larger global issue of economic instability. To enable further and future development of local economies, BC must reassess how revenues from the provincial treasury are allocated so that communities are better able to service their specific needs. There is concern from communities across the province that they are not receiving the financial return they feel their regions rightfully deserve. Participants are adamant that governance reform would offer BC’s communities the opportunity to be better served by public health and education systems, and to retain local human capital, notably young people and immigrants.

"BC should support the development of local stories. Development funds and initiatives to allow educated youth to build businesses, gain experience and access mentorship with local companies, to avoid going overseas to obtain skilled employees."
Developing a Long-Term Economic Vision for BC

British Columbians are a people with varied hopes and concerns for their provincial economy. This diversity breeds innovation and economic growth, but also creates divisions that prevent consensus around common interests and goals for the provincial economy. The following four concepts were identified by participants as disconnects that jeopardize the future of BC’s economy:

- **Political Landscape**: Polarization exists along left-right, labour-management, and environment-economy lines that prevent collaboration. There is a lack of leadership that is needed to negotiate balanced compromises and no apparent mechanisms that could be used to help bridge perspectives.

- **Regional Disconnect**: BC’s diffuse geography produces a regional (north-south) and community-based (urban-rural) disconnect that is reinforced by inter-regional economic disparities, unequal investment in infrastructure in remote areas, and a perceived lack of appreciation for the contribution northern and rural BC communities make to the overall provincial economy.

- **Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal**: Failing to properly recognize or settle land claims, ignoring Aboriginal wisdom and leadership in economic development, and not formally recognizing the importance of First Nations governance, all contribute to significant misunderstandings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents and hinder productive relationships and collaboration.

- **Triple Bottom Line**: Too much priority is given to financial growth and conventional economic measures (e.g. GDP), which creates disconnects between wealth creation, social equity, and environmental protection.

**Suggested Actions:**

- Engage with Aboriginal people to facilitate economic inclusion by: creating opportunities to access the Aboriginal labour pool; acknowledging and utilizing traditional knowledge; and reformulating the Indian Act.

- Improve processes and mechanisms for long-term planning by: developing a long-term strategy for the sustainability of revenues from resource extraction; engaging in planning beyond the 4-year electoral cycle; adopting the Aboriginal “Seven-generation” approach to planning; developing a 3-year rolling budget, rather than an annual budget, for government; and building partnerships between private and public sectors to foster collaborative, inclusive, and long-term economic planning.

- Implement a triple-bottom line approach to long-term planning that integrates and embeds economic, social, and environmental goals and objectives designed to benefit the greatest number of people.

- Introduce tax incentives to encourage our environmental and social goals, such as providing encouragement for employers who offer transit passes and/or childcare.
Areas for Future Research

Through the 100 Community Conversations process, three broad areas for further research have been identified. First, gather facts and statistics on such things as local economic contributions to the provincial economy, the invisible economy, the diversity of BC’s economy, and the impact of transitioning to a low carbon economy. Second, create measures to monitor such things as economic performance (in ways other than through GDP), economic literacy/knowledge of BC’s economy, and the mismatch between jobs and skills. Third, explore ways to engage citizens and governments (including re-establishing the BC Progress Board, and through governance reform) to foster increased municipal responsibility in the economy.

Summary

According to our participants, British Columbians care deeply about BC’s economy. They look forward to a future where prosperity is shared more equitably and the province’s resources and abundance will still be available to support and nourish future generations. The results of the Citizens’ Agenda reported here reflect the aspirations of hundreds of individuals from across the province. This report weaves a complex tapestry of hopes, concerns, and solutions that move BC beyond traditional divisions to a more robust, productive, and compassionate society—a society that recognizes the need for wealth creation, social equity and environmental protection.

For a more detailed account of the SFU Public Square provincial dialogue on BC’s Economic Future please see the Final Report of the 100 Community Conversations available at www.sfu.ca/publicsquare.