

Community

# KEEPIN' THE ISLAND VIBE *Alive*

## ISLAND COMEBACK CAMPAIGN BOLSTERS LOCAL VENTURES

Story by CHERIE THIESSEN  
Photos courtesy Island Comeback

It's a brave new world since COVID-19 arrived and forced us all to think outside the box, even seniors fairly stuck in their old ways — like me.

One day in November, realizing that going off Pender Island to find a specific Christmas gift for a friend was not "essential travel," I searched through the internet until I found a good restaurant in her Duncan area, researched it on a few sites, and then emailed the venue to request a gift certificate. I paid for it with e-transfer, had my certificate emailed to me and then forwarded it to my friend. All done!

All she has to do is make a reservation, go to dinner and pick up her voucher. My gift has been researched and purchased in 10 minutes, my friend is pleasantly surprised and the restaurant is paid in advance. Talk about safe, environmentally friendly and efficient shopping! While in this instance I was not able to support any of my local businesses, I was able to support a small business where she

lives. I have a feeling she will now be reciprocating with a certificate for one of my favourite Pender Island places. It's a win-win.

Turns out this is the concept behind the Island Comeback campaign. However, it has taken the idea of digital main streets, shopping hubs and BOPIS purchases and added enhancements. (BOPIS stands for "buy online, pick up in-store.")

Francine Carlin is the project lead and founding chair of the Rural Islands Economic Partnership (RIEP) that has created this pandemic response and recovery program for the 18 west coast islands stretching from the southern and northern Gulf Islands to the Discovery Islands and beyond to Malcolm and Cormorant islands, which are accessible by ferry from Port McNeill.

"Once we obtained seed funding in April," she explains, "we worked flat out."

The site went live just seven weeks later, on May 27, with a positive initial response.



"We now have 141 sign-ups and counting thanks to our winter holiday sign-up campaign, and in 2021 we will be expanding the site to build upon a directory offering full e-commerce shopping. Our goal is to create a rural islands digital main street where visitors can access all services, and our aim is to have 80 per cent of all businesses and non-profit organizations on each island eventually listed with Island Comeback [at [www.islandcomeback.ca](http://www.islandcomeback.ca)]. This initiative will generate immediate funds for island businesses and community organizations through the long-term platform that has been created for obtaining gift certificate purchases and making donations."

Fred Shadian of Saturna's Kayaking Skills and Vibrational Greens, and his partner, Ruth Daber, were among the first businesses to sign up.

"The Island Comeback campaign is a great initiative to encourage people to shop and support local businesses," affirms Shadian. "When you shop local, you are creating a ripple effect of cash flow to circulate in the local community."

It's an impressive platform, easy to move around in, and chock full of interesting things to do, places to go and items to buy. Who knew, for example, that on Saturna Island there was a company called Vibrational Greens that made grass-based health

drinks? Or a bustling and successful café on Galiano specializing in pizzas (Babes in the Woods) or, for that matter, way up north on Malcolm Island, a café that serves up killer seafood tacos? It's called Coho Joe: I know, I've been there.

The economic commissions of Salt Spring and the Southern Gulf Islands are the founding program sponsors with the RIEP running with the idea.

"When COVID-19 hit full on, a friend called me and said, 'Can't you do something similar to what Cornwall, Ont. has done? Check it out,'" Carlin says. "I did, and then called a RIEP board meeting and we agreed to pursue the idea. We made calls to contacts across the islands as well as seeking seed funding from sponsors. Before long our very talented project team of contractors were at work, donating hours and discounting their fees."

Future plans involve seeking a business development/marketing specialist to expand island startup contacts with each island's businesses and non-profits. With the numbers of sponsors also growing, I have a feeling this will be happening soon. BC Ferries, Shaw Business, and Vancity, First West, Coastal Community and Union Bay credit unions have all supported this initiative, along with the Vancouver Island North Training and Attraction Society.



Above: Island Comeback participant Jenessa Lenore Donahue of Good Woman Hand Craft on Salt Spring.

Page 13: A Saturna Island Kayaking Skills group.



From left, Galiano Island artist Jeanne Erickson, and Salt Spring Shine distillery owners Michael and Rie Papp, who have signed on to the Island Comeback program.

"We have been most fortunate to engage sponsors for the full site," Carlin continues. "And now we will move to obtaining sponsors for each island's page, approaching essential service providers: grocery stores, insurance companies, liquor sales, etc. Also, the islands have many notable persons living and working on them, so we will be inviting 'influencers and notables' living on these islands to share with their networks."

The program has a "pay to play" structure so that each island pays a one-time charge between \$300 and \$500, depending on the population, and the one-time fee helps to pay for

the platform and hosting of pages and photos as well as for promotions and marketing. Each island can then register as many businesses and organizations as they like. Purchasers are asked to pay the three per cent processing fee so that suppliers and community groups can receive the certificate's full value.

Carlin is certain of its success.

"Island Comeback was created to keep the rural island vibe alive. It is already a valuable resource for each island's economic recovery and it will grow through the pandemic and beyond. Through this coalition with rural island economic and social betterment organiza-

tions and the support of local government, we are building a virtual rural islands community and a digital main street where each island's businesses and organizations can promote their products and services via a robust global marketing platform where consumers will be able to find everything 'rural island' in one place."

I love the idea of giving and receiving certificates from my own island community's businesses.

Who says "You can't teach old dogs new tricks?" I can't believe I actually have something to thank COVID-19 for. ✨



# AQUA

GULF ISLANDS LIVING

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## Giving Spirit

Salt Spring Island Foundation small grants  
make it easy to build community

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empty plates and more

### RESILIENCY ROCKS

Island Comeback campaign  
helps locals thrive

### SURVIVAL TOOLS

Program to support tourism  
industry reaches out

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