

## **A Benchmark in Co-op Education**

Image



'The beginning of something big'

The [Upper Columbia Co-op Council \(UCCC\)](#) in Nelson, B.C. is partnering with the [Community Futures](#) to deliver business development workshops throughout Southeastern B.C. This provides a unique opportunity for UCCC to integrate the co-op model into the entrepreneurial education programs that Community Futures already provides.

UCCC coordinator Zoë Creighton sees this as a pivotal moment of recognition for co-ops to flow along with the stream of business development work, rather than duplicating one another's services.

“Because we’re involved right from the beginning (of the project) it means that we’ll work with them to educate people around different business models, and co-ops are one of them. And that hasn’t ever happened before (...) as most people teach traditional business models like sole proprietorships,” Creighton explains.

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*Gathering in Golden, B.C. for an Upper Columbia Co-op Council workshop in Feb. 2013.*

She says the commitment for this project is to maintain social enterprise and co-operatives as an essential part of all the marketing and pre-entrepreneurial education.

“There are a lot of similarities in how we advise businesses as co-ops, but there are also huge differences. So for us to be able to train business advisors to see things through a co-op lens and to know when the trigger point is to get services specific to co-op development, is very exciting,” she says.

Community Futures [was awarded](#) almost \$2m in funding under the contract through the [Columbia Basin Trust](#) to do comprehensive business advisory services all around Southeastern B.C.

The series of eight business development luncheon sessions kick-off on Dec. 4 in Nelson and on Dec. 5 in Castlegar and continue into January. This is the second phase of UCCC’s co-op development project, the first of which revealed an appetite for co-op development education in the region. This second phase provides resources to reach interested communities that exceeded workshop delivery capacity in the first round.

It still comes as a surprise to some past workshop participants that the co-op model includes for-profit options, Creighton explains. “We built “myth-busting” into the body of the presentation. It’s actually true how much misunderstanding there is around co-ops,” she says. “A couple of our audiences in the beginning were people who assumed that if they were health care practitioners or artists or dancers as part

of a group, then they had to take the non-profit model. They couldn't be a worker co-op, for instance.

"Seeing them become aware of the adaptability of the model to whatever they're already doing, to just formalize and incorporate and organize themselves — that, to me, was inspiring. To see them say, 'Oh, this can be my business model. This isn't just something I have to do on the side out of good will or philanthropy. This can actually be my employment.'"

Creighton witnessed the worker co-op economy in action on a recent trip to Mondragón, Spain this past fall. It reinforced for her what she and the UCCC are witnessing in their local region and the strength of the co-op model's ability to build social values into employment.

"Employment is a really big concern for people. North Americans who are driven by wanting to have concern for community and some of the co-op principles, like social well-being, they don't have to be separate," she says.

As a chapter of [British Columbia Co-operative Association](#), UCCC strives to be relevant to the rural populations it serves. Creighton underscores the importance of breaking this down further, as each centre in the region has its own unique social and economic challenges. This awareness is top of mind in workshop preparation, so that sessions adapt to each context.

"It really feels like the beginning of something big," she says

A schedule for January workshops will be posted on [www.uccc.coop](http://www.uccc.coop) in the next week. To register for a workshop or for more information, e-mail Zoe at [zoe@uccc.coop](mailto:zoe@uccc.coop).

*A version of this article was originally written for the [British Columbia Co-operative Association \(BCCA\) news service](#). This repost, for which we received permission, follows the style guidelines of the original post. To learn more about generative newsroom options for your organization or community, please contact [peter\(at\)axiomnews.ca](mailto:peter(at)axiomnews.ca).*