



DAVI Leaders Forum – Steps to Launch

February 25, 2026 – hosted by CGI Canada (Victoria)

Overview

The Data and AI Vancouver Island (DAVI) Leaders Forum convened industry leaders, government representatives, academics, privacy professionals, startups, and innovation agencies to transition DAVI from consultation to concrete action. The event followed three previous roundtables involving 68 participants across 100 invitations, establishing strong regional interest in building a data services ecosystem on Vancouver Island.

The forum's primary objective was to "get concrete" - moving from vision to execution by defining governance, identifying priorities, and establishing launch mechanisms. Attendees represented diverse perspectives including AI governance practitioners, startup founders, privacy professionals, AI educators, innovation agencies, managed service providers, and university-linked innovation hubs.

Those ready to bring their time and resources to the DAVI table nominated themselves, pending specific decisions for the governance structure¹. Next steps are at the end of this document.

Discussion Context

Federal AI Strategy Alignment

A forum leader provided critical context on Canada's federal AI task force, emphasizing how DAVI aligns with national priorities. The federal strategy, developed through Canada's largest public consultation (11,000+ responses, 64,000+ participants), focuses on innovation-first approaches while managing responsible AI use.

Key federal themes directly relevant to DAVI include urgent AI literacy needs, establishing clear guardrails for tool usage, defining and making sovereignty accessible to all organization sizes, and moving at business speed (rather than government pace). The federal government is shifting from risk-averse culture to innovation-enabling frameworks, with mandates for public sector efficiency through AI tools.

Canada excels in AI research but loses talent to international firms. Federal policy development aims to address this through streamlined work permits, talent retention incentives (tax credits), foreign investment attraction, and clearer IP/data protection frameworks. DAVI is positioned as a regional instantiation of these national priorities - demonstrating how local communities can capture economic benefits from data/AI developments through skills, talent, training and capacity building.

Regional Economic Imperative

Discussion centered on South Island economic challenges identified in recent reports²: over-reliance on public sector employment, talent outmigration, and missed opportunities to

¹ The Constellation model (and Impact Backbone) are under consideration for DAVI

² SIPP Rising Economy Taskforce Report 2025

translate technical capability into economic growth. DAVI emerged as response to recognized disconnect between strong local data science community and limited economic monetization of these capabilities.

Core vision emphasizes data as fundamental building block, providing buffer against potential AI market volatility. Focus remains on building a sustainable data services cluster that can weather technological shifts while serving regional, provincial, and eventually national markets.

Key Topics Covered

Cluster Development Strategy

DAVI aims to establish dynamic data services ecosystem focused on regional economic growth, government support across federal/provincial/municipal levels, talent retention and attraction, and service delivery beyond Vancouver Island to broader BC and Canadian markets.

Working assumptions validated through roundtables include significant existing talent base, underutilized economic potential, demand for data services across sectors, and opportunity for regional specialization in data governance, AI implementation, and sector-specific applications.

AI Literacy and Adoption

Extended discussion on cultural shift in AI tool usage, as illustrated by the university experience where approaches to education have evolved from treating AI as cheating to integrated teaching tool. Third-year university students now are required to use AI tools while developing critical thinking, fact-checking, and knowledge synthesis skills.

Urgent need was identified for baseline AI literacy across public, private, and citizen populations. Organizations stuck in "pilot mode" waiting for permission and clear guidance on appropriate tool usage, acceptable data inputs, and sovereignty requirements. DAVI is positioned to provide regional leadership in practical AI literacy development.

Pragmatic Sovereignty

Discussion emphasized need to clearly define what sovereignty means in accessible terms for startups, public sector, and large enterprises. Interest expressed in models like air-gapped AI solutions that enable sovereignty without sacrificing capability. Participants stressed importance of protecting local talent, IP, and data while enabling collaboration and growth.

Governance and Commercialization

Recognition that Canada leads in AI research but falls short at commercialization, losing talent to international firms. Discussion highlighted need for streamlined policy, work permits, and financial incentives to retain talent. DAVI must address commercialization barriers while creating pathways from research to market for local startups and enterprises.

Governance framework discussion focused on pragmatic approaches balancing responsible use with innovation enablement. Privacy professionals highlighted need for integrated privacy management programs, particularly for SMEs facing legal, financial, and reputational risks.

Sector Opportunities

Previous roundtables identified high-potential sectors including ocean/marine technology (regional strength), Indigenous data sovereignty (critical regional priority), health informatics and medical technology (university linkages), and life sciences (broad regional definition encompassing diverse applications).

Discussion noted Victoria-centric nature of current activity with intention to expand across Vancouver Island region. Emphasis on serving sectors with strong local presence while building capability to service broader markets.

Priority Actions and Recommendations

Immediate Launch Preparation

Forum participants committed to moving from discussion to action. Key imperative: establish governance structure, define roles and responsibilities, identify pilot projects for initial implementation, and set concrete timelines for April launch.

Emphasis placed on "putting shoulder to wheel" – with participants agreeing to get on board and contribute actively. Recognition that continued in-person meetings unsustainable; need for effective virtual collaboration platforms established (with some in-person as appropriate).

Impact Measurement Framework

Commitment to developing robust impact measurement and management framework to demonstrate value creation, track talent retention outcomes, measure economic growth contribution, and provide evidence for government support requests.

MBA research on impact measurement frameworks for innovation hubs positioned as foundational work for DAVI metrics development.

Communication and Coordination

Recognition of platform decision importance - determining optimal balance between existing tools and new channels to maintain momentum without notification overload. Need for structured approach to onboarding new participants as interest grows beyond initial cohort.

Funding and Support Programs

Discussion of AI commercialization program launching April 2026, innovation agency programs supporting companies facing market barriers, and federal/provincial funding opportunities for ecosystem development.

Emphasis on aligning DAVI activities with available funding mechanisms and demonstrating regional readiness for investment.

Collaboration Models

Participants represented diverse organizational types requiring coordination mechanisms across startups, established enterprises, government agencies, universities, innovation hubs, and professional service providers.

Discussion emphasized bringing together existing capabilities rather than duplicating efforts - leveraging regional leadership initiative across Vancouver Island for greater visibility and impact.

Key Priorities and Opportunities

Talent Ecosystem

Critical priority: retaining graduates and experienced professionals currently leaving region for opportunities elsewhere. Creating compelling reason for talent to stay through viable employment pathways, entrepreneurship support, connection to broader markets, and demonstration of economic opportunity.

Data Services Specialization

Strategic opportunity to develop recognized expertise in data governance, AI implementation services, sector-specific data applications, and sovereignty-enabled solutions serving privacy-conscious markets.

Startup Support and Commercialization

Addressing barriers preventing research-to-market transitions through mentorship and expertise networks, connection to funding sources, demonstration of market demand, and peer learning across startup cohort.

Public-Private Collaboration

Leveraging region's public sector concentration as opportunity rather than liability through procurement opportunities for local data services, pilot project partnerships, talent exchange programs, and demonstration sites for innovative approaches.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Recognized as both regional priority and opportunity for differentiation, aligning with reconciliation commitments, building partnerships with Indigenous communities, developing specialized expertise, and creating models exportable to other regions.

Follow-Up Action Items

Governance Structure

Finalize steering committee composition defining roles and decision-making authority, establishing working group structure for specific initiatives, determining membership criteria and onboarding process, and creating accountability mechanisms.

The identified models are Constellation Model³ and Collective Impact Backbone Model⁴. The former is favored for being agile and while the latter is more formal though complex⁵.

Launch Planning

Set specific April 2026 launch date and format, prepare launch communications and materials, identify initial showcase projects, and coordinate with partner organizations.

Platform and Tools

Select communication/collaboration platform balancing functionality and adoption barriers, establish document sharing and knowledge management approach, and implement meeting scheduling and participation tracking.

Pilot Projects

Identify 2-3 initial pilot projects demonstrating value and building momentum, ensure diversity across sectors and organization types, establish success metrics and evaluation approach, and plan documentation for learning and promotion.

³ [Constellation Model of Governance - Centre for Social Innovation](#)

⁴ [Collective Impact Backbones - Different Approaches](#)

⁵ See Leaders Forum slides

Funding Strategy

Map available funding programs and application timelines, develop compelling narrative for government support requests, quantify economic impact potential, and identify corporate sponsorship opportunities.

Outreach and Engagement

Develop materials explaining DAVI value proposition for different stakeholder types, plan broader community engagement beyond core group, coordinate with media for strategic visibility, and establish connections with national AI ecosystem initiatives.

Measurement Framework

Finalize impact metrics aligned with regional economic goals, establish baseline measurements for key indicators, implement tracking mechanisms, and plan regular reporting cadence.

Next Steps

The initial formal infrastructure of operations and governance will be set up, prior to the April 1 launch date. This will include public presence, shared collaborative facilities, definitions of membership, and population of the steering committee (or equivalent). A call for Expressions of Interest for ecosystem capacity building projects will also feature.

Those who attended – as well as those who could not but previously participated – will be kept informed, invited to step forward, surveyed for preferences, and presented with opportunities over March 2026.

Conclusion

The February 25, 2026 DAVI Leaders Forum marked critical transition from consultation to action. Participants demonstrated strong commitment to building data services cluster addressing regional economic challenges while aligning with federal AI strategy priorities. The diversity of represented perspectives - from startups to government, privacy to commercialization, education to enterprise services - positions DAVI to address ecosystem needs holistically.

Success depends on maintaining momentum established through roundtable consultations, translating enthusiasm into concrete deliverables, demonstrating early wins building credibility and attracting additional participants, and balancing inclusive growth with need for decisive action. From early wins, larger strategic objectives will be rapidly developed based on opportunity and insights.

April 2026 launch represents opportunity to establish Vancouver Island as recognized hub for responsible data and AI services, creating blueprint for other Canadian regions seeking to translate technical capability into economic prosperity while maintaining commitment to sovereignty, privacy, and reconciliation priorities.

Contact the DAVI co-leaders for more information and express your interest in participating

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