BIABC: Tight Budgets Don't Justify Inaction - Low-Cost Decisions Can Still Deliver for Small Businesses

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Vancouver, BC – British Columbia's small businesses are no strangers to tight margins and hard choices – and while they understand today's provincial budget reflects real financial constraints, those constraints do not excuse inaction.

The Business Improvement Areas of British Columbia (BIABC), representing the majority of the province's BIAs and approximately 55,000 businesses, says there are clear, practical steps - many of them no-cost or low-cost that government can take right now to support small businesses, strengthen local economies, and reinforce confidence in communities across the province.

"Small businesses understand the realities government is facing," said Jeremy Heighton, President of BIABC. "What we are asking for now is not expensive new programs, but practical actions that improve certainty, safety, and collaboration."

1. Strengthen Internal Trade and Local Markets
BIABC continues to call for concrete action to remove interprovincial trade barriers, expand Buy BC and Shop Local initiatives - and improve domestic market access. Strengthening internal trade and local sourcing is one of the fastest, most cost-effective ways to build resilience and reduce exposure to external shocks.

The province's decision to sign the Canadian Mutual Recognition Agreement (CMRA) is a positive step, particularly for independent retailers with limited administrative capacity. However, the real test will be turning this national commitment into measurable benefits for small businesses. BIABC will monitor implementation closely and urges further expansion to include food, alcohol, and agricultural products.

2. Improve Public Safety Coordination
BIABC is calling for stronger provincial leadership and better inter-departmental and inter-governmental coordination to address repeat violent and non-violent offending, alongside continued collaboration among police, courts, municipalities, and community partners.

3. Reduce Red Tape and Improve System Flexibility
Targeted regulatory adjustments and streamlined processes can strengthen small-business resilience at minimal cost.

Examples that illustrate inflexible policies and administrative delays:

- As of January 1, 2026, WorkSafeBC requires all restaurant income - including tips - to be reported as payroll, increasing premiums and potentially costing employers thousands annually. At the same time, CRA rules require employers to report card tips while employees report cash tips, creating conflicting obligations. To comply with WorkSafeBC, employers would have to track income they do not currently control - and doing so may trigger additional CRA reporting and CPP/EI liabilities. This creates unnecessary administrative burden and risk, particularly since gratuities are not wages and should not be treated as compensable earnings.

- Processing times through Open Door/WorkBC to support employment opportunities for individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities have grown from roughly four weeks in 2024 to 8–12 weeks in 2025, with projections of 16+ weeks - impacting front-line capacity and opportunities for individuals.

- During the 2025 BCGEU labour dispute, centralized liquor distribution rules left restaurants and bars with little flexibility when supply chains stalled, as archaic rules prevented them from purchasing directly from private liquor stores. Those same rules remain in place today.

4. Improve Supportive Housing Planning
Supportive housing policy must be guided by clearer planning and collaboration. BIABC's concern is not about whether housing exists, but about how it is planned and distributed across a community. Concentrating similar projects - particularly low-barrier or social housing - in one area can create unintended pressures on neighbourhood well-being, public safety, and economic vitality. The Association is urging a coordinated, evidence-based strategy developed with municipalities and local stakeholders.

5. Restore Structured Small-Business Engagement
With the elimination of the Small Business Roundtable, BIABC says a clear engagement gap now exists. The Association is calling for a stand-alone Ministry of State for Small Business to ensure direct representation, stronger cross-government coordination, and early consideration of small-business impacts in policy development.

Beyond these measures, BIABC will continue to press government for a coordinated, balanced approach to safety and repeat offenders, recognizing that many of these challenges are closely linked to untreated mental health issues, addiction, and housing instability. This includes improved access to long-term mental-health and addiction treatment, continued investment in community-based enforcement initiatives such as the Community Safety and Targeted Enforcement Program (C-STEP), and restoration of

the Securing Small Business Rebate Program to help offset vandalism and property-crime costs.

About BIABC
The Business Improvement Areas of British Columbia (BIABC) is the provincial champion of strong, vibrant, and successful downtowns, main streets, and commercial districts throughout the province. Its members represent more than 80 business districts, employing hundreds of thousands of retail, service, and office workers.

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