Recommendations on Improving community engagement at the Rockfish Climbing Co-op

for

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by

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# Introduction and Background

The Rockfish Climbing Co-op was founded in 2018 by a tight-knit group of climbers with a specific purpose in mind: build a modern indoor climbing gym that can provide a space for climbers in Prince Rupert to both build a community and pursue their passion for the sport.

For years, the climbing community in Prince Rupert has been limited by the harsh weather of the region, which limits the opportunities for outdoor climbing, and by the limited access to indoor climbing spaces. For the past 4-5 years, the Devil’s Crag wall at the civic centre has acted as a community hub for the budding local climbing community and helped stabilize and even grow the existing community.

But as all local climbers know, there are limitations in both the small physical space and management of that wall. With only 7 ropes, the wall has become too small for the regular crowd of 10-15 climbers it receives on climb nights.

Beyond the physical space, the lack of community access to the wall has been an issue. While the wall is mostly maintained through volunteer work of the climbers themselves, the space is managed by the Civic Centre and shared with the basketball court. This means climbers have limited access to the space, both for climbing and maintenance.

The goal of building a new climbing wall is to both expand the physical space and gain full control over the wall so as to allow for the climbing community to expand further.

The problem the co-op is facing is that it is hard to recruit and retain co-op members who are willing to invest time, money and energy into the co-op without an existing physical space that brings people together. But at the same time, to attract funders and ensure the sustainability of the co-op in the long term, more members and community engagement is needed to get the project started.

This report will detail actionable recommendations the co-op board and members can take to increase community engagement and recruit new members to the co-op. To compile these recommendations, I have conducted interviews with different stakeholders to gather information on the problem itself and potential solutions.

**A Note About Covid-19**

Covid-19 has changed everything. The co-op was already on track to finding a location for the climbing wall and approaching funders, but the pandemic derailed these plans.

The pandemic has also affected the climbing community. No longer can climbers meet regularly at the Devil’s Crag or come together to build a new wall.

This report is making the assumption that life will go back to a level of normalcy seen pre-pandemic, where climbers can climb in large groups again, public events can be held and people can interact outside of their bubbles.

This is an important consideration when reading through the recommendations, as life may look different in 2021 and beyond and many of these recommendations may no longer be relevant.

# Findings

### Who can the co-op attract?

One of the biggest challenges the co-op is facing is demographics. Climbing gyms are mostly found in urban centres because of the high overhead and maintenance cost, which requires a large customer base. In a small town like Prince Rupert, with only close to 12,000 people, it’s hard to maintain a for-profit gym.

While the co-op structure helps offset labour costs and removes the need for profit, the co-op still needs to attract enough members to maintain operations.

Traditionally, the main demographic for climbing gyms are young people of around 18-30 years old. Prince Rupert, however, has a similar issue as other small towns where young people in that age group tend to leave for school or other opportunities.

This means the co-op needs to expand the target demographic for who to engage to include older demographics as well as young children and teenagers

Prince Rupert, however, is currently going through a boom phase with the port expansion, which is bringing many young people back in town. While many of these are transient workers are staying for just a few weeks to a couple of years, there are many who are staying long term. This boom presents an opportunity for the co-op as a place for newcomers to engage with the community.

Other factors to consider are the racial and economic makeup of the city. The North Coast has the highest ratio of First Nations people of any region in BC and is also one of the regions with the highest poverty rates.

Rock climbing has traditionally been a very white and privileged sport in North America. Accessing climbing gyms, outdoor recreational areas and buying all the gear is expensive, so this has been a barrier for low income, First Nation and immigrant communities to access the sport.

Any community engagement plan has to include plans to attract First Nations residents to the project and create opportunities for low income people.

### Stakeholder interviews

This report relies on information gathered from interviews with different co-op stakeholders and members of the wider Prince Rupert community. Below is a brief summary of the interviews and the learnings from each interview.

**Benjamin Punnet - President, Rockfish Climbing Co-op**

The interview with Ben had the purpose of gathering information about the co-op and the challenges it has faced in trying to build a new climbing wall. Since the board members of the co-op and most regular members are aware of the history and challenges of the co-op, this report will not go into much detail about that section of the interview. However, these are some of the key learnings from the interview that are relevant to this report:

* The original co-op membership mostly consisted of Benjamin’s friends and family, most of whom are regular attendees to the Devil’s Crag climb nights at the Civic Centre.
* Most new members for the co-op have consisted of new arrivals in Prince Rupert looking to make friends and build a community.
* The main form of community outreach for the co-op outside of the climb nights at the Devil’s Crag has been the yearly Reel Rock film screenings, the Children’s Festival event at the civic centre and social media promotion.
* The co-op has a goal of selling between 10-20 yearly passes to the new climbing wall every year as well as selling 30-40 drop-in passes per week to stay solvent.
* Some of the barriers the co-op faces for further growth and community engagement include:
	+ The bad experience many Prince Rupert locals have with the civic centre, which has a history of restricting the types of activities that can be held inside their facilities.
	+ The perception that rock climbing is an extreme sport.
	+ The lack of awareness many locals have that there is an existing climbing wall and a co-op trying to build a new one.
	+ The lack of control climbers have over the Devil's Crag opening hours and space.
* The co-op does not currently have specific outreach plans to expand the climbing community.

**Naomi Vandermeer - Member**, **Rockfish Climbing Co-op**

Naomi is a good example of how the co-op can attract new climbers to the community by acting as a community hub. Naomi did not grow up climbing and only got into climbing at the Devil’s Crag three years ago as a social activity. She had friends attending the climb nights at the Devil’s Crag and decided to join as a way of hanging out with her friends, but over time came to love the sport and the community of climbers.

She is now one of the regulars at the Devil’s Crag climb nights, has taken up outdoor climbing, and is an active member of the co-op. While she is not on the co-op’s executive board, she has helped out at events like the Reel Rock film screenings and the Children’s Festival.

For her, being part of the co-op is more a way to be part of a community and a place to learn, than a physical space to climb.

Naomi is also one of the few co-op members who was born and raised in Prince Rupert. As a local, she confirmed many of the elements Benjamin identified as barriers preventing locals from joining:

* Many of her friends and family had no idea the Devil’s Crag existed until she started climbing herself.
* Since climbing is not a popular sport in Prince Rupert, many people see it as an extreme sport rather than an evening recreational activity.
* There is little awareness of the co-op and its goals in the wider Prince Rupert community.

But Naomi also provided useful feedback as to how the co-op can attract new members. Some of her recommendations included:

* Run and attend more events as a co-op.
* Do more promotion to raise awareness of the project.
* Organize group outdoor events like trail clearing in local crags or group outdoor climbing days.
* Be more friendly and welcoming to the new people who come to the Devil’s Crag and outside walls.
* Link up with other like-minded groups.

**Jessie Gibson - Prince Rupert Resident**

Jessie is likely the quintessential target demographic for a traditional climbing gym. She is a young professional in her early 30s, active, lover of the outdoors and has expressed interest in climbing in the past. In fact, she has attended climb nights at the Devil’s Crag climbing wall a handful of times, but does not attend regularly.

When asked about which clubs she is part of in Prince Rupert, she mentioned the Ground Search and Rescue, the Kaien Coastal Riders - an adaptive hiking program that connects people with mobility barriers to the outdoors - and the Backcountry Society. When asked what inspires her to join and engage with these groups, she listed her love for the outdoors and love for community as the top reasons.

During the interview she expressed she was interested in doing more climbing and even joining the co-op to pursue that sport. But her main motivation for doing more climbing is to be outside, which is why she has not taken indoor climbing as a regular activity and the main reason why she has not joined the co-op.

For Jessie, her main motivation is to be outside and find people with whom she can be outside. She specifically said she would be more likely to join the co-op if the co-op offered programs that connect people to the outdoors and build an outdoor climbing community.

**Erik Brooke - Team Leader, Prince Rupert GSAR**

Erik is the team leader of the Prince Rupert Ground Search and Rescue (GSAR). Like many groups in the city, the GSAR has struggled over the years to maintain an active volunteer base. Over the past 2-3 years, however, the volunteer membership of the GSAR has grown substantially.

Erik attributes this to a few reasons:

1. The GSAR executive has been working to make the team more welcoming of all abilities. Like with rock climbing, many people are intimidated by joining a GSAR group. Not only do people have an idea that GSAR volunteers need to be extreme outdoors people, but there were also some people who felt the previous iteration of the local GSAR was not a welcoming place for new members.
2. The recent demographic shift from the latest economic boom has brought more young people into the city who are looking for activities where they can connect with people. As one of the main outdoors-focused groups in town, the GSAR has attracted many of these newcomers hoping to connect with the local outdoors community and give back to this community.
3. The GSAR has been more active in community events like the annual Sea Fest and the Children’s Festival, and has even hosted fundraising events of its own.
4. Recent permanent funding allowances from the province have helped the local GSAR invest in the membership and in new equipment, which has spurred greater public and media interest in the local group.

When asked specifically about the co-op, Erik mentioned that the GSAR is very supportive of building a new climbing wall as it would give their group a space to practice rope rescue, which the group does not currently have. Furthermore, many of the GSAR members are also outdoors enthusiasts, many of whom are also outside climbers and would be interested in using an indoor climbing facility during the winter months.

**Kevan Robitaille - President Powell River Climbing Co-op**

The Powell River Climbing Co-op opened their doors in 2018. In many ways, it resembles the Rockfish Climbing Co-op. It arose from a desire by a small local climbers to have an indoor space to work out and congregate. It’s also located in a small community without the population base to support a traditional for-profit climbing gym.

When asked what their engagement strategy was to recruit members before their wall opened, Kevan’s answer was “our strategy was: if you build it, they [people] will come.”

While they did run some events to drum up community support for the project in the early days of the co-op, they also struggled to get community members involved before the physical space started to be built.

Once the construction of the wall started, the excitement of having a new recreational facility prompted many community members to volunteer and donate for the construction of the wall. He mentioned, as examples, an electrician who volunteered his skills in exchange for a yearly pass for his child, or businesses who donated funds in exchange for ad space in the new gym.

In the years since their gym was built, they have formed partnerships with the school district, local businesses and the City of Powell River to boost attendance and community engagement.

# Recommendations

These conversations with stakeholders and community members provide valuable insight on actions the co-op can take to increase community engagement both before and after the physical climbing space is built:

1. Form a community engagement committee in co-op that is tasked with organizing public events and forming networks with the wider Prince Rupert community.
2. Launch an outdoor climbing program ahead of the building of the new wall as a way to attract members of the wider outdoors community to the co-op.
3. Increase online presence by engaging more on social media and building a website as a way to promote the existence of the co-op among locals and newcomers
4. Develop a dedicated First Nations engagement strategy to make the co-op more welcoming and open to First Nations communities that have traditionally been excluded from other spaces and clubs in Prince Rupert.
5. Establish formal ties with other outdoors-focused groups in Prince Rupert, including the Backcountry Society, the Prince Rupert GSAR, and the Kaien Trails Society.
6. Enhance the community elements of the co-op by hosting monthly or quarterly socials that can bring in new members and help fundraise for the new wall.