

WIN THIS SPACE

Program Overview



INTRODUCTION

Historically, entrepreneurship has been fundamental to the emergence of rural Ontario communities and their downtown cores. For many rural communities today, maintaining the strength and vitality of the downtown business core is an ongoing economic development challenge as local demographics shift, economies globalize and advances in digital technology fundamentally change consumer expectations of rural downtowns. In the midst of all this change, a host of stakeholders: municipalities, not for profits, CFDC's, BIA's and Chambers of Commerce, are coming together in pursuit of solutions to reinvent the rural downtown business environment.

Win This Space was developed and implemented to address two challenges common to rural communities: filling storefront vacancies in the downtown core and fostering local entrepreneurship.

WHAT IS WIN THIS SPACE

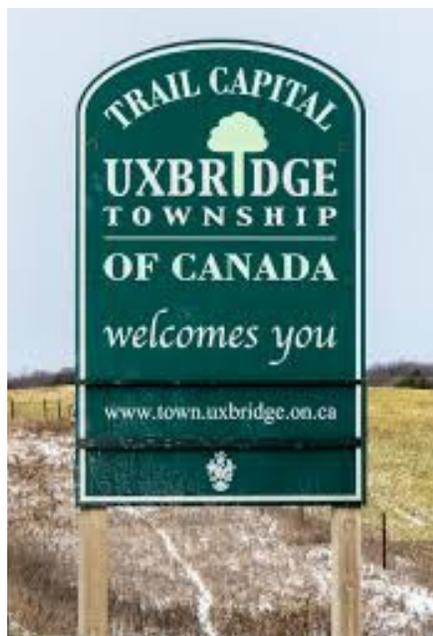
Win This Space (WTS) is a business recruitment initiative that encourages and inspires local residents to explore their dreams of entrepreneurship, and equips participants with the tools and skills needed to open a business in a downtown storefront.

WTS incorporates a business pitch competition alongside mentoring, business training and networking opportunities. The grand prize each participant is working towards is a rent-free storefront location for one year, along with additional business services.

The first Win This Space entrepreneurship competition was developed in the Town of Uxbridge by the local Business Improvement Association (BIA). Uxbridge's program won an award at the Ontario BIA Achievement Awards (OBIAA) Conference in 2014 in the category of Business Retention and Expansion.

Since then, with an overwhelming universal appeal, Win This Space has expanded throughout Ontario to many different communities.

Second to explore this program was the Municipality of Huron East, and the communities of Brussels, Seaforth and Vanastra. The adoption and re-invention of this program illustrates its strength and scalability for communities across the province.



“Win This Space is not just about filling empty retail spaces, it’s about people inspiring other people. It’s about helping to fulfill someone’s dream to become [an] entrepreneur,” says Sari Pandopulos, Uxbridge BIA board member, who ran this program for the first time in Uxbridge, Ontario.

TIMELINE

While every community has a slightly different structure, Win This Space has roughly six different stages:

1. Project Planning
2. Community WTS Launch Period
3. Applicant Review
4. Business Workshops
5. Business Plan Review
6. Grand Finale

1. PROJECT PLANNING (4-6 MONTHS)

Win This Space has grown and evolved organically over the years, following from the examples of other communities. Many of the communities looking to run a WTS competition have reached out to communities with prior experience to review the structure of the program and any variations employed. Communities are typically open to sharing, and this is a valuable way to learn how it all unfolds.

Using this planning stage to actively engage the community is also very important. When local residents and/or business owners feel engaged in the project, they are more apt to lend support through avenues like sponsorship, judging or active promotion (social media, word-of-mouth, etc.).

There is an opportunity with Win This Space to bring together a community. WTS can create new connections and new relationships built around a common goal – something that adds value beyond the duration of the project.

Typical steps in the **PROJECT PLANNING** phase:

- > Conduct background research: connect with other WTS communities
- > Contact OBIAA for more information
 - Build process documents and the “rules of the game”
- > For your own reference, as well as for participants, laying out a clear understanding of how this will all unfold is important
 - Create scoring/ranking criteria for participant evaluations
 - Seek council resolution/approval (if necessary)
 - Identify strategic partners and recruit advisory committee
- > Once business is operating, training workshops and business mentoring are both critical to the success of the program, which is reliant on the strategic partners
 - Finalize your panel of judges
 - Solicit sponsors/funding
 - Develop marketing plans
 - Identify storefront vacancies and connect with local landlords
 - Identify locations and plan for contest events (site visits, workshops, grand finale)
 - Organize administration components
- > Contracts with contestants ensuring active participation in the project
- > Contracts with landlords for available space
 - If eligible, charitable receipts for sponsorship donations
 - Memorandums of Understanding with project partners to outline working relationship
- > Terms of Reference for project advisory committee to clarify expectations for deliverables and time commitment
- > Confidentiality Agreements signed by Administration/Judges (protects financial and personal information submitted by participants)

"Downtown Seaforth and Brussels, both in the Municipality of Huron East, just finished the Win This Space program modelled after the one initiated by the Uxbridge BIA in 2013. It was a HUGE success," writes Jan Hawley, Economic Development Officer with the Municipality of Huron East. "None of this would have happened had I not heard of this great project at the OBIAA conference in Hamilton."

2. COMMUNITY WTS LAUNCH PERIOD (1-1.5 MONTHS)

The launch of the competition and the associated marketing strategies are crucial in building community support, soliciting sponsors and recruiting quality applications. Taking time to ensure relationships are built in the community, and that awareness of the opportunity is widespread, will breed more success throughout the duration of the competition.

Some ideas for the launch period worth considering include:

- > Begin project advertising prior to registration opening in order to raise community awareness
 - Think about using a combination of social media, radio, newspaper ads, alongside emails to local organizations like the Chamber of Commerce
 - Identify vacant storefronts with logo decals/window signage – gets people talking
- > Hold a public launch event or announcement
 - Consider an in-person event, hosted at a downtown location
 - Invite media, community leaders, business community and residents
- > Open registration/applications for the competition following promotion:
 - Registration typically lasts (suggested no less than) three weeks
 - Create a clear expectation of what applicants need to include in their application
- > Community information sessions
 - Consider hosting information sessions in the community to help promote the opportunity and clarify any questions prospective applicants might have.
 - Review Contest Details: Rules and regulations, goals of the contest, grand prize, potential benefits to participants: educational components, access to mentors, public speaking experience, business supports, contest timeline
 - Existing resources to support an application
- > Set a firm application deadline

WIN THIS SPACE

Project Metrics

- **Total duration of project (planning & implementation): 5-9 months**
- **Staff time: 10–15 hours per week for duration of project**
- **Note: 1st year is often the most difficult as there is no existing template to work from. Subsequent years are less time consuming.**
- **Organizational investment: \$2,000 – \$15,000 plus wages**
- **Leveraged Cash/in-kind donations: \$20,000 – \$45,000**
- **Number of applicants per year: 15-30**

3. APPLICANT REVIEW (1 WEEK)

This preliminary review of applications will ensure all the proposed ideas will actually work within the space available, and provides an opportunity to filter out the businesses that may not fit with what the community has agreed upon for eligibility. Additionally, if an overwhelming number of applications were received, this is an opportunity to narrow down the list further.

- > Evaluate applications to determine if they meet any mandatory pre-determined criteria
 - "Permitted uses" in the downtown zoning bylaws
 - Type of business (i.e., retail vs. industrial)
 - Eligible ideas are invited to move onto the next stage of the competition.

4. BUSINESS WORKSHOPS (2-4 WEEKS)

The business workshops are designed to help participants write high-quality business plans for the Win This Space competition. As these workshops are ongoing, participants are expected to be drafting their business plans using the information they are receiving in the workshops.

It is recommended that these workshops be mandatory for all participants. Mandatory workshops increase the reach of entrepreneurship training in the community, something that could help more entrepreneurs to succeed beyond the duration of the competition.

Where your community may not have the expertise to run workshops in these areas, look to your local service providers like your SBEC or Community Futures as a strategic partner. Workshops typically touch on:

- **Starting A Small Business**
- **Writing A Business Plan**
- **Market Research**
- **Marketing Strategies & Social Media**
- **How to Deliver a Strong Pitch**
- **Financials – “Show Me the Money”**
- **Free one-on-one counseling provided at any time during business plan writing**

5. BUSINESS PLAN REVIEW (1 WEEK)

This is an opportunity for judges to further narrow down the list of participants for the final pitch competition. Judges review and rank all business plans and typically select the top three to five, depending on the structure the community has chosen for the finale. If there is a small number of total participants by this stage (sometimes participants will drop out for a variety of reasons), some communities have skipped this step and allowed all participants to participate in the finale.

6. GRAND FINALE & FINALIST JUDGING (1 WEEK)

For participants, the grand finale is the final test – it is the culmination of all their hard work, from the submission of their application, to the workshops, to the business plan writing and pitch rehearsing.

For the public, the grand finale is an exciting time to learn about the kinds of businesses that could possibly open up shop in the downtown. For both sides, this is a big occasion, and the grand finale provides the opportunity to celebrate everyone involved in the process, including the community. An event with a sense of occasion and celebration helps breed contagious excitement among everyone in attendance.

THE FINALE

- > **Hosted at a community venue or storefront to support existing businesses**
- > **Invite residents, family members of participants, local media, all levels of elected government**
- > **Some communities have had the whole event filmed by local TV stations**
- > **Document the event, either through the production of a video, a story/press release written by a skilled journalist, and/or a collection of good quality photographs. This ensures ownership of good quality marketing material by the event organizers for future use.**

THE PITCH COMPETITION

- > **Finalists submit final business plans (including marketing and financial plans)**
- > **Finalists participate in a “Dragons’ Den style” Grand Finale:**
 - **10-minute presentation, followed by 5-minute question period from judges**
 - **Judges select a single winner**

(It is recommended that the rankings of all finalists be kept on file in the event the winner cannot fulfill his or her obligation. In the event this does occur, a runner-up could be awarded the prize through a fair and equitable process.)

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

WORKSHOPS

Mandatory participant workshops have stood out to many as an integral component to the participant's success, as well as the broader community.

The most noticeable outcome of the Win This Space competitions is the empty storefronts that are being filled and the downtown business districts that are becoming more vibrant.

Surprisingly, many contestants, not only the contest winners, have opened businesses with great success. As part of the program design in some communities, the associated mentoring, training and coaching for the prospective entrepreneurs have been mandatory to all participants' eligibility in the contest. Participants who did not “win” the contest have nonetheless started successful businesses, built on the foundation of the training and inspiration they received through the WTS process.

Further, as new business owners have emerged as a direct result of this program, they have not started out alone. Another key component to the impact on rural entrepreneurship has been the support network generated for participants, past and present. While WTS was a competition from day one, the workshops and pitch competitions provided an opportunity for prospective entrepreneurs to come together and build relationships – relationships that have lasted through the years. These groups have stayed in touch and act as an informal support network for like-minded entrepreneurs and their downtown business communities.

“Without a doubt, I feel the business training is the most important aspect of the program’s overall impact, not only from an entrepreneurship development perspective, but that of local economic development and downtown revitalization,” says Jan Hawley, project coordinator for the Huron East competitions.

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

Win This Space competitions depend on strategic partners. Not every host organization is going to have the capacity needed to organize a complex project while also providing the technical expertise necessary to ensure success for all participants.

Identifying mutual interests is a good place to start. For example, many Small Business Enterprise Centres already have a mandate for providing entrepreneurship/ business skills training and this competition gives them a captive and engaged audience.

For the most part, all of the potential strategic partners listed on the chart on the following page have a vested interest in the success of local entrepreneurs; however, there will likely be additional partners looking to give back to their community who will come to the table.

The chart gives a sense of what some of these partners could possibly offer to a project - keep in mind this is not an exhaustive list, and many could take on multiple roles. The important part is to identify the missing expertise and find a partner who can fill that gap.

ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

Roles may change depending on the project and the organizations/ institutions who are active in the community. Bringing together a diverse advisory committee is a good way to build broader community support.

Something every community cited as important was the connections made with other community members, whether it was through sponsorship, in-kind services, retail space, marketing or word-of-mouth. Building a diverse advisory or action committee will help ensure the success of the project.

ORGANIZATION	ROLES/ACCOUNTABILITIES
Business Improvement Association or Municipal Economic Development Department	Project Lead/ Project Facilitator
General Manager, Chamber of Commerce	Work with BIA on project as a whole
Office Administrator, Chamber of Commerce	Provide administrative support to project as a whole
Municipal Community Development Coordinator	Working committee member; Advertise as appropriate; Judge for Finale; Attend main events
OMAFRA Agriculture and Rural Economic Development Advisor	Working committee member; Advertise as appropriate; Attend main events
Business Analyst, Community Futures Development Corporation	Working committee member; Advertise as appropriate; Attend main events; Judge for Finale
Economic Development/ Communications Assistant, Small Business Enterprise Centre	Working committee member; Lead in Workshops; Judge for Finale
Branch Manager, Local Credit Union	Lead in workshop and support to businesses; Working committee member; Judge for Finale
Economic Development & Tourism Coordinator, County-level municipal government	Working committee member; Advertise as appropriate; Attend main events

APPLICANT ATTRACTION AND SCREENING

Marketing and community outreach ensure a large quantity and high quality of applicants for the program. Some communities received overwhelming support and had a lot of work to narrow down the list for a core group of finalists. Other communities had fewer total applicants, and even more still who dropped out mid-way through, realizing that the life of an entrepreneur and/or their business concept was not going to work for them. In many ways, screening out applicants, or helping them recognize they have more work to do, was also an important outcome of this initiative as this helps people adjust and move forward.

Having a detailed inventory of commercial vacancies, plus a clear understanding of the community's business mix will be of great benefit when vetting the applications.

Any community that has undertaken a BR+E analysis in their downtown business district will find it a helpful tool to glean information from when determining what businesses are needed or wanted in their core.

PRIZE PACKAGE

The prize package has evolved to become more than just rent. In building widespread community support, there is the opportunity to secure in-kind support from local businesses and professionals that will help to get the WTS winner off the ground. Some communities have created robust prize packages approaching \$50,000 in products and services that help new businesses succeed. In-kind donations can often create minimal additional costs for the donor, but save a young business owner a lot of money that could be better used elsewhere in the development of their business.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Win This Space was designed to fill one storefront with a new business, but the results of the training and mentoring that accompanied this competition has meant that many more storefronts have been rented by contest participants.

In the case of Huron East, there were 24 new business start-ups as a direct or indirect result of its three WTS competitions. Downtown vacancies have been significantly decreased and a better mix of service and retail related business has been realized. This has equated to more people visiting and shopping in the community, especially in its downtown business district.

The first winner of WTS Seaforth, The Cotton Harvest Quilt Shop, even attracted an international quilting show to the community in Year Two. This event attracted 2,000 people from across Canada and the US, who travelled to downtown Seaforth over a three-day period. This event, the first of its kind in Canada, has now become an annual occurrence. Going forward, this same business is to be featured in an internationally acclaimed publication "Quilt Sampler – Better Homes & Gardens" in spring of 2019 with a focus on the business and its community. This has definitely become a "Win-Win" for Seaforth and all its businesses.

ENTREPRENEUR PROFILE

JACKIE DEWIT - NO NONSENSE NATURAL PRODUCTS

Jackie is a multi-talented, passionate entrepreneur who, following the Win This Space competition, now owns real estate and operates three different businesses in downtown Brussels. These businesses include:

1. JD & Company - manufacturer and retailer of organic cleaning and personal hygiene products
2. Locally Unique - consignment shop for local artists and artisans
3. The DeWit Luxury Suites - downtown short-term rental accommodations

Jackie, winner of the Brussels, Ontario, Win This Space competition, has not always been an entrepreneur. As a matter of fact, she did not even win WTS her first time around; however, Jackie is resilient, driven, and a true community builder. Although without Win This Space, she may not have taken the plunge into entrepreneurship and as a result, downtown Brussels would be a different place today.

Jackie is a mother of two young children with autism. When faced with attending to the health of her children, she left her job as a ticketed welder, and began examining the environmental influences in her home, searching for a solution and eventually ended up throwing out all of the chemically based cleaning and personal hygiene products. Sourcing pure, all-natural ingredients, she started making her own products and saw dramatic improvements in her children.

No Nonsense cleaning supplies, cosmetic necessities and personal care items include glass and floor cleaner, dishwashing and laundry soap, bug spray, sun screen, toothpaste, body wash, shampoo and deodorant. As she began sharing her story, community interest picked up and she started selling some of her products out of her home to neighbours.

Jackie was driven to sustain this business, even buying, restoring and then reselling furniture on the side to make extra income to help grow her inventory.

When Jackie heard about the Vanastra Win This Space competition, it was a natural fit. While she was still somewhat hesitant about taking the leap into entrepreneurship, she was encouraged to join and at the very least, participate in the workshops.

Although Jackie didn't win the first competition, she was invigorated by the experience, and with renewed energy, was determined to win the following year. From all appearances, it seems that when Jackie makes up her mind, she accomplishes what she sets out to do.

Jackie's story doesn't end with her successful pitch to the Win This Space judges – she has gone on to open two new businesses in the downtown: the consignment store and short-term rental accommodations. Jackie's success in her businesses inspired her to purchase the building where she was once a tenant and refurbish the dilapidated downtown building that was once an eye-sore to the entire community. Beyond her own building, Jackie recognizes that the strength of the downtown depends on all the businesses working together.

Jackie has been a passionate community builder in spearheading community makeovers, buying paint and volunteering her time, alongside others in the downtown, to refurbish more of the old storefronts.

Jackie's short-term accommodation business is a good example of the revitalization that occurs when you get energetic and driven entrepreneurs into a downtown space. The short-term accommodations that she has refurbished are an important new part of her business, but also an enormous contributor to the downtown business community.

In 2016, a 150-year-old bank barn was unassembled and relocated in downtown Brussels as a wedding venue. The Four Winds Barn has been a great success story on its own, booked solid throughout the summer months; however, there were very few accommodations available locally for wedding-goers. Jackie recognized an opportunity and has leveraged the success of the Four Winds Barn to support her rental properties. At the end of the day, through the success of one business, the whole downtown wins – a dilapidated old building has been revived, and more wedding-goers are staying downtown, spending money in the downtown businesses and strengthening the offering of the whole Brussels business community.

SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to Jan Hawley, Economic Development Officer with the Municipality of Huron East, for sharing her experiences with hosting the Win This Space competition and with coaching other communities to host their own. There are now 20 communities throughout the province using the WTS model. Jan has been a strong advocate for the value of Win This Space and has been instrumental in assisting communities through one-on-one mentoring and public community presentations.

Special thanks as well to all the organizations and municipalities who shared their experiences for the benefit of this case study: Huron East; St. Catharines Downtown Association; Town of Minto; Peterborough DBIA; North Perth; and Downtown Sudbury BIA. This type of open collaboration and sharing helps everyone do better work and build stronger communities.

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