

# **Within Reach**

*Strategic Direction for Alberta's Agricultural Societies*

**Alberta Association of Agricultural Societies**

**A Planning Assignment Conducted by Manecon Business Strategies Inc.**

**2011**

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### **Executive Summary**

The attached document reports on research conducted for the Alberta Association of Agricultural Societies in 2010 and 2011. A qualitative approach was employed to explore key research priorities:

- Opportunities and challenges facing Alberta's Agricultural Societies
- The role of Agricultural Societies in community leadership
- Progressive partnerships and alliances
- Appropriate best/emerging practices
- Strategic priorities for Agricultural Societies and for AAAS

Further, the research was intended to develop simple action plans and tools to assist Agricultural Societies to identify and pursue their business opportunities.

A program of in-depth in-person and telephone interviews explored the study topics with nearly 100 Agricultural Societies. Financial statements, business plans, and activity reports provided to AAAS by Agricultural Societies were analyzed. Further insight was provided by consultation with Board Members and staff of AAAS, representatives of the Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions and the International Association of Fairs and Exhibitions, other key influential organizations, community leaders and businesspeople. Prior research related to the industry was also reviewed.

### **Overview of Conclusions**

Alberta's Agricultural Societies have been at the heart of the life and growth of their communities for a century or more. They contribute significantly to rural and urban life, reinforcing rural, agricultural, and other community values. Agricultural Societies provide a wide range of programming, facilities, and support mechanisms benefiting local, regional, and other residential and business populations.

In most Alberta communities Agricultural Societies have made available recreational, social, and business facilities for their communities that would not have been available otherwise. In addition to income earned from operations, Agricultural Societies are significantly supported by funding from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development and from other Provincial and Federal Government sources.

Over their long history Agricultural Societies have provided a multi-purpose community focus for local residents and business people and have provided for many needs. The Agricultural Societies are thus community builders and facilitators.

Non-residents have been attracted to communities directly by the programming and facilities delivered by the Agricultural Societies. Thus Agricultural Societies have directly stimulated non-resident spending for the benefit of the local business community. Facilities and programming have often been made available for local residents only because it is partially funded by the spending of non-residents of the community.

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Many Agricultural Societies are progressive and innovative, seeking out and pursuing opportunities with enthusiasm and consequently delivering strong benefits for their communities. They are visionaries and leaders. Others are more focused on maintaining a status quo, limited from taking a more aggressive approach by a variety of factors described in this report. Regardless of the extent to which their Agricultural Society is considered to be a progressive community leader, it is clear from the research that the Boards of Directors and employees of Alberta Agricultural Societies are dedicated, concerned individuals, strongly focused on serving their communities to the very best of their ability and resources.

It is strongly recommended in the report that Agricultural Societies take action to regain or optimize their relevance in light of the changing needs of their community. Further, they should take steps through aggressive community engagement to proactively meet the steadily evolving needs and expectations of their community.

The more progressive Agricultural Societies deliver a diverse, innovative, and changing range of activities, facilities and services. They are strongly positioned in their communities. Their Boards of Directors and senior executives are enthusiastic about their opportunities and their track record. They envision huge potential for growth, but acknowledge the limitations on achieving their full potential for their stakeholders resulting from financial and human resource constraints.

However, many Agricultural Societies struggle to maintain their existing facilities and programming, often appearing to have been backed into a corner by the opposing challenges of decreasing voluntarism, increasing operating costs, increasing competition for financial and human resources, changing local demographics, and sometimes a feeling of isolation. They maintain a lower profile in their communities than the more progressive Agricultural Societies and may be losing ground as they have been unable to keep up with the evolution of their community. Many Agricultural Societies have difficulty in attracting new Board Members and are challenged to deliver more than their existing programming or facilities. Many Boards also appear to be reluctant to change and that reluctance directly impedes their ability to be current in their pursuit of community benefits.

The research shows that challenges facing many of Alberta's Agricultural Societies are similar to those experienced by many Agricultural Societies elsewhere in Canada and in the US.

Tools are included in the Agricultural Society Toolkit accompanying this report to assist Agricultural Societies to pursue the recommendations noted below and other action items.

## **Key Recommendations**

- Agricultural Societies should actively and openly engage their communities, stakeholders, other community organizations, and other Agricultural Societies in planning approaches to identify and pursue new opportunities.
- Agricultural Societies should pursue updating or regaining their relevance through a process of community and stakeholder consultation as a component of developing a new strategic plan.
- Through consultative strategic planning focused on developing expanded priorities, Agricultural Societies will be able to identify and negotiate with potential partners for development and delivery of new initiatives or to deliver specific programming.

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- Agricultural Societies should adopt enhanced practices and emerging technologies where they are appropriate.
- By engaging other community leaders, other Agricultural Societies, stakeholder groups, and corporate partners Agricultural Societies may identify or explore opportunities for cost and resource sharing, cost reduction, and revenue generation.
- New strategies are needed to revitalize Boards and Agricultural Societies in order to bring new vitality to the Agricultural Society. Agricultural Society Boards should undergo Board training, using the AAAS Governance modeling program.
- Agricultural Societies should develop an open and ongoing community and stakeholder engagement program to raise awareness of the Agricultural Society and its capabilities and resources and to encourage dialogue with the community and other stakeholders about the Agricultural Society and its deliverables and future direction.

## **The Role of AAAS**

Agricultural Societies interviewed noted the significant value of the AAAS annual convention and AGM and special educational meetings as learning and networking events. While those attending the Regional Meetings also applaud them, several Agricultural Societies indicated they were unable to take advantage of them for logistical or resource reasons.

AAAS has successfully pursued many initiatives for the benefit of its members. However, often the members appear not to know about them. A more intensive communication strategy would be appropriate to raise awareness of the progress of AAAS on behalf of its members. The research validates the priorities and achievements of AAAS during recent years.

The research identifies two primary roles for AAAS as the industry leader for Agricultural Societies in Alberta:

## **Industry Leadership Priorities**

- Be an example of visionary leadership
- Engage members to build stronger industry understanding, participation and teamwork
- Rebrand and refocus the industry
- Continue to emphasize the investment in education and training for Agricultural Societies
- Provide guidance and facilitation of strategic planning approaches to assist Agricultural Societies to develop stronger strategic direction
- Maintain an ongoing industry research program to provide strategic and planning knowledge for Agricultural Societies
- Actively explore opportunities with government and industry to reveal potential ventures for Agricultural Societies to assist these partners to promote or deliver their programming at the community level; Develop joint ventures with appropriate organizations (e.g., Travel Alberta) for joint promotion strategies
- Develop and execute a strong communication strategy to raise the profile of Agricultural Societies, enhance communication and stimulate dialogue around the potential, issues and priorities of Agricultural Societies in provincial media and among business and government
- Develop a new funding model with modified financial management principles.

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### **Services to Members**

In addition to its strategic priorities on behalf of Alberta's Agricultural Society industry, AAAS has a role to provide services for its member Agricultural Societies. Priorities in this respect include:

- Establish a more effective active member engagement strategy
- Continue to enhance and stage the annual Convention and Regional Meetings
- Assist Agricultural Societies to implement new funding and financial management methods as they are developed
- Develop and stage a strategic planning approach to assist Agricultural Societies to develop and pursue new strategic direction.
- Maintain a program of education and training for Boards to pursue excellence in governance and business operations.

### **Summary**

Agricultural Societies have great potential to expand the benefits they deliver for their stakeholders, by acknowledging and responding to the evolving nature and expectations of their populations and business communities.

Strategies to achieve that growth include focused engagement of the various stakeholder groups in more formalized, consultative planning approaches. Developing partnerships and alliances with other community organizations, other Agricultural Societies, and other organizations would enhance the benefits delivered by the Agricultural Society.

The research suggests that in some cases, Agricultural Societies would benefit significantly from Board Training in governance and business operations.

The consultants take this opportunity to acknowledge the cooperation and insight of Alberta's Agricultural Societies, of AAAS, CAFE, IAFE, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, and other organizations interviewed in the research.