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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.

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1.0 Introduction

This research was commissioned in 2010 by the Alberta Association of Agricultural Societies (“AAAS”) to explore opportunities to assist Alberta’s Agricultural Societies to enhance their important role in their communities and to identify strategies for AAAS to support those strategies. Many of Alberta’s 300 Agricultural Societies are as old as the communities they serve although others are much younger. Formed to contribute support to agricultural and rural communities, Agricultural Societies have evolved to address needs identified in their communities and to pursue opportunities presented by funding sources. Agricultural Societies are funded by a combination of contributions from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, operating revenue, sponsor and member investment, and other sources.

Agricultural Societies serve their communities by providing facilities and programming focused on a wide range of applications, including entertainment, agricultural awareness, community development, sports and recreation, and support for the business and residential communities. Prior research has shown that events staged by the Agricultural Societies and the facilities operated by the Agricultural Societies serve an extraordinary proportion of the population of Alberta and visitors to the Province, measured by attendance at events and in facilities operated by the Agricultural Societies.

As is the case with most industry associations, AAAS member societies range from very focused, progressive, and innovative Agricultural Societies to societies that are very limited in their scope and some that are quite introspective. This research seeks to explore these differences in order to develop valid recommendations for Agricultural Societies to pursue their mandates.

Agricultural Societies report that changing demographic conditions and funding priorities have caused many Societies to re-think their direction and priorities. However, responding to the changing business environment has not been simple for the Agricultural Societies. Future challenges will require changing priorities for the Agricultural Societies and many find it difficult to perceive how their future role must evolve to maintain relevance to their stakeholders.

This research explores the changing business environment and suggests opportunities and strategies for Agricultural Societies to pursue goals focused on current trends and conditions. Tactical aids are also provided to assist the Agricultural Societies to assume new opportunities.

Research Priorities

Key research priorities are:

- Identifying the key factors that limit the success of Agricultural Societies in meeting their goals
- Identifying and developing leading or emerging practices in significant areas of the operation of Agricultural Societies that, if implemented, would be expected to contribute positive benefits for the societies
- Exploring and identifying new partnership and strategic opportunities for Agricultural Societies to stimulate enhanced benefits at the community level

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- Identifying and describing opportunities for strategic positioning and new partnerships and alliances for AAAS to pursue its mandate
- Developing recommendations for the industry in key areas that appear to offer the greatest potential for improvement in strategic leadership and pursuit of strategic opportunities for Agricultural Societies to stimulate the greatest benefit for their rural communities
- Developing specific tools to assist Agricultural Societies and AAAS to implement study recommendations.

Methodology

This research is qualitative by nature. It was conducted through exploratory discussion processes. The research methodology included the following components:

- Discussions with Agricultural Societies:
- Reviews of planning and reporting documentation provided by Agricultural Societies:
- Discussions with community representatives:
- Discussions with organizations with knowledge or expertise relevant to Agricultural Societies:
- Reviews of other relevant documentation.

The experience held by the consultants in this industry was employed to interpret the results of the research and to develop conclusions and recommendations. This was accomplished by detailed examination and comparison of the individual interview notes and other research inputs to develop conclusions. Interim reporting to AAAS during the research program addressed conclusions drawn from several individual research elements.

Report Structure

This report is structured to follow the research priorities noted above. Report sections are as follows:

1. Introduction (this section)
2. Research Summary
3. Alberta's Agricultural Societies
4. Agricultural Societies' Stakeholders
5. The Challenges of Leadership
6. Opportunities, Barriers, and Constraints
7. Acknowledged Successful or Leading Practices
8. Partnerships and Strategic Opportunities
9. Strategic Positioning and Priorities for AAAS
10. Supporting Government Initiatives
11. Summary of Conclusions
12. Implementation Tools for Agricultural Societies and AAAS

Additional reports (bound separately) include:

- Implementation Toolkit
- Quantitative analysis
- AAAS Strategic Plan.

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Acknowledgements

The consultants acknowledge gratefully the commitment and insight of the more than eighty Agricultural Societies consulted in the research. Board Members and staff of these Agricultural Societies discussed research topics openly and with a progressive view.

The knowledge and leadership of AAAS, Government of Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, the Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions (CAFE), and the International Association of Fairs and Exhibitions (IAFE) contributed significantly to the interpretation of research findings and to the development of recommendations. Their vision and guidance contributed to this research is sincerely appreciated.

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2.0 Research Summary

This section of the report highlights key findings from each of the primary research avenues. The Agricultural Society representatives included in the interview programs in this research were encouraged to address specific issues and in many cases commented on the fact that the discussion was a benefit for them and may contribute to some improvements in the areas discussed in the interview.

Key issues and opportunities that arose during the research were communicated to AAAS for further evaluation and development.

Analysis of Business Plans

Analysis of the Business Plans submitted by Agricultural Societies to Government of Alberta, Agriculture and Rural Development ("ARD") and AAAS provides a perspective on the priorities of Agricultural Societies and the depth of their focus on community priorities.

The review of the business plans was significantly qualitative and was employed in many study activities. It included a quantitative assessment to aid in grouping the Agricultural Societies for various purposes. The rating system developed for the quantitative component of the review is focused on key areas of community participation and leadership and on organizational priorities:

- Community leadership
- Partnerships
- Planning
- Growth and expansion
- Organization promotion

The following table indicates selected summary results of the analysis, including rating results only where they can be determined from examination of the business plans. The following notes summarize selected data from the review:

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Agricultural Societies - priority areas (based on Business Plan Review)	Number of Ag Societies included in data	Average category rating/5	Median	Rated 5	Rated 4	Rated 3	Rated 2	Rated 1	Percent rated 4 or 5	Percent rated 1 or 2
Community Leadership role	210	3.5	3.5	16	72	57	20	3	52.4	13.7
Partnerships	210	3.1	3.0	7	50	56	26	7	39.0	22.6
Planning	210	3.4	3.5	23	60	38	27	10	52.5	23.4
Growth and Expansion	209	3.1	3.5	17	66	37	19	41	46.1	33.3
Organization Promotion	209	3.0	3.0	17	62	28	21	52	43.9	40.6
Total Points	211	11.23	13.3	80	310	216	113	113	46.9	27.2
# rating 20 total points or more	54									
# rated 11 to 19 total points	36									
# rated 10 total points or less	121									
No business plans	89									
Total Number of Societies Listed	300									

Rating system Category

Community Leader

Rating

1 - basic organizational functions
3 - involved in basic functions and some events and activities
5 - pivotal to community social life

Partnerships

1 - no partnerships identified
3 - clientele as partners
5 - strong and diverse partnerships

Planning

1 - no evidence of planning
3 - immediate short term planning
5 - long term planning including succession plans, and well defined goals and objectives

Growth & Expansion

1 - no membership drive
3 - loose membership drive
5 - well planned membership drive

Organization Promotion

1 - no passive or active promotion
3 - active promotion
5 - active promotion with well defined strategies

The review of business plans described above illustrates the focus of Agricultural Societies.

- Slightly more than half of the business plans describe a role their author-Agricultural Societies play in community leadership. Agricultural Societies are slightly more inclined to be focused on a significant role in community leadership than to be inwardly focused.
- Partnership activities appear to be a lower priority with few indicating a significant focus on developing or operating within strong and diverse partnerships.
- Again slightly more than half of the Agricultural Societies show a medium to longer range planning focus. The insistence of ARD and AAAS on the production of business plans has contributed to this. Interviews conducted in the research plan show that many Agricultural Societies that had previously not focused on planning acknowledge that they have benefited from the process.
- Growth and expansion of the Agricultural Society was assessed through mentions in the business plans of membership development. Slightly more than half of the societies have included this drive as a priority.

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- Less than half of the Agricultural Societies are actively focused on developing the profile of their organization in their community. In most interview groups engaged in the research Agricultural Society Board Members reported that they are not good at promoting themselves: “They are not very good at blowing their own horn”.

AAAS Convention Interviews

Approximately 40 Agricultural Societies completed a self-administered questionnaire or participated in an exploratory interview at the AAAS 2010 convention. Delegates interviewed identified several key areas of concern:

- Funding challenges
- Accountability
- Resistance to adapt
- Decline in voluntarism and volunteer burnout
- The challenge of increasing paperwork and “red tape”
- Their own lack of knowledge of business practices required to meet reporting requirements
- Engaging youth.

The Personal Interview Program

The personal interview program was conducted with Alberta Agricultural Societies during the month of June 2010. Agricultural Societies to be included in the personal interview program were selected in consultation with the AAAS Board of Directors and staff. Interviews lasted between 90 and 150 minutes and in most cases included a selection of Board Members and, where appropriate, employees of the Agricultural Societies.

The interview program was designed to explore the research topics in detail. An exploratory technique was used to examine key study issues, including issues included in the interviews conducted at the AAAS Convention in January 2010. This program of interviews provided significant value in understanding the opportunities and challenges facing Agricultural Societies and their interaction with AAAS, their partners, their communities and other stakeholders.

Telephone Interview Program

A selection of Agricultural Societies was also engaged through in-depth telephone interviews to explore further some of the key issues raised during the in-person interviews. The telephone interview program was particularly challenging due to the limited availability of Agricultural Society representatives for interview. Most of these interviews were with smaller Agricultural Societies and provided additional perspective on key issues relevant to the smaller organizations.

The Community View

Throughout the research, unstructured discussions and interviews were conducted with local government representatives, representatives of community organizations, local business people, and other local organizations. These discussions varied in their nature, generally focused on expanding

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understanding of the perceptions and benefits associated with the Agricultural Society in the community.

Communities vary in their own nature and progressiveness. A progressive community is one actively pursuing enhancements and opportunities for the local residential and business populations. Enhancements and opportunities may include a strong focus on economic development, real estate development, infrastructure improvements, opportunities for education, recreation, and health, etc. They are making progress with their goals, despite often challenging community circumstances. While most of these communities are larger, that is not a precursor. Some smaller communities are also very progressive.

At the other end of the scale, some communities are facing dire circumstances as a result of economic trends, agricultural trends, other business factors, or perceived competition with neighbouring communities. Some are striving for survival. Some of these communities may appear to have “given up”, although, again, some of these communities are quite progressive in their drive for a stronger identity.

Between these two ends of the scale are many communities, most of which are also dealing with challenging environments. However, there is a role for a strong Agricultural Society to contribute in each of these cases.

Interviews with AAAS Board Members

The final research component was a series of hour-long interviews with AAAS Board Members. Nearly all of the Directors were interviewed individually in this initiative.

It was refreshing to see the vision and commitment of the AAAS Directors. Each of those interviewed brought new insights and suggestions to assist Agricultural Societies to take advantage of their opportunities. Clearly, each of the Directors has strong experience that is very relevant to their dual roles in their own Agricultural Society and the AAAS Boards. It was clear from the interviews why the Agricultural Societies attending Regional Meetings found them to be a valuable experience.

Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions (CAFE)

A discussion was held in Ottawa with Hannah Service, Executive Director of CAFE in Ottawa and her colleague, (now CAFE Executive Director) Mavis Hanna was significantly valuable and provides insight into several key strategies, including:

1. The importance of defining what Ag Societies are
2. The need to focus on a diverse stakeholders
3. Strategic direction for Agricultural Societies and for the industry, including the roles for CAFE and Provincial Associations
4. Opportunities and strategies for Ag Societies to enhance their role and participation in their communities.
5. Examples of leading/innovative Ag Societies that have been successful community builders, integrating youth, etc..

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6. Challenges facing Ag Societies and the industry
7. Information and knowledge sources valuable for Ag Societies, Provincial Associations, and for the industry
8. Financial and funding strategies at the national level

The discussion revealed that CAFE has available several sources of information that would be valuable to AAAS, individual Agricultural Societies and other industry players.

Naturally, CAFE is seeking to become stronger as a national facilitator and lobbyist for the growth of Ag Societies. They are interested to hear how AAAS defines CAFE and to enhancing teamwork and integrating programming for the benefit of Agricultural Societies and the industry.

Given the AAAS thrust to become more active in CAFE it may be appropriate for AAAS and CAFE to explore formally the opportunities and strategies relevant to the priorities of both organizations.

International Association of Fairs and Exhibitions (IAFE)

Discussions were also held with (IAFE) President and CEO Jim Tucker. IAFE represents the interests of Agricultural Societies, fairs and exhibitions predominantly in the US although it also maintains an international focus. It is a strong organization and is based in the US. Its Board of Directors includes a representative from the Board of Directors of CAFE. The mandate and key priorities for IAFE are similar to those of CAFE and AAAS within their own constituencies.

The purpose of these discussions was to explore conclusions reached during this research, seeking insight towards developing recommendations from the broad experience of IAFE, and to contribute to exploring best practices appropriate for use by Alberta's Agricultural Societies and AAAS.

IAFE consistently wrestles with challenges for its broad membership that are similar to those identified in this research for Alberta's Agricultural Societies. Similarities include:

- Refocusing to meet changing business and community conditions
- Education of members
- Fair Board education and motivation
- Attracting youth
- How smaller fair Boards comprising mostly volunteers can maintain their focus and programming
- How to position the Industry Association best to encourage and motivate its member organizations
- Developing and pursuing strategic direction.

IAFE has a strong focus on member education to facilitate the development of strong member organizations. It has focused significantly on educational priorities, including both Fair Board and Management education and training and raising agricultural awareness.

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The IAFE's "Institute of Fair Management" certifies Agricultural Society, Fair, and Exhibition managers through a program of education. Programs developed for professional development of Fair Boards and Management include:

- A strong focus on mentoring, facilitated in conjunction with the Annual Convention and other events
- Creation of the "Institute of Fair Management" four years ago that has attracted significant interest. It was established to fill vacancies as Baby Boomers retire from the fair industry. Its training programs target fair managers and are on a four year cycle, thus it is just entering its second full cycle. It has now graduated 28 executives and has 176 more enrolled. IAFE is very pleased with the uptake.

Agricultural awareness training includes several initiatives that have been developed for use by member fairs in their own events and programs. Several portable program concepts are available to members, including:

"Read and Win"

- Offered in conjunction with the National Independent Concessionaires Association, this program encourages elementary school students at the community level to read library books. Awards are provided for accomplishments

"Colour the Fair"

- A colouring book builds awareness of the fair among young people as they fill in pictures depicting fair and agricultural scenes

"The Milk Maker Activity Station"

- Builds awareness of the source and production of milk

"The Farmer for a Day Activity Station"

- Engages young people and families to learn about farming

"Corn is Everywhere"

- Raises awareness among families of the broad use of corn in their homes and lives.

"Grow-ems" to engage the community further.

IAFE believes many people, even people resident in rural communities, have seen more zoo animals than farm animals. This has caused IAFE to create programming and initiatives to focus on extending recognition of the agricultural environment. These priorities focus on all stages of the food stream. Guest chefs, wine, educational groups in the communities contribute to getting the population engaged again. Similar approaches have been employed in Alberta by ARD to engage rural communities with the food chain.

Engaging young people in order to attract them to get involved in fair management and direction is a major priority for IAFE, as it is for AAAS and Alberta's Agricultural Societies. Through decisions at its 2008 Convention, IAFE created an initiative called the Young Professionals Initiative, focused on developing young professionals aged 40 years and younger. The mission of the YPI is to provide a venue for young professionals to guide the future of the fair industry through leadership development, mentoring,

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incentives, education, and idea sharing with IAFE. The Young Professionals Initiative in turn has created the "Rising Star Award" to identify the rising stars of the industry.

IAFE maintains an ongoing research program that results in a library of knowledge-based resources being available to members.

"Status Quo" for Agricultural Societies

Alberta's rural communities have changed significantly over the more than 100 years of history reported by many Agricultural Societies. Changes in the communities include:

- Transportation and communication enhancements, housing costs, urban congestion, urban population trends, and changes in the business economy have led to changing demographics in rural communities. Many smaller communities have sometimes dominant in-migrant populations with more urban views and expectations. Many communities have become "bedroom communities", in which increasing proportions of local residents are more inclined to be of urban origin and to focus on urban standards and priorities while ascribing to the values and benefits of rural living.
- These new residents have different values and priorities from the previously prevalent rural/farming populations. They have chosen to live in rural communities, but bring with them expectations built from their urban experience. Opportunities exist for Agricultural Societies to facilitate the increasing awareness and participation of these populations in their new rural living environment.
- Further, in some communities the agricultural economy has weakened as local farms have sold to larger corporate agriculture companies. Technology has changed resulting in the loss of agricultural jobs and businesses focused on agricultural customers.
- Residents have expanded expectations for entertainment.
- Residents have less awareness of local agricultural influences and of the importance of the agricultural economy.
- Communities show the changing face of farming as larger corporate farms have absorbed many smaller local farms, consequently changing the relationship of the farm with the community and its residents and businesses.
- Changing economic conditions have affected the economy of Alberta, particularly influencing the financial resources of local and regional governments
- Economic stress affects the vitality of local businesspeople, which directly constrains the ability of many local business people to provide traditionally available financial support and sponsorship for local organizations.
- The implications of financial stress on Alberta families and community organizations requiring them all to do more with less.
- Limitations of time pressure on families grappling with the challenges of increasingly complex and often parallel priorities. This limits the potential to attract new volunteers and contributes to burnout in others.

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This is not news to Agricultural Societies. However, these factors significantly affect the role of the Agricultural Societies, which need to re-focus to respond to the needs and expectations of their new stakeholders and markets. While some have seized this as a growth opportunity, many have not been able to re-focus.

Each of these factors lead to opportunities for Agricultural Societies to expand the benefits they deliver for their local stakeholders. However, pursuing these opportunities would also require the Agricultural Societies to engage their local stakeholders more positively.

Without question, Agricultural Societies and their Boards are totally dedicated to their communities. However, it is important to understand that there are degrees of value in this dedication.

The research shows that some Agricultural Society Boards have enthusiastically taken on the challenge of change. They have engaged their stakeholders and developed priorities and programming consistent with the needs and expectations of their stakeholders. They have sought out new partnerships and other resources and developed plans to contribute actively to the progress of their community.

Increasingly focused the growing challenges of delivering their main events and other mandates, many Agricultural Societies have been unable to respond to changes in their business environment. Agricultural Societies have a vital role in their communities and they deliver benefits for many stakeholders. Sadly, because they have been unable to keep up with their changing business environment, many appear to be serving priorities that are no longer appropriate or progressive. Thus they do not deliver an active role as a key player in the community's drive forward.

Agricultural Society Boards have an extraordinary opportunity to position themselves to contribute significantly to meeting the desires, needs, and expectations of present and future stakeholders, thus playing a vitally important role in contributing to cohesiveness and harmony in the community.

Agricultural Society Boards of Directors comprise a remarkable group of people. The Directors are mostly strongly committed to their community and to their Agricultural Society. Many of the Board Members are also members of other Boards in the community – they are leaders and champions of their communities. However, it is unfortunate that many Agricultural Societies are hampered by limitations associated with their Board of Directors.

Although the Directors are so dedicated to their cause, it is a characteristic of many Boards that a large proportion of Board members have served their Boards for many years. Executive positions simply rotate among them.

It is unfortunate that many boards displaying those characteristics lose their vision over time. While the Board Members remain focused on their day to day tasks and events, they lose their enthusiasm and creativity. In turn, that tends to slow down the progress of the organization as it loses vibrancy until it becomes disconnected from its evolving stakeholders. It becomes a Board that does not attract or encourage younger, more enthusiastic, or innovative Board Members. That leads to tired Boards and "burned out" Directors, as the directors feel they have to do everything because there is little support.

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This challenge for Boards and Agricultural Societies is not new. It has been reported many times, including in research conducted for AAAS (ibid) in 1992.

Many Agricultural Society Boards are “working Boards”, both acting as their Society’s Directors and directly planning and delivering its programming. Further, many of these Boards comprise volunteers who have limited knowledge of some of the business practices required to perform in the current business environment for Not for Profit Societies.

3.0 Alberta's Agricultural Societies

The Agricultural Society Organization

The business plans reveal that in many cases Agricultural Societies do not have a strong and vibrant vision to focus direction for their organization into the future. Agricultural Society vision statements and discussions on vision are often focused on a delivering a status quo program. Most Agricultural Society Business Plans reviewed tend not to be strategic by nature. This is confirmed through the discussions with Agricultural Societies. However, some Agricultural Societies are more strategic by nature and have a clear view of their future direction.

In many cases Agricultural Society business plans were developed in order to respond to the request from ARD to provide them and most follow the format recommended to them by AAAS. Most Boards have formally adopted the business plans.

Several of the societies found the development of their business plan to be a very valuable process. Most of those societies use their business plan as a working tool. However, future-orientated components of the plans are generally project-focused rather than visionary or strategic.

Most boards are working boards. They suffer from many challenges of overburdened voluntarism. There is not generally a focus on building boards for the future. Most boards have wrestled with the challenge of introducing younger board members as a part of their focus on the future. Most of the Agricultural Societies do not have a succession plan – a significant ongoing challenge is generally finding people to serve on the board. The previous discussion in this report provides a perspective on this challenging situation.

In some cases, it was noted that younger, more visionary/more enthusiastic board members have joined the board but their ability to move their Agricultural Society forward is limited by the attitude of the remaining, longer standing Board Members and to some extent by the community.

Several success stories were recorded through the research. Boards should identify their successes and these should be celebrated. It is noted, however, that in discussion of success stories, most successes were related to successful new or existing events. In some cases, Boards commented that their greatest success was to have survived another year, given increasingly difficult operating conditions. Only a small number of success stories related to expanding benefits for the community or significant new ventures, direction or innovation.

Conclusion

- A stronger visionary and forward orientated strategic planning process would be valuable to help guide Agricultural Societies to achieve their greater potential. This is evolutionary and can be achieved through guidance provided by AAAS over time.

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- Boards need guidance on building community relationships, internal leadership, and addressing a series of challenges they have noted. This can be accomplished by providing some tools and from AAAS leadership.

The Agricultural Society Board of Directors

Challenges associated with the Boards of Directors of Agricultural Societies have been addressed in research conducted for AAAS in 1992/3 and several subsequent research assignments (Ibid). Efforts of AAAS and of individual Agricultural Societies have achieved some progress in enhancing the operation of Agricultural Society Boards. The 1992/3 research identified that Boards were large, were constituted of very long standing Board members, and had difficulty in attracting younger Board members. However, many of the challenges identified in 1992/3 remain today.

The implication of those structural challenges is polarized differently in discussions with Board members who are younger and more recently appointed/elected to Boards compared with discussions with those who, themselves, are older and longer-standing Board members. This is a very important issue. Boards should be encouraged to address this issue as a major priority

The interviews with Agricultural Societies revealed the importance of balance in the composition of Boards as an evolutionary process. Boards actively integrating the input and perspective of new and longer standing Board Members appear to be more vibrant and to have more progressive approaches than boards without that balance, illustrating a significant benefit of Boards becoming more aggressive in their own regeneration.

Most of the societies interviewed in this research that reported progressive initiatives and programming, innovative approaches, growth strategies or expanding community benefits have a clear vision for the opportunity at their feet and they have the enthusiasm to pursue it. They have more balanced Boards and (in many cases) vibrant and progressive managers. It should be noted that in most cases they were located in medium to larger communities where more resources are available. However, examples were found also in smaller communities.

These societies have stronger business plans and some also have a strategic plan. They have strong and active relationships within their communities and they benefit from sponsorship and other business partnerships. In most cases their communities acknowledge the value of the Agricultural Society. These organizations tend to be focused on current and future opportunities. They have taken innovative approaches to problem solving and to seeking out new opportunities.

Agricultural Societies that report a less progressive environment tend to have Boards with less balanced composition. These Boards are no less committed to their communities or their Agricultural Societies than their more progressive peers. However, these Boards are concerned that they find it difficult to attract younger Board members. They tend to be significantly more inwardly focused and report they are challenged by increasing costs and are concerned about increasing difficulty in attracting volunteers. These Boards are confident they are fulfilling their mandate in the community, albeit with increasing

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challenges. Their communities comment that their Agricultural Society continues to execute its traditional responsibility.

The research shows that new and longer-serving, younger and older Agricultural Society Board Members are equally likely to serve as a member of the Board of Directors of one or more other community organizations. However, it appears not all of these multi-faceted Board Members directly engage the other organizations' Boards to discuss direction and priorities of the Agricultural Society – they are more likely to segment their roles for the various organizations they belong to. They indicate their contribution to all Boards they serve is increased by their knowledge of all of the organizations to which they belong.

View of Newer Board Members

While most Agricultural Societies attempt to attract younger people to their Boards, many are unsuccessful. The Boards acknowledge that younger Board members are enthusiastic, may bring new ideas, and may represent the changing demographic composition of the community well.

The younger, more recently appointed Board members interviewed appear frustrated with the “status quo thinking” that is represented by the longest standing members of their Boards. They perceive that some long-standing Board members appear to view the Agricultural Society as “theirs”, even to the extent that some noted direct control over the Agricultural Society by their longer standing Board colleagues. Examples provided during discussions in this research include refused Board support for participation in beneficial events, priorities viewed as inappropriate, reluctance to change systems (e.g., planning, bookkeeping), etc. More than one example was provided by a young, enthusiastic Board Member who wished to attend functions that would be of value to the Agricultural Society. They offered to do that at their own expense as Agricultural Society funds were not available – and their Board refused to sign the documentation required for attendance, indicating it was not necessary.

Several newer Board members interviewed in this research note that they, and other newer Board Members on their Board, perceive significant opportunities for their Agricultural Society but they are often restricted from pursuing them by the longer term Board Members. The research indicates that in several cases longer term Board members form an Executive Committee and make many decisions without them coming to the Board, thus maintaining control over the direction of the Agricultural Society. This is not appropriate Board behaviour.

View of Longer Standing Board Members

The Boards interviewed in this research that were predominantly constituted from long standing Board members were notably equally dedicated to their responsibility. However, they were more likely to discuss “burn out” of Board Members, tiredness, and lack of support than were their less long-serving colleagues.

Discussing the challenge of attracting younger, new Board members, the “long-termers” suggest that younger potential Board Members do not offer to join the Board and do not appear to be interested. It is

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suggested that well qualified members of this targeted demographic will be interested to join a progressive and vital Board that is centrally focused on optimizing the community's benefits.

Recommendation

Boards should pursue a "vitalization strategy" in order to create and maintain a vibrant and visionary Board with energy to seek out and pursue the opportunities and priorities available to the Agricultural Society. This process would start with the development of a strategic plan (for those Agricultural Societies that do not have one) developed in conjunction with other stakeholders and community leaders. Then a Bylaw Review Committee of the Board should develop bylaw renovations to formulate the Board suitably to pursue the Strategic Plan. This would include the process of selecting Board Members, limitations on the length of each term and the number of terms Board Members may stay on the Board. A Board Renovation Planning Tool is provided to assist Boards to pursue this recommendation.

The Primary Focus of the Agricultural Society

Through their long tenure in their communities, Agricultural Societies have generally focused on staging events and providing facilities that entertain or educate local residents or that provide facilities that would not otherwise be available in the community. Rural lifestyles and values have been dominant and most of the communities have grown with a strong agricultural focus.

While some communities have grown faster than others, it is very evident that in most cases the rural and agricultural nature of the communities has prevailed. Some rural communities have declined as their neighbours grow or as a result of changes in their local agricultural or other economy. The factors influencing this have been noted previously in this report.

However, the common factors influencing changes in communities are population and demographic change and expectations and rurally-focused economic change or development. This is the environment within which Agricultural Societies operate.

In order to remain relevant to the residents and business people in their communities and their regions, Agricultural Societies need to evolve as their community changes. This calls for ongoing strategic planning, which should include consultation with other community leaders and community stakeholders. If the Agricultural Society does not remain focused on this changing environment it will fall behind evolving trends in the community. Several examples in Alberta illustrate the importance of this focus.

Focus on Relevance

As noted previously, the demographic, political, and business environment that encompasses the stakeholders of Agricultural Societies has changed dramatically, but too many Agricultural Societies appear not to have responded to these changes. Further, many Agricultural Societies have not attempted to examine how their focus and priorities should evolve to meet those changes. Even among the Agricultural Societies that have changed their focus and priorities most have done this through internal discussion rather than through consultation with representatives of their stakeholders. Further discussion with these Agricultural Societies leads to the conclusion that new events, programs, and

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facilities have resulted from opportunities associated with new, motivated volunteers, as a result of funding opportunities.

In some cases new facilities have been developed by Agricultural Societies in response to an expressed need in the community. This indicates that there is often good and productive communication with the communities' leaders and motivators.

Perhaps the single most important issue for many Agricultural Societies is to focus on defining and optimizing their relevance to their new "brand" of stakeholders.

Not a single Agricultural Society interviewed in this research indicated that they did not care – but many may have "lost track" over so many years of service to their communities or lost some vigour as the Board attempts to deal with difficult funding environment or other operating challenges or suffers the consequences of lack of new blood on the Board. Many of the interviewees commented about the challenges they face, but most described internally-focused approaches to address their challenges rather than approaches involving consultation with other community leaders.

The interviewees described several internal approaches to accommodate the changing business environment, including cost cutting, programming limitation or curtailment, increased loading on volunteers (although this was often unsuccessful), etc. Most reported they had not responded to changes by adding new, or by increasing existing, revenue streams or expanding programming. Discussion revealed this was generally because the source of their challenge was their increasing difficulty in generating revenue to offset increasing costs, coupled with limited volunteer resources. Therefore, they believed securing additional operating revenue or sponsorship, etc., locally was inconsistent with their mission to provide programming for the community.

Many Agricultural Societies appear to believe that they are mandated to provide programming, facilities, etc., for their community and they are "on their own" to continue to do so as well as they can. Further, they appear to believe that other community organizations are equally challenged.

In some communities the municipality has stepped in to direct decisions about the operation of community facilities traditionally operated by the Agricultural Society. Those occasions have been widely communicated among Agricultural Societies. Knowledge of those apparently unilateral approaches may have made some Agricultural Societies reluctant to expose their challenges for discussion and scrutiny.

A Role for the Agricultural Society

In this research Agricultural Societies were identified that fulfill many roles in their community. Some are active as leading or equal partners in formally established economic and community development corporations/commissions. They are clearly identified and promoted in the community and outside as community leaders. They are active in a vibrant team identifying and developing a wide range of new initiatives for the community and determining how to pursue them. Many of the initiatives are not to do with the primary mandate of the Agricultural Society, but they are important to the community and the community had assembled its most vibrant thinkers to undertake this key role.

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Some Agricultural Societies are not involved in high level planning for their community and usually find out about community initiatives – often with great frustration or resignation - while they are being planned or when they are executed.

Some Agricultural Societies are viewed as aggressive community builders focused on growth or expansion, managing by innovation and developing partnerships in order to pursue their steadily evolving mandates. They are identified as leaders in their community. While they are not necessarily involved in planning for every community initiative, where it is appropriate they are included.

In many communities the Agricultural Society is viewed to be an important organization that is identified exclusively with specific events or programming or that operates specific facilities. It is more likely than not viewed as reliable and consistent. However, in many cases the Agricultural Society does not assume its potential role as one of the community's leaders.

“Silo” thinking is a challenge in many communities. In these communities, each of the community organizations or mandates has clearly defined boundaries and they are not involved in the initiatives contained within other silos. These communities often have difficulty identifying and taking advantage of their opportunities – they are not able to identify, research, or implement the opportunities due to these insular attitudes.

People Count

Regardless of the size, location or other circumstances of the community, the common factor that influences the progressiveness of these communities is the attitude and motivation of the people who live in them. That provides the opportunity for Agricultural Societies to take a stronger role in the leadership of the community – if they are also progressive and vibrant.

With the resources and community background available to them, Agricultural Societies have the potential to assume a leadership role that will derive increasing benefits for their community. However, In order to be successful in that role they will need to contribute participants who are viewed in the community as progressive and vibrant visionaries, strategic thinkers, and skilful “doers”. Naturally, in most cases these individuals will be expected to volunteer their time.

Recommendation:

In communities where specific challenges are identified, Agricultural Societies should initiate or facilitate multi-leader discussion in their community to determine joint approaches to optimize programming and delivery of related services. This process of discussion would be a natural result of the strategic planning process recommended previously.

An ongoing dialogue among community leaders is an effective process to develop jointly agreed strategies to achieve community goals in several areas. Because of the history of Agricultural Societies in their communities, they may be the best positioned community organizations to initiate and facilitate such a process. In communities where the Agricultural Society has not been seen recently or traditionally as a progressive and active leader, this process may take some time and “kid gloves” to get moving.

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Development of Rural Communities

This research shows that Alberta's Agricultural Societies are primarily focused on community development in a rural setting. This has likely always been the case. This is revealed by examination of the events staged by Agricultural Societies, discussion of their operating priorities, and examination of their business plans.

In fact, although most communities contain several community organizations, in many cases none is as deeply entrenched in the history or fibre of the community as the Agricultural Society. This is particularly the case in the older Agricultural Societies, although even those formed more recently also play an essential role. However, as many Agricultural Societies say, they do not "blow their own horn" well. They believe other community leaders know the mandate of the Agricultural Society and they are confident the organization is respected for executing that mandate.

That is true to some extent, but the other organizations have their own priorities and are equally challenged by resources and volunteer support so they do not have the time or reason to explore the detailed purpose or operation of the Agricultural Societies. However, most community organizations have formed more recently than the Agricultural Society. The leaders of those organizations may have assumed their responsibilities or may even have arrived in the community comparatively recently (often more recently than when some Agricultural Society Directors became members of the Board). Due to their own priorities and pressures, limited exposure to the history of the Agricultural Society, etc., these leaders may have not had occasion to consider the resources or the potential role for the Agricultural Society.

This situation of awareness is further limited by the fact that the Agricultural Societies have often maintained their focus, have not recently pursued innovative initiatives or "rocked the boat", and the "faces" of the organization have not changed. While people in the community say they are doing their job well, the Agricultural Society is not viewed as exciting.

An interviewee noted that the Agricultural Society is like the grandparents house. It has provided facilities, activities, safety, a sense of family, fibre, and stability for the community "forever", but it is now considered just a "nice place to go home to" where everything will be OK. However, it is no longer acknowledged as "the place to be for fun and excitement". It is time for Agricultural Societies to regain their role.

Therefore while the Agricultural Society is a pillar of the community and has provided the "home" for the community for many years, and has always been a part of the leadership in the community, it is not recognized as one of the primary leaders. It should be noted that although many aspire to a leadership role, it is their colleagues, peers, and followers who determine who the leaders are. Leaders are identified by their vision, how they work with people, what they achieve and how they do it.

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Community and Rural Development

Most of the Agricultural Societies perceive they are supporters, if not developers, in the evolution of their communities and their rural area. However, they mostly do not have specific area of focus on this issue, except through their provision of their existing facilities and programming in good order.

Conclusion

The Agricultural Societies are active in community and rural development but many do not communicate this benefit locally and they do not “expand the envelope”. This is a key area that should be addressed through stronger focus on the Boards and through extended communications programming. This can be achieved through an AAAS focus and through tools and developmental processes focused on this topic.

Regional Initiatives

Most Agricultural Societies are not involved in regional initiatives. They are focused primarily on their own mandate. Some Agricultural Societies indicated they are involved in good cooperation with other regional Agricultural Societies, for example to avoid competitive date scheduling or programming for events. It is logical for Boards to work with neighbouring Agricultural Societies to develop a broader base of programming for the area's population, using the facilities of each of the partner Agricultural Societies as required to provide a regional program with multiple events and programs. Suitable sub regions are readily defined throughout Alberta and consultation between the Agricultural Societies and other community leaders would result in stronger community benefits and less operating stress – notably better utilization of facilities and volunteers.

Conclusion

The limited availability of human and financial resources may constrain the Agricultural Societies from taking a stronger regional role. However, this opportunity should be considered a priority.

4.0 Agricultural Societies' Stakeholders

The Stakeholders

Agricultural Societies serve several categories of stakeholder. Their focus is broadly concentrated on the residents of their community or district, some of who are members of the Society. However, their stakeholders may include variously:

- The local business community
- Local governments (municipal, district, regional)
- Local community organizations
- Sponsors and advertisers
- Agricultural producers
- Special interest groups
- Business clients and tenants
- Business partners
- The Government of Alberta
- And other groups.

It is fundamentally important that Agricultural Societies focus clearly on their stakeholders. As Agricultural Societies look to the future directional strategies should acknowledge their broader realm of stakeholders. Stakeholders for each society can be identified by asking the question:

“Who benefits or may be affected by the activities and decisions of the Agricultural Society?”

Understanding the answer to that question may significantly influence the priorities and decisions of the Agricultural Society concerning events, facilities, partners, and revenue generation.

Exploring Relevance

The research revealed several critical priorities for the industry. Many are focused on securing and maintaining the relevance of the Agricultural Society with respect to its community, its population, its local and regional economy, and its business and local government.

This is a vitally important issue, essential because building a vibrant and focused organization requires the organization to be relevant to the needs and expectations of its stakeholders

Agricultural Societies play an important role in their respective communities and are often involved in providing benefits which go beyond their basic functions. A number of the societies own and/or operate facilities. The viable existence and growth of these societies is important to ensure that these services are provided within communities.

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Benefits for the Community

Many Agricultural Societies interviewed perceive that the major benefit they deliver for their stakeholders is to provide facilities and programming. However, in more detailed discussion they talked of the benefits of the events they stage and/or of the facilities they own and/or operate, as well as other priorities.

Facility-Related Benefits

In most cases the facilities made available by the Agricultural Societies would not be available in the community had the Agricultural Society not provided them. Agricultural Societies and their communities consider this to be a major justification for the investment of the Government of Alberta, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, focused through the broad mandate of the Agricultural Societies over many years.

The Agricultural Societies noted their facilities are used for varying purposes, including:

- Events staged by the Agricultural Societies and other community organizations,
- Training and development focused on agricultural and rural development priorities (e.g., development of rural skills, 4H, etc.)
- Major community events
- Community entertainment for local and rural residents
- Programming
- A wide range of programming was discussed, including:
 - Major annual events
 - Tourism orientated events
 - Providing for agricultural and rural development programming
 - Youth development programming
 - Education and training courses requiring facilities.

Other benefits

In several cases the Agricultural Societies provide funding for initiatives of other local organizations. They consider this to be community teamwork: working together with other community organizations to pursue the overall goals of the community to add facilities and programming by accessing whatever funding is available to achieve the goals. In some cases the benefits are reversed: the Agricultural Society benefits from funding raised by other organizations. However, these tend to be project oriented, not programming within the community's longer range planning.

Relationship with the community

In general, the Agricultural Societies enjoy a good relationship with their community. They may not be "front of mind" in the community except on issues raised by the Agricultural Society.

The Agricultural Society is generally expected to get on with its own mandate.

Most Agricultural Societies do not receive requests from other community organizations, or the municipality, to pursue specific direction or initiatives, with the exception of the funding distribution

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noted above. There appears to be somewhat limited knowledge in the communities of the direction, aspirations, and opportunities associated with Agricultural Societies except within their focused mandate – in some cases that mandate may have become stale.

Generally, the participants in the discussions commented that funding limitations constrain the ability of the Agricultural Society to pursue greater goals that might benefit the community more.

Constraints on Progress

Financial constraint has been touted as being one of the primary issues preventing Agricultural Societies from providing benefits to the community. A number of the Agricultural Societies are of the opinion that funding should be based on merit and that the current system is flawed. Under the current system, Agricultural Societies are funded in three primary categories based on their size.

The two major Agricultural Societies, Edmonton Northlands and Calgary Exhibition and Stampede) and seven Regional Exhibition Organizations (Camrose Regional Exhibition, Lloydminster Exhibition, Olds Agricultural Society, Lethbridge Exhibition and Stampede, Westerner Park Red Deer, Evergreen Park Grande Prairie, Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede) each have focused funding models.

The remaining 286 Agricultural Societies are eligible to receive an annual ARD-administered base grant of \$17,500 (totalling more than \$5.0 million Province-wide), provided they satisfy the requirement to stage at least one agricultural event annually and they comply with stipulated reporting requirements. In addition, these Agricultural Societies are eligible to apply to ARD for a proportional grant for eligible activity expenses from a further Provincial budget of more than 3.6 million.

However, eager and motivated Agricultural Societies that are keen to expand their benefits and provide increased services believe that a number of Agricultural Societies tend to receive funding and accumulate funding without utilizing the finances towards community and industry well being. The progressive Agricultural Societies believe that all Agricultural Societies should be accountable to deliver programming and/or facilities that directly benefits their community.

More teamwork with Agricultural Society stakeholders focused on pursuing strategic direction for the community and its business and residential populations would help Agricultural Societies and their communities achieve mutual goals, and thus expand benefits provided. New financial resources may be available through a concerted strategy of this nature and human resources would be shared, thus increasing the potential for success with these initiatives.

The quantitative report (bound separately) notes the extraordinary productivity of the investment in Agricultural Societies by ARD and the Government of Alberta. Funding invested by government is used to great effect to leverage co-investment by the public and by corporate partners in order to deliver a wide range of programming and facilities that directly benefit rural development, community life, and the community's business development. However, most Agricultural Societies are trying to achieve more

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with increasingly limited resources. Increasing costs and the decreasing availability of volunteers erode the resources of the society.

Whether the Agricultural Societies interviewed were highly progressive or not so, they talked of the challenges of finding sufficient financial resources to satisfy their needs. Many approaches are used, including grant funding, sponsorships, advertising, earned revenue, etc. However, it is clear that if the Agricultural Societies are to take advantage of the opportunity to generate stronger benefits for their communities and stakeholders they need more money. The research revealed several unique and innovative approaches to generating revenue for Agricultural Society capital and operating needs.

It is appropriate for AAAS to continue to focus on financial strategies that would benefit Agricultural Societies. This should include corporate partnerships, fundraising strategies, grant discussions with government. Without the availability of additional financial resources it will be very difficult for Agricultural Societies to contribute fully to their true role as rural and agricultural community facilitators and communicators.

5.0 The Challenges of Leadership

The Agricultural Society as a Community Leader

Agricultural Societies do not outwardly perceive themselves as community leaders. They say that with other organizations, they are part of the community team that makes things happen in their communities. This may be viewed as leadership.

The Agricultural Societies may operate somewhat “under the radar” in some communities, diligently delivering their programming or facilities and other benefits. They are generally not consulted on issues of major significance in the community unless those issues are directly within the known mandate of the Agricultural Society.

Most communities do not have a defined team or group of community leaders focused on the growth or benefits for the community. Agricultural Societies may be able to stimulate the evolution of such a team and focus in their communities. However, due to erosion of their positioning over time, the mandate of the Agricultural Society may be viewed as too limited for it to be naturally included in the community leadership team.

There is little formal relationship between community organizations in most communities. Organizations do not “swap” Board members, except that many people (as active volunteers for the community) serve on several Boards including the Agricultural Society Board. Indeed there is some reluctance to swapping Board Members.

Conclusion

The Agricultural Societies have the potential and resources to play a stronger role in community leadership. Some Agricultural Societies actively assume leadership roles in their community with significant benefit.

- Some Agricultural Societies may not perceive a broader role for themselves in their communities and in most cases Agricultural Societies perceive the communities do not expect them to exercise a broader mandate. However, that does not stop them from doing so!
- A stronger role may be played in the community – but it may be considered important for Agricultural Societies to be “front and centre” as community leaders, increasing awareness of their role, the benefits they deliver, and the opportunity to do more with a higher profile.

Leadership in the Community

Over an extended time frame, Agricultural Societies have demonstrated their capacity for leadership and their willingness to be one of their community's forefront organizations. They have provided services, facilities and various types of assistance. In many cases this natural role has been lost.

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In these cases, it is appropriate for the Agricultural Society Board Members to play a supporting role in community leadership. Some Agricultural Societies lack the experience or resources required to assume a leadership role. In some communities there is an existing leadership structure.

Most societies view themselves as leaders within their community. Several are significantly involved in providing services to the community and are active in community development. Many Agricultural Societies work with other organizations in the community and support organizations such as 4H, schools, sports groups, and other non profit organizations. In addition to providing facilities Agricultural Societies also help with events, fundraisers and funding. Particularly in some smaller communities, Agricultural Societies are the voice of the community in decision making with local government and pursue higher levels of government for major initiatives.

Some societies believed they could expand their leadership role in the community but are limited by their resources. Assuming a stronger leadership role would result in increased investment of time, so due to constraints of current workloads, a stronger role in leadership cannot be pursued.

Board members in some of the more progressive Agricultural Societies interviewed were often community residents who did not grow up in their community but had moved from other areas, mostly urban. The different enthusiasm and vision were embraced by the Agricultural Society Board. Thus, these new community residents had a positive impact their Agricultural Society and consequently on their community. However, examples were also found of communities and of Agricultural Society Boards that initially welcomed "new" arrivals but later resisted the vision and enthusiasm they brought.

Several Agricultural Societies identified as leaders in their community described a variety of new initiatives in which they were involved with other community partners. Listed below are some examples of the diversity of initiatives and projects they are involved in, and the major partners Agricultural Societies are involved with. It should be noted that the research revealed many comparable examples of progressive action. These examples are presented simply as an illustration.

- Ardrossan Recreation and Agricultural Society (ARAS)
 - Partner: Local Government
 - Initiative/projects:
 - Renovating the community hall
 - Partner in area development
 - Studies being conducted on open spaces
 - Ardrossan's community study
 - Facility development

- Bashaw Agricultural Society
 - Partner: Town
 - Initiative/Project:
 - Operational efficiency of various facilities through information sharing and streamlining.

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- Barrhead Agricultural Society
 - Partner: Habitat for Humanity
 - Initiative/Project:
 - Involved in fundraising for the Habitat for Humanity
 - During the Wild Rose Rodeo Finals, the society donates \$0.50 from every ticket sold on the Sunday to Habitat for Humanity
 - This effort has helped in Habitat for Humanity in being able to secure a facility
 - The community now, views them as a leader and contributor to their well being.

- Bonnyville Agricultural Society
 - Partner: Research Association
 - Initiative/Project:
 - Research association works on presenting the farming community with technical knowhow, while the society financially sponsors the Research

6.0 Opportunities, Barriers, and Constraints

This section of the report addresses opportunities that were identified through consultation with Agricultural Societies and related stakeholders. Barriers and limitations that may constrain Agricultural Societies as they pursue their goals on behalf of their stakeholders are also explored.

Priorities and achievements

Most Agricultural Societies seem to lack structure that makes it difficult to achieve any sort of strategic direction. Business plans have been completed as a formality by most societies in response to recent funding requirements. However, some Agricultural Societies have enthusiastically taken the opportunity to evaluate their organizations more thoroughly.

Business plans submitted by Agricultural Societies to ARD and AAAS lacked depth and detail. The information provided very little insight into the Agricultural Society's functions, and exhibited lack of activity within the organization. Most Agricultural Societies interviewed did not indicate that they conducted strategic or other longer term planning. However, the value of this kind of activity is well known. In discussions with the Agricultural Societies on the benefits of stakeholder-based strategic planning many were mostly concerned that (as volunteers) they did not have the time, knowledge, or resources to pursue such initiatives. Some Agricultural Societies indicated their belief that this was not their role in their community.

Thus, the absence of detail in business plans and lack of strategic planning should not be misinterpreted as lack of interest and motivation. Providing guidance and facilitation for strategic planning for Agricultural Societies is a valuable potential role for AAAS. A strategic planning tool is included in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit.

Accomplishments

Agricultural Societies are proud of their accomplishments, which are consistent with their organizational goals and objectives. Success stories and accomplishments revealed during the discussions include:

- “Building the indoor skate park was a big accomplishment, since the youth were involved in a number of unwanted activities, and the indoor skate park was a community initiative to find the right solution for the youth. It has given youth in the community a place to hang out at, have fun while unruly behaviour by youth has reduced”.- Dale Reinke (President), Hay Lakes Agricultural Society.
- “Better financial stability. Increased membership. Increased volunteer base. Communication initiatives in the form of magazine publications and online” – Jan Neumann, Ardrossan Recreational and Agricultural Society

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- “Board meets on a monthly basis from meeting once a year. Business plans are in place and efforts are being made to implement them. Appointment of full time manager to assess and implement business plans”. – Roxanna (Treasurer), Irricana Ag Society.
- “The Agricultural Society has taken average events (3 Day Fair, Halloween Party, Christmas Party) and turned them into very wholesome experiences which result in great benefits to the youth and kids in the community, which can result in greater participation in a *FUN* organization”. – Roberta Billey (Treasurer), Rochester Agricultural Society.

Although the above responses are truly major achievements, many Agricultural Societies responded to this discussion by saying that keeping the Agricultural Society operational was their biggest achievement. It is important to understand that although, this might not seem significant, given the challenges faced by some of these organizations and their communities, survival is indeed a massive achievement for these Agricultural Societies.

Priorities

Similarly priorities for Agricultural Societies varied from big picture management changes, to capital projects to reinvigorating the organization and educating the community of their purpose. However, not too many rural Agricultural Societies were found to be thinking far ahead. Most Agricultural Societies did not have long term plans, and their main focus tends to be on daily operations, traditional activities and, sometimes, a specific future project.

Strategic planning should be a priority for Agricultural Societies. A strategic plan to move the organization or to find solutions to problems would contribute significantly to the future stability of Agricultural Societies. A small number of the Agricultural Societies interviewed, mostly those in larger communities, had dedicated managers to pursue planning, operations, and general management.

Security for the future is a priority for Agricultural Societies. While most Agricultural Societies had a reserve of cash, the funds were reserved for emergency needs or to implement future capital projects. This has consistently been observed over many years of research. In fact, when emergencies occur or when major capital projects are initiated the retained cash is insufficient and additional financial resources must be sought out. All organizations should hold reserved funds to accommodate scheduled or unscheduled future capital projects or repairs.

Detailed discussion on this topic showed that the funds held in reserve in most Agricultural Societies were held logically and were used. Some Agricultural Societies, though, appear to focus more on retaining and investing cash than on delivering value to their community. However, most of these interviewed reported valid reasons for their retained cash resources.

Communication with organizations within the community is quite limited in most cases and has for most Agricultural Societies been a low priority. However, strong communication is an essential part of stakeholder and community engagement and should be expanded. Many Agricultural Societies had Board representation from local government due to funding conditions. Many board members are also involved with other community interests or businesses through volunteer activities or work. However,

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that does not replace the consistent use of a strong communications plan. A communication planning tool is included in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit.

Opportunities

Most interviewees were unable to identify new opportunities for their Agricultural Societies. Those who did propose opportunities saw them as being partnerships with several service groups and organizations. This is indicative of the fact that many Agricultural Societies have not committed their energy towards moving their organization forward. Volunteers are occupied with current operations and do not have much more time to invest. Lack of strategic planning or forward thinking can be attributed to several factors, including:

- Many Board Members do not have the training to conduct strategic plans, and hence identify opportunities.
- Members have been on Boards for a very long time and the philosophy of the organizations is stagnant
- Members are facing burn out from existing obligations and do not have the time required to be involved in planning.

Several key areas of opportunity were explored through the discussions.

Communication with the community

Communication methods are largely dependent on the size of communities. Larger Agricultural Societies communicate with the larger audience through radio, newsletters, advertisements, posters, social media and other means. Societies in smaller rural towns and villages rely mainly on word of mouth and minimal print media. Radio and newspaper advertising is expensive and rural communities cannot afford such spending. Moreover, free advertising tools such as social media and websites may not be accessed in smaller communities due to the limited availability of the Internet in rural societies.

The large difference in communication methods between Agricultural Societies in larger and smaller communities is associated with the availability of financial resources. The limited financial resources of smaller Agricultural Societies restricts the money that can be allocated primarily to promotion and advertising. Radio and print advertising can be an expensive affair. This is important for Agricultural Societies to work in concert with other organizations in order to communicate their marketing or other messages.

Agricultural Societies who did tend to communicate well with their community are generally also those who are generally well functioning societies. These societies are viewed as leaders by the community, and most of them manage to get participation and input from the community where it is needed. However, the research shows that even some of the larger Agricultural Societies would be well served by improving their community engagement.

Communication in Agricultural Societies takes place both formally and informally. This implies that not all information shared with the community is communicated through media such as radio, newspapers,

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posters and newsletters. A significant amount of communication takes place through word of mouth and networking in the community.

Strong leadership and motivated members (including Board Members) are factors associated with a well functioning society and hence with sound communication. Jan Neumann with Ardrossan Recreation and Agricultural Society (ARAS) pointed out that while there are several contributing factors to the success of the society, leadership within the organization is a stand out factor. "The City Council representative on the ARAS Board is a community champion and his leadership transpires into the organization and motivates members".

Some societies have a vibrant, motivated and energetic board. These Boards support each other and care deeply about the organization. To ensure the success of the society, these members make it a point to communicate with the community through word of mouth. Board Members promote their Agricultural Societies vigorously and dedicate immense effort towards increasing membership and motivating participation in general.

Community Champions

The process of identifying and empowering community champions is an important opportunity for Agricultural Societies. A champion of this nature will be able contribute well to community promotion and teamwork and will lead the charge to initiate and promote new progress. Information about a champions program focused initially on the tourism industry has been provided to AAAS. AAAS and Agricultural Societies are very well positioned to be the flagship for delivery of the program in Alberta.

Composition of the Board

Board composition among Agricultural Society Boards is generally quite similar. Some Boards include representation from different organizations and stakeholders within the community. Most boards comprise of representatives from agriculture, businesses, local governments, other service organizations, schools and a variety of other organizations. Communication transpires into other organizations within the community through this diverse mix of board members.

Board representation from other organizations generally provides the potential to ensure that the community is kept in the loop through various networks and channels. While this is a great first step in the communication cycle, societies need to ensure that these representatives actively promote the activities of Agricultural Societies and the organization to all of their networks. Failure to do seriously dents the reasoning behind having other community organizations well represented on the board.

Vibrant and active Boards attract vibrant and active new Board members.

Economic Benefits and Tourism

The communities in which the Agricultural Societies are located acknowledge the revenue and promotional benefits for retailers, the service sector, and for tourism. Agricultural Societies are also aware of these benefits. However, they do not know how to define the benefits and in many cases have not previously focused on communicating them. They do not actively engage the community on tourism

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or retail sector priorities or benefits. While the Agricultural Societies know they contribute to tourism, they do not actively focus on this role.

The opportunity exists for Agricultural Societies to develop a stronger focus on tourism promotion in conjunction with area tourism planners, retailers, Chambers of Commerce, and the service sector in their communities. A guideline and perhaps workshops would assist in developing this focus. Tools will be needed to assist in determining the value accruing to the community from Agricultural Society operations and visitors.

Development of tourism potential is a key area of opportunity for Agricultural Societies, but one which many have pursued only passively. Non-residents visiting the community generate positive economic benefit as they spend money in the community that would not otherwise be spent there. Pursuing opportunities to increase visitor spending will benefit Agricultural Societies, tourism business operators, and the community in general.

During telephone and in-person interviews, it became clear that Agricultural Societies believe (correctly) that the business people in their community benefit from non-residents of their community who visit for Agricultural Society events or other events in the Agricultural Society's facilities. However, in most cases bringing focus to this benefit has not been a significant priority for the Agricultural Society.

This is confirmed by discussions with visitor centres/tourist offices and tourism operators interviewed (including accommodation, food and beverage, and retail business operators). In most cases, the tourism operators and tourism information centres can identify increased volumes when major Agricultural Society events take place in their community. However, also in most cases, it is evident that the Agricultural Society has not reviewed opportunities with tourism operators to optimize the achievement of the mutually beneficial initiatives.

Recommendation:

It is strongly recommended that Agricultural Societies actively engage the tourism-related organizations and businesses in their community and region to develop mutually beneficial tourism planning, tourism marketing and product development strategies.

Further, it is recommended that on a Provincial or Regional basis, AAAS develops alliances with appropriate tourism organizations to enhance tourism marketing for the benefits of Agricultural Societies and their community partners.

Why Visitors Count

Many Agricultural Societies are not able to quantify the benefit created by non-residents of their community attending their events or their facilities. However, in order to optimize the benefits of non-resident spending for the community, it is important to have some perspective on non-resident attendees.

Notably, many local business people will say that they do not benefit when the Agricultural Society events take place. Local residents are at the event, rather than in the shops. However, the local residents

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not shopping because they are at an Agricultural Society event will return to the shops on another day. Their overall purchases are not less, but they are distributed to different days.

Non-residents travelling to Agricultural Society events or events in their facilities do spend time in local shops, restaurants, and other attractions during their visit. They also learn about the community and their familiarity brings them back for future visits.

Visitor Spending

Research provided by Travel Alberta suggests that in 2009, for every dollar spent on recreation (e.g., attending a local fair or other event) during a visit to the Central Alberta Tourism Destination Region by a resident of Alberta (including day trippers):

- \$0.09 is spent on public or local transportation
- \$5.15 is spend on private automobile operation
- \$5.19 is spent on accommodation, food and beverage
- \$2.06 is spent on retail.

In the case of attendees at local fairs and festivals, this constitutes a significant value for the community. As an illustration, if 200 non-residents of the community attend a fair at a community in Central Alberta and each spends \$60 at the fair, in total these travellers may spend as much as \$6,000 on accommodation, food and beverage and \$2,500 on retail in connection with their visit. Much of that would be spent within the community or within the region. Thus actively increasing the number of non-resident attendees creates a significant economic benefit.

Market Research

Recent market research confirms the interest of residents of Western Canada in attending fairs and festivals. The Canadian Tourism Commission and Provincial Tourism Departments, including Travel Alberta, conducted research in 2006 to examine the activities and motivation of Canadian and US residents in a very wide range of tourism experiences. The extensive nature of the research has provided the opportunity for participating agencies to produce detailed analyses and in depth reports. In 2008, Travel Alberta conducted one such analysis addressing fairs and festivals: "The Canadian Market for Fairs & Festivals Tourism in Alberta, A Special Analysis of the 2006 Travel Activities and Motivation Survey (TAMS) – Travel Alberta, 2008".

- The report shows that approximately half of the respondents in these huge surveys attend fairs and festivals. Two thirds of Alberta destined Canadian travellers (including Albertans) rely on the internet for travel and trip planning. A similar proportion relies on advice or guidance from friends and/or relatives. Past experiences are also very important.
- Most of these overnight travellers use commercial overnight accommodation, dining (71% look for local ingredients and recipes and 33% state that food and wine are driving factors in their

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trip), and they shop for a wide range of staples, luxury items, memorabilia, and arts/crafts items in connection with their trip

- Non-local residents in this market are motivated by attending fairs or exhibitions and historic sites (more than 40%), farmers markets or country fairs (32%), general history museums (34%), and strolling to see local architecture (46%).
- This market includes people travelling for other purposes, who will take the opportunity to visit local fairs, and purpose driven travellers.
- Therefore, there is good reason to pursue this market. The report suggests packaging attendance at local fairs and similar events with visits to museums, dining experiences, side trips, of walking tours. A large proportion of these travellers are campers.
- Building a strong tourism economy is the main priority for Travel Alberta.

Building a Stronger Tourism Economy

In order to develop a strong focus on tourism, tourism operators must be actively engaged by the Agricultural Society. Where there is a tourism or visitor organization in the community, that agency is the most logical to start to work with. If such an organization does not exist, it would be most appropriate for the Agricultural Society, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Municipality to meet to discuss tourism benefits and how to pursue them. A tourism plan should be in place.

A Tourism Planning Tool is included in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit.

Estimating Attendance by Visitors

It will be important to all interested participants to have some measure of the value of tourism in the community and the contribution of tourism associated with the operation of the Agricultural Society and those using its facilities.

Reliable methods to estimate attendance and visitor spending can be complex and gathering and analyzing data may be challenging for Agricultural Societies. This is particularly the case for Agricultural Societies whose facilities or events are not gated but are widely accessible to attendees, and for organizations that are challenged by attracting volunteers to conduct projects of this nature. A simple methodology for gathering, analyzing and presenting tourism data is suggested in the Agricultural Society Toolkit.

Challenges Facing Agricultural Societies

A series of challenges appear to consistently face Agricultural Societies. However, many of these challenges are primarily associated with maintaining relevance to their community in light of changing demographics. Challenges include:

- Attracting youth and obtaining younger participation in the organization.
- Blending expectations of rural and urban residents
- Focusing on specific roles in rural, agricultural, and community development to build appropriate benefits for the community
- Their own vision for their role and mandate

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- Financial resources, including survival (in some cases), exploring and securing grants and other financial resources, balancing to community role and operating revenue
- Paying for/preparing appropriate Review Engagement financial statements
- Challenges related to voluntarism (which may be related to the issue of relevance)
- Membership – including defining the need and benefits for membership, attracting members, the cost/benefit of membership philosophies
- Etc.

Educational programming and a specific, ongoing focus by AAAS may be required to assist the Boards to identify, define and address these serious issues for their Agricultural Society.

Agricultural Societies in general overwhelmingly expressed their primary concerns as being volunteer and financial woes, followed by added 'paperwork'.

- These are significant problems. Unless these difficulties are addresses, many Agricultural Societies will not be able to pursue further opportunities for leadership and stakeholder-based strategic planning.
- Increased paperwork not only takes up more time, but also drains financial resources in the form of hiring accountants. For Agricultural Societies struggling with current levels of funding, more rigid reporting appears to be an increasing burden.
- Costs associated with maintenance of aging facilities, rising utility costs, increased insurance costs, and other operating expenses are challenging – particularly for Agricultural Societies with a large number of often aging facilities to manage.

Population and industry trends in rural landscapes have affected many government, profit seeking and not-for-profit organizations.

- Agricultural Societies are not the sole victims of these trends. However, due to their financial and human resource constraints and their positioning in the community, Agricultural Societies have more difficulty in making change than other affected organizations.

There appears to be an increasing lack of interest in the Agricultural Society from the changing farming community.

Perhaps due to their very nature and history, the smaller, rural Agricultural Societies in particular are not accustomed to the scrutiny and reporting required in present day accountability. Their volunteers are busy individuals who have a number of commitments. While attracting volunteers has become increasingly difficult, the workload incurred by existing board members can work against further recruitment.

Human Resources

In most cases the Agricultural Societies included in this portion of the research had no, or somewhat limited, paid employees. Therefore, many of the challenges they face are well known challenges to do

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with volunteers. This includes attracting and motivating volunteers, limited time available for the volunteers, burnout, etc.

The Agricultural Societies have many priorities for their volunteers. As the organizations become more focused in their community and rural development role additional human resources will be required. This is particularly complicated by the changing demographics in the rural communities.

Volunteers involved with Agricultural Societies often share their volunteer activities between several not-for-profit organizations in the community.

- It is important to remember that many Agricultural Societies are exclusively volunteer based and for all of them the Boards of Directors are volunteers. The responsibilities assumed by these volunteers on behalf of their various volunteer commitments can become overwhelming.
- Many of the volunteers have full time jobs, families and other responsibilities in addition to their volunteer commitments. It is difficult for them to stay motivated to do well in organizations which have failed to generate interest and support from the community. It is often difficult for volunteers to find the time and motivation to move organizations and ahead and be forward thinkers – or to help them survive without support.
- It is the nature of Agricultural Societies that many would not survive without the strong commitment of their volunteers. However, their business partners must recognize that these volunteers are not entrepreneurs or paid executives, they are volunteering their time as a gesture of goodwill. They need additional financial and human resources and those are challenging to acquire.
- Members overworked in their daily life are less inclined to participate

Although this has been a focus of AAAS for some time, additional programming may be required to assist the Agricultural Societies to come to grips with this key issue. A tool to assist Agricultural Societies to address issues of voluntarism is included in the Implementation Toolkit.

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7.0 Acknowledged Successful or Leading Practices

This section of the report addresses practices that may assist Agricultural Societies and/or AAAS to pursue their goals. The conclusions are drawn from the interview program and through observation of the success achieved by Agricultural Societies while employing these practices.

In 1999, CAFE (then CAE) published a report including a section addressing Best Practices. Many of the recommendations of that report are as valid today as they were at that time. IAFE has also identified several areas that are vital to pursue the increasing success of its members. These constitute successful or emerging practices and priorities.

Critical Success Factors

The research sought to identify the Critical Success Factors that characterize the more progressive and “successful” Agricultural Societies. This issue was addressed initially through consultation with Agricultural Societies, observation of their performance, and observation of the factors that characterize success in other Not for Profit organizations.

The following practices that characterize successful and progressive organizations were identified through these observations:

- They have a clear, focused and documented mandate or strategic plan and are very dedicated toward pursuing it and tracking its performance
- They are focused on the needs and expectations of their stakeholders
- They are strong communicators
- They are active team players, and often leaders, in their communities
- They are innovative and aggressive in their mission
- They are well funded through innovative approaches to revenue generation
- They are accomplished builders of partnerships and alliances
- They are well organized and in several cases well staffed
- They have progressive, innovative, enthusiastic, and effective Boards of Directors.

Interestingly, these characteristics describe successful organizations or individuals in many walks of life. Agricultural Societies are encouraged to pursue the development of these characteristics within their Boards. An opportunity exists for AAAS to focus its Board education programming to pursue adoption of these characteristics by Agricultural Societies.

Mentorship

Mentorship is a widely recognised process for professional development. This helps build capacity within societies through internal resources. Societies almost unanimously encouraged mentoring and being mentored.

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Several Agricultural Societies have informally developed mentorship relationships with individuals from other societies that they admire. During the interviews the Agricultural Societies were able to identify several leaders. They are generally perceived to be leaders or examples and examples of their skill tend to be related to the Critical Success Factors noted above.

AAAS may consider establishing a formal mentorship program, initially to link mentors to assist smaller Agricultural Societies.

Communication

Effective and well planned communication is a key component of successful and effective operation, community participation, and leadership. IAFE has also identified the importance of communication and prioritizes effective communication as a key component of facilitating success, including using modern methods to convey messages. IAFE notes that, as is the case with some Alberta Agricultural Societies, social media and other emerging technologies are used to interact with young people. A US Fair Board now texts young people to get them to participate in selecting grandstand show options and other relevant issues.

Strategic Planning

- Complete a strategic plan. All organizations benefit from effective strategic planning as a key component of developing and managing their direction. A strategic planning tool is included in the Implementation Toolkit to assist Agricultural Societies with this important priority.

Deliver a Strong and Portable Education Program for Agricultural Society Boards

Establish a strong education program to focus on professional development. This may be in the form of a Foundation or certification program.

- AAAS should actively encourage Boards to evolve. However, it is important that the Agricultural Society Boards act voluntarily in this respect. AAAS should be careful to avoid appearing to be authoritarian – acting as “the management” forcing change on “the workers”
- Identify clearly the roles of staff and boards. It should be noted that in most Agricultural Societies interviewed where there are employed executives or managers this evolutionary step has taken place. However, Board Education remains a priority.
- Address the problem of virtual lifetime memberships on Boards through Board education
- Acknowledge that most smaller fairs are operated by volunteers who wear both a Board and Event Execution “hat”

It is a recommendation of this research that AAAS continues its focus on developing a more comprehensive portable program of Board Development, supporting its successful Governance training model. The initiative should include focus on Community Facilitation, Board Education and Business Development. While AAAS may be able to deliver the program directly through seminars or regional initiatives, it may also be appropriate to build a delivery alliance with an Alberta educational institution. In addition to its primary focus on Agricultural Societies, this program may be made available for a fee

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(or as a gift) to other community organization Board Members. Again, this would increase the visibility of Agricultural Societies and AAAS as professional leaders and facilitators.

Identify and Empower Community Champions

Identify a very sensitive champion and facilitator in the community to bring focus to the future.

- AAAS can contribute to the success of this initiative by facilitating the use of the Community Champions program available through consultation with Travel Alberta. Information on this program was provided to AAAS as soon as it was published in 2010.

Focus on the Food Chain to engage families and young people in agriculture and rural life.

The benefit of success in this area of emphasis is that targeted markets are engaged early in their lives or in their lived in a rural community. Many opportunities exist to pursue this key priority.

- Develop “fun” projects for large events, such as initiatives to encourage young people to “build a demonstration community” using locally available resources.
- Engage younger people and mothers with small children through communication and events programming focused on food ideas and the values and benefits of rural life.
- In conjunction with local educational institutions and, perhaps, 4H, develop Junior Agricultural Society Boards or focus groups to be facilitated through local schools or colleges. These groups would focus on food decisions, entertainment options, and special projects in Rural Development and Food Chain agriculture that are important to younger people. Initiatives of this nature have been undertaken in Alberta with success. The teachers can identify the leaders with the right focus in the body of students.
- Create a mobile “100 mile kitchen” and associated programming, staffed by local or celebrity chefs, to encourage teenagers to learn how to plan and deliver menus using locally available food resources. The kitchen and associated programming could be initiated directly by Agricultural Societies, perhaps working with local food industry leaders, or programmed by AAAS.

Discussions with ARD have identified several initiatives focused on educating young populations about the food chain in which AAAS has also been involved. A detailed review of their programs and of a series of programs published by CAFE and IAFE indicate this is an ongoing priority for Agricultural Societies.

Community Engagement

Awareness of Agricultural Societies in some communities is quite limited by comparison with the capability and resources they have to offer. It is recommended that Agricultural Societies execute a strategy to engage their community in a dialogue on the Agricultural Society, or on rural life or agriculture. Execution of the proposed approach will achieve two key goals:

1. Raising awareness of the Agricultural Society, its capabilities and resources, its deliverables, and its potential among targeted groups of stakeholders.
2. Providing an environment in which the Agricultural Society will be able to share its vision and challenges and learn about those of other organizations.

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Building a stronger and more visible relationship in their community and region will benefit most Agricultural Societies and in turn will also benefit the community. However, pursuing such a goal will require them to develop and execute a specific two-way communication plan to engage the community.

There are several examples of Agricultural Societies and other organizations that have not managed this process well and as a result have been unsuccessful in being able to execute initiatives for infrastructure, programming, and other projects that might have benefited the stakeholders. This has been the result of inadequate community engagement sometimes even after completing a lengthy and expensive planning process.

A community engagement strategy is a communication and consultation process – it is as much about listening as it is about conveying information. It is a foundation for effective strategic planning. It needs to be structured, must be applied on a consistent basis, and must be monitored.

Key principles of community engagement are described below. Segments may be selected as appropriate, but this program is appropriate for even the smallest communities.

A separate focus is required for each of the following stakeholder groups. Each of these may be further subdivided:

- Residential population
- Business population
- Media representatives
- Local/regional government
- Regional stakeholders

Communication programming actions include:

- Use of carefully prepared printed materials
- Media releases and media engagement
- Presentations to local and regional governments
- Format for discussion with community organizations
- Internet, social media, and other electronic communication

The purpose of the community engagement program is to build strong awareness of the Agricultural Society and its capability in the community and to stimulate ongoing dialogue in the community on topics of interest to Agricultural Society.

A community engagement tool is provided in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit.

Good Practices Emerging form the Discussions with Agricultural Societies

Several valuable practices resulted from discussion or evaluation of the interview programs with Agricultural Societies. They are:

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- Encourage increased communication between Agricultural Societies and AAAS and among each other
 - This will contribute to identifying new ideas, creating companionship and the excitement of being part of a “big picture”, seeking out common problems, and partnering in joint initiatives.
 - Approaches may include periodic telephone calls to Agricultural Societies and providing a platform through which societies in close vicinity would meet up and discuss the challenges they face and the projects they are involved in.
- Share a list of projects societies are working on and funding opportunities:
 - Several Agricultural Societies complained about a lack of new ideas. These societies have urged to be provided with a list of the new initiatives other societies are involved in. Bigger societies can urged to list some of their success stories and then distribute these throughout the membership through newsletters, electronically, and at meetings.
- Training and education:
 - Agricultural Societies are made of volunteers, and need to be appreciated as such. Providing training and education to societies shows that AAAS values their services and is investing in their personal growth. This in turn will help societies to run more efficiently.
 - Training can be provided in group sessions, where a few neighbouring societies can convene at a central location for training. Training in strategic business plan development, grant writing, social media, communication and other such topics would be of great assistance to AAAS members.
- Strategic introduction of changes to operations:
 - While accountability and changes are vitally important in ensuring that organizations conduct themselves well, these changes need to be phased in. A number of Agricultural Society members have been on boards for a very long time and are resistant to change. To ensure that changes being introduced serve their intended purpose and are fruitful, these changes need to be made by providing training and sufficient time to transition.
- Facilitate the movement of urban populations to rural centers:
 - A number of people contributing well in Agricultural Societies are former urban dwellers who have moved to rural communities for a better lifestyle. Urban living comes with its fair share of inconveniences such as overpopulation, noise, pollution, lack of community feel and others. Herein lies an opportunity for AAAS to promote rural living. A number of smaller rural communities are on the outskirts of bigger cities and towns. AAAS should consider seizing this opportunity to educate urban citizens on the advantages of rural living. A strategic communications plan would need to be developed and implemented to reach the targeted audience. This practice was been strongly endorsed by former urban dwellers currently residing in rural communities, who are part of Agricultural Societies and a number of other community organizations.

8.0 Partnerships and Strategic Alliances

Partnerships and Alliances

In most cases the research found that Agricultural Societies were focused primarily on their own mandates, predominantly limited by their available financial and human resources. They have a variety of relationships with appropriate community organizations and external associations (e.g., breed associations, 4H, activity/sport associations, etc). However, most Agricultural Societies interviewed do not appear to have developed formal partnerships or alliances to pursue jointly important goals. They have not pursued opportunities or benefits that might be associated with these alliances. However, in the absence of action or leadership by the Agricultural Societies, sometimes other organizations have taken on these initiatives to the chagrin of the Agricultural Society.

In many cases sponsorships were viewed as partnerships, although further discussion revealed that the sponsorships were primarily benevolent or philanthropic rather than focused on mutual benefits or gain.

Opportunities exist to form stronger alliances or partnerships within the communities or with external organizations.

Community Partnerships

Community partnerships and alliances pursue ongoing programs or specific initiatives. The research revealed many such partnerships, although in most cases those identified were focused more on sponsorship, events, or specific initiatives than on strategic direction. Often the partnerships or alliances are informal, in that there is no formal agreement between the Principals. That is not a problem. Many of those partnerships have lasted for many years.

Strategic partnerships have traditionally developed to pursue initiatives such as facility development, which often requires the resources of several involved stakeholders. Partners may include, for example:

- The municipality and sport organization(s) to pursue the development of a new arena
- The municipality and activity groups to develop walking or woodland trails
- Educational institutions or delivery agencies to establish and deliver educational or training programs in the facilities owned or operated by the Agricultural Society
- Social organizations to promote major fundraising initiatives or membership drives
- Tourism or business organizations (e.g., Chamber of Commerce, Visitor Centre, hoteliers, retailers, special event or festival operators) to develop and promote tourism programming
- Local or regional businesspeople to participate in funding initiatives as sponsors or an investors for mutual benefit
- Higher levels of government (Regional, Provincial, Federal) for major infrastructure development agreements

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- Agreements with local 4H organizations to provide employment or volunteer opportunities for 4H members at the Agricultural Society.

Agricultural Societies should continue to develop and participate in partnerships of this nature.

Broader opportunities also exist for partnership development to develop and deliver specific programming or capital initiatives. Agricultural Societies should explore opportunities to contribute to the initiatives of other community organizations, thus reinforcing the concept of true teamwork in the community.

Several Agricultural Societies identified their participation in key community partnerships and Agricultural Societies are encouraged to explore the opportunity to motivate the establishment of these joint initiatives in their communities.

Good examples of such initiatives are:

- The role of AAAS as an active partner with the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (“ARPA”) in several initiatives focused on pursuing provincial- and community-level priorities concerning community facilities and wellness and lifestyle promotion.
- The participation of AAAS in joint initiatives with ARD and Travel Alberta focused on mutually important initiatives to raise agricultural awareness, promote tourism development, etc.
- The participation of AAAS in group meetings to raise awareness among provincial organizations (e.g., AUMA, Rural Alberta Development Fund, ACE Communities, ARPA and other partners) with common interest of each others’ initiatives and to identify and execute new joint initiatives in sustainability, inclusive communities, and capacity development.
- The participation of the Olds Agricultural Society in the Olds Institute, an Olds partnership of community organizations (including OAS, the Town of Olds, Olds College, and the Olds Chamber of Commerce) focused on the sustainability and growth of the town.

Initiatives of this nature can be developed in individual communities. Opportunities to facilitate progress by bringing together key organizations of this kind is a good process to initiate further development of local specific partnerships. While each community has different dynamics, these initiatives are highly successful and reflect very positively on the partners.

A further opportunity may be to develop agreements with other organizations in the community to share their volunteer base, promotional resources, equipment needs, and other resources. This has been achieved very successfully in several communities in Canada. Few similar examples were found in Alberta, but this is a very valid way for Agricultural Societies to deal with key challenges: limited financial resources, challenges attracting volunteers, and engaging new populations (including youth).

Corporate Partnerships

Partnerships for Agricultural Societies with corporate players may be developed to conceive and pursue initiatives that are of mutual benefit or are for the goodwill and growth of the community or its

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population. For example, it is clear that many Agricultural Societies have good relationships with businesses in the food chain.

Focusing on raising awareness of the food chain is an important priority for Agricultural Societies. It may be appropriate to form a loose alliance between the Agricultural Society and several players in the food chain (e.g., a producer, a supplier to the industry, an agribusiness participant, a distributor, a retailer, a chef) to develop a plan to raise awareness of the food chain among new (previously urban) residents of the rural community, young people/mothers with young children, and local businesspeople. This would be an example of a partnership focused on a key priority for the Agricultural Society that is also of vital importance to the business community.

Regional Alliances

Agricultural Societies, particularly those in smaller communities, should consider seriously the opportunity to create a regional program of events using facilities in all of the communities, rather than viewing other Agricultural Societies as competing. This opportunity would share resources and equipment. Several examples of this nature were observed during the interview program.

In such an alliance, the participating Agricultural Societies would have a greater opportunity to attract financial investment by the corporate sector than they would have with just their own local populations.

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9.0 Strategic Positioning and Priorities for AAAS

AAAS provides a comprehensive range of services to its member Agricultural Societies. Direct engagement of members occurs at the annual Convention and AGM and at Regional Meetings held by the AAAS Directors in their regions, through newsletters and other publications, and surveys.

The research validates recent initiatives by AAAS. Discussion with the Board and Staff of AAAS reveals a strong program of developments that directly benefit the Agricultural Societies that are AAAS members. A brief summary of these initiatives includes:

- Governance and Board Training
 - Funded by a significant grant from the Government of Alberta
 - Addresses Board renovation, board mediation and conflict resolution
 - Contributed to rescuing a Board/Agricultural Society that was in difficulty
 - Any Not for Profit organization can access the program – there is a link on the Government of Alberta, ARD website
 - The program has received many referrals and achieved great awareness
 - Funding was obtained to develop bylaw review and revision workshops
 - This initiative contributes a practical “best practice” to assist Agricultural Societies to achieve more professional standards.
- A new initiative will result in a significantly enhanced, standardized financial management program using the well known computer program Simply Accounting
- Active participation in the Government of Alberta, Culture and Community Spirit “Alberta Nonprofit/Voluntary Sector Initiative” (ANVSI), whose purpose is to improve the quality of life for Albertans' through a viable Non-profit/Voluntary Sector.
- Active discussion with the Alberta Farmers Market Association to explore options for a stronger farmers market environment in Alberta
- Pursuit of broader initiatives focused on building good relationships including, for example, The Premiers Art Council, the Arts Touring Alliance, Cooperative development, initiatives with other provincial organizations, etc.
- Presentation at the 4H leadership conference
- Etc.

While these initiatives have directly and indirectly benefited Agricultural Societies and the Agricultural Society industry, it is important that members learn how they have benefited and how they can apply their gains in their community. This will remain an ongoing communication priority for AAAS until Agricultural Societies all prioritize communication and progressive action.

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Opinions of Members

AAAS members can identify several ways in which they benefit from the operation of AAAS, their Provincial Association. However, AAAS members also feel a void in some areas that could be filled well by AAAS.

There is an important role for AAAS in facilitating the transition of its members in several specific areas:

1. Becoming more relevant in their communities, engaging their communities more actively and enhancing communication with the community and other stakeholders and partners
2. Taking a strategic approach to planning to enhance the current business planning process
3. Adopting current business and communication practices
4. Enhancing governance, particularly with respect to encouraging more Board turnover and development of Board excellence
5. Developing alliances for community growth and sustainability
6. Fundraising strategies and support
7. Innovation in programming
8. Encouraging inter-member, sub-regional programming alliances

It is clear from this research that AAAS is actively and successfully pursuing member enhancement in several of these areas.

Broader areas of focus for AAAS include:

1. Executing an ongoing research program
2. Lobbying with governments
3. Media relations and communication for the industry

Again, several of these areas of priority are already areas in which AAAS is successfully playing a leadership role.

AAAS Strategic Positioning

AAAS has focused in recent years on significant enhancement of its priorities and programming. The AAAS Board and staff are to be applauded for their vision and commitment, which has significantly benefited local Agricultural Societies. It is important for AAAS to continue to pursue this direction and to increase awareness and adoption of the benefits it has developed among Agricultural Societies.

A strategic plan was facilitated with the Board of Directors of AAAS as part of this professional assignment.

Priorities for AAAS

The research reveals several opportunities for AAAS to prioritize in order to continue to service its members well. Key priorities include:

- The need for enhanced communication to achieve increased understanding and visibility of the role and benefits of AAAS for its members. Several Agricultural Societies interviewed have

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limited awareness of the capability and deliverables of AAAS and many see the Convention as their main benefit of membership.

- AAAS should continue to develop new approaches for theming of the AAAS convention and of sessions at the convention to address issues of primary importance to Agricultural Societies, thus increasing the value for members.
- Many members are challenged to attend the Regional Meetings by logistical, financial, or volunteer availability. Consideration should be given to increasing access to interim regional meetings for Agricultural Societies. Members attending, and several that cannot, appreciate the developmental and educational value delivered by the meetings.
- AAAS should consider expanding its Financial Resources initiatives by adding a grant proposal writing facility to assist Agricultural Societies to research and pursue new funding opportunities. Some of the larger rural Agricultural Societies are prepared to pay for such a service, so this may be both a valuable member service and a revenue opportunity for AAAS. The need for enhanced global funding solutions also exists. AAAS has been successful in identifying major financial support initiatives with corporate philanthropists and investors and that initiative should remain a key priority for AAAS.
- AAAS should prioritize the opportunity to assist Agricultural Societies to clarify and communicate opportunities to refine and develop their role in their communities. This will involve a significant communication and facilitation initiative.
- AAAS should continue to prioritize its effort in the area of strategic business and financial planning for Agricultural Societies. The success of the business planning initiative suggests this will be a very valuable process for Agricultural Societies. The initiative should be expanded to provide guidance on strategic planning.
- AAAS should also continue to develop educational workshops on key topics, including building relevance to the stakeholders, strategic planning, Board development, etc.
- Ongoing research and communication into best/emerging practices should be maintained
- AAAS should consider communication programming focused on communities, in conjunction with local Agricultural Societies, to support initiatives and communication established locally by Agricultural Societies.
- Continued lobbying of government to focus on key issues (e.g., financial resources, the issue of relevance in light of demographic changes in the urban/rural communities; relationship to agriculture; the importance of the role of Agricultural Societies in rural and community development; support of the community, etc.).

Governance has been a consistent priority for AAAS. Research and planning, Convention topics, Regional Meetings, and other workshops have been staged by AAAS to address governance issues and significant progress has been observed in this area among Agricultural Societies.

Annual Convention and AGM

Almost without exception the Agricultural Societies that have attended the Convention and AGM rate it to be of exceptional value. They benefit from the speakers and discussion sessions and from networking and opportunities for consultation with their peers. Discussing these topics many Agricultural Society

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Directors and staff interviewed were so enthusiastic that they can describe topics or discussions that helped them to understand or progress with challenges and opportunities they face.

Several of the Agricultural Society Directors interviewed considered the Convention to be so valuable that they suggested attendance should be mandatory as a condition of membership or, perhaps, even as a condition of funding.

Agricultural Societies that had not recently attended the Convention we're mostly unable to commit the resources due to other timing priorities of the directors or for budgetary reasons.

AAAS reports that the average age of attendees at the Convention has become lower – a sign of progress that younger Board members are taking a more active role in their Agricultural Societies.

Regional Meetings

Most of the Agricultural Society Directors who had attended regional meetings staged by the directors in their regions consider the meetings to be of value. They found them a good learning experience, predominantly to learn about AAAS activities and developments, for educational purposes, and to learn about other happenings in their region. However, several agriculture societies did not attend the regional meetings. Their reasons for not attending were predominantly to do with the availability of the volunteer directors given other priorities, or for budgetary reasons. Further exploration of this issue revealed that the regions are large and although the meetings are held within their region often the travel distance involved for directors to attend was unrealistic given the family and to work priorities.

In this context it might be easy to suggest that the AAAS directors hold more meetings at additional locations within their regions. However, the directors are also volunteers. This is an issue that should be addressed by the AAAS Board and staff.

Development and Education

Education and training sessions provided by AAAS have been of considerable value to the Agricultural Societies. A notable example is the professional development that has occurred as a result of the training associated with the planning process. Agricultural Societies were required to provide business plans to satisfy the requirements of Alberta Rural Development and Agriculture. Initially many Agricultural Societies saw little value in the process. However, having learned through seminars presented by AAAS how to prepare the plans, several societies realized their value in operating their society. Several societies now consider the updating and monitoring of their business plan an important annual function. Initiatives of this kind are of great value to members of AAAS.

It is clear from the research that most Agricultural Societies look to AAAS to provide recommendations and will follow them. They will adopt new procedures that appear to be relevant to them.

Recommendation

Agricultural Societies will need to learn more about the value and implementation of some of the recommendations and tools generated through this current research. It is recommended that AAAS stage a similar education and training approach to raise familiarity with these opportunities and tools.

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Facilitation of Opportunities

The research reveals that many Agricultural Societies are not significantly aggressive in seeking out new opportunities that would benefit their communities. Recommendations contained in this report suggest some approaches to bring about more insightful working relationships between Agricultural Societies and some of their stakeholders. However, the continued emphasis of AAAS on seeking out new opportunities for Agricultural Societies and the industry should remain a key priority.

Government of Alberta, Agriculture and Rural Development

ARD is a vitally important partner for the Agricultural Society community and through its investment in Agricultural Societies has been a very significant contributor of infrastructure and programming in communities throughout Alberta. Without this investment, many communities would not have the infrastructure that they rely on.

People moving to rural areas expect to have available the kind of facilities, programming and services they have come to rely on. Without these being in place, it is not possible for broader initiatives to encourage people to move to these rural areas to be successful. The investment of ARD and the action of the Agricultural Societies over many years have jointly provided these assets. Providing a cost effective way to manage and deliver facilities and programming.

It is clearly appropriate to finalize the proposed new funding agreements with ARD in order to stimulate continued growth for the rural communities through the joint priorities of ARD and the Agricultural Societies.

Further, it is recommended that AAAS maintain dialogue with ARD on branding and priorities for Agricultural Societies in Alberta. It is of concern that existing branding likely contributes to limiting the achievements and contribution of Agricultural Societies in their communities. A broader branding focused on rural and agricultural community facilitation may be more appropriate than a narrow and aged agricultural focus, which may no longer characterize the priorities and expectations of the stakeholders of Agricultural Societies and their communities.

Other Government Relations

AAAS has also maintained consistent and valuable relationships with other Alberta Government departments. This process of communication is vitally important for the industry and directly benefits Agricultural Societies and their communities.

10.0 Supporting Government and Industry Initiatives

Agricultural Societies are uniquely positioned to support many broad-based public initiatives. Alberta Government Departments and other organizations create or manage programs that require communication, demonstration, distribution, or interaction involving wide selections of Alberta communities and populations. Prior research has shown that Agricultural Societies operate in most Alberta communities and engage most of Alberta's population through events and programming at the community or regional level.

This report suggests Agricultural Societies explore locally their opportunity to assume a stronger role as a valuable partner within the leadership in their communities, assuming a previously traditional role at the core of the community. As they pursue a stronger role, Agricultural Societies will expand their engagement with the community. The expanded role and community engagement programming will raise awareness of the Agricultural Society as a source and conduit for growth and information and a central focus within the community.

With a stronger role in the community, the Agricultural Society would have the potential to engage the community on most topics. Communicating, promoting, or delivering new or existing programs and initiatives remains a challenge for government. Often, despite strong communication and promotion, awareness or uptake of valuable programs is limited. The Agricultural Society will have the resources locally to contribute to seamless program planning and delivery.

As local Agricultural Societies assume their stronger role and recapture more focused relevance in their communities, they have the opportunity to assist government partners to research, promote or deliver their programs within their specific community. Groups of Agricultural Societies may work together to assume this role on a regional or sub regional bases. Opportunities include:

- Facilitating local research among residents, including providing opportunities for local focus groups.
- Providing a centralized communication focus with targeted population or business groups, perhaps in conjunction with selected other organizations (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce, the local municipal government).
- Act as local agent for program delivery.
- Provide local facilities required for program delivery.
- Providing opportunities to conduct program or initiative evaluations at the local level to assess the adoption or success, or explore new opportunities, related to client program initiatives.

Most Alberta Government Departments and many public and corporate organizations without their own local direct local representation can take advantage of this opportunity. Opportunities may exist with several Alberta Government Departments, including Economic Development, Education, Culture and Community Spirit, Infrastructure, etc.

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Some examples to illustrate the nature of these opportunities may include:

- Assisting the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association to expand the penetration in communities of many of its mandates for healthy living and facilities optimization.
- Assisting Alberta Culture and Community Spirit by promoting the adoption and high profile of programs that promote strong communities.
- Assisting Alberta Advanced Education and Technology to promote and accommodate local Post Secondary Education and Community Learning programming to build community capacity.
- Assist Alberta Seniors and Community Supports to directly engage targeted populations and facilitators by providing (volunteered) human resources and communication programming.
- Assisting Alberta Tourism and the Tourism Destination Regions to bring a local focus to tourism, where there is no local tourism organization.
- Assist corporate clients to present or launch new products to targeted local populations by providing and promoting facilities for these events, for a service fee plus rental.
- Act as local facilitator to engage or bring together local community groups relevant to corporate, not for profit, or government priorities.

AAAS is well positioned to facilitate this opportunity as it has developed a good reputation for professional leadership in Alberta. It is recommended that AAAS builds an action plan to identify and engage government and other organizations whose mandates are appropriate to the resources and capabilities of Alberta's Agricultural Societies to explore detailed opportunities.

While no specific revenue for AAAS or Agricultural Societies to assume this valuable role is apparent at this time, AAAS may be able to agree on service charges or other fees to be paid by client organizations. In some cases, Agricultural Society facilities would be rented or their equipment or human resources could be made available, resulting in an economic benefit for the Agricultural Society.

In some cases this opportunity could exist on a province-wide basis and in other cases it may be local or regional. AAAS would need to have strong communication with progressive (responsive and motivated) Agricultural Societies in order to facilitate these initiatives.

The success of this programming opportunity would be contingent on the extent to which Agricultural Societies have successfully pursued stronger relevance and re-positioned as a strong part of their community's leadership team.

A monitoring and evaluation program by consultation should be staged to assess the success of these program opportunities from the perspective of the clients and the targeted populations.

11.0 Summary of Conclusions

Role of Agricultural Societies in communities

Agricultural Societies play a pivotal role in the well being of their respective communities. They provide a diverse range of services, and a number of these services go beyond the basic functioning of the agricultural industry. Services provided by societies are telling factors in youth development, community development, health and well being, industry education, support to other organizations, economic contribution, enhancing social life and a lot of other factors which go into the make up of a vibrant community.

Agricultural Societies today are faced with several challenges, which compromise their ability to function smoothly. Although challenges vary from one society to another, there are common challenges across most Agricultural Societies. In the view of the Agricultural Societies, the biggest problems they face currently are insufficient funding and lack of volunteerism. While funding is a common theme, and it seems as if it is second nature to complain about lack of financial strength, societies have concerns about the funding distribution. Equal funding is given out to small rural Agricultural Societies, which is a cause for concern among a number of Agricultural Societies.

This opinion was voiced at the AAAS conference in Edmonton and was restated during the phone interviews. Some Agricultural Societies are of the view that a number of societies do not provide the services they can with the stipulated funding in their communities and, rather, either let the funds accumulate or simply re-distribute them to other community interests. Agricultural Societies that work hard to provide facilities, programming and services in their communities, want to expand these benefits, but are limited by financial restraints, believe that the money accumulated by Agricultural Societies as a result of lack of programming or facilities could be put to better use in the communities.

Volunteerism is a major obstacle inhibiting Agricultural Societies. This is a common theme across organizations, however the extent to which this affects rural societies is significantly damaging. Volunteer-related challenges have resulted into a number of problems arising in societies internally and externally. Internally the lack of fresh faces has led to depletion of new ideas. Board members tend operate the society in the same manner they have been for a number of years.

These methods do not change in spite of failing results. Such attitudes negatively affect board members who might be advocates of positive change in the organization. In addition, board members who sit on the Agricultural Society boards in their communities, play other such roles in the community as well. These members are "burnt out" from all of their volunteer work. It is crucially important to understand and accept that poor functioning many societies comes down to the fact that their Board Members are, after all, also volunteers. As most Agricultural Society Boards are working boards, these same volunteers also operate the society's facilities, administration and programming.

These board members have regular jobs (or are retired) and families, and society obligations are a part of them being a service to their community. Volunteers in the capacity of board members invest

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significant time in the operations. To expect these volunteers to invest more time and effort in long term strategic planning and other additional tasks can be demanding on these volunteers. The addition of increased accountability and paper work has made their volunteer positions more demanding than it has previously been.

While AAAS completely understands that a lack of volunteer activity in communities is a problem faced by several societies, it is important to be very cautious about overburdening existing volunteers. Retaining these volunteers in Agricultural Societies in the need of the hour, and imposing increased workloads, may push these volunteers to depart from Agricultural Societies. A more strategic approach needs to be taken by AAAS and a number of other organizations to tackle this massive trend. Larger urban centers would be faced with the same problem, were it not for the larger pool of people from which they manage to attract volunteers.

In addition leadership, training and communication are important aspects of the smooth functioning of any organization. Training on these topics is crucial in developing capacity with societies. Rural communities and their Agricultural Societies understand their communities very well, but lack the formal training to develop and utilize tools. Tools and resources will vary significantly for societies depending on the problems that are faced in their organizations. However, providing the training to deal with problems strategically and by developing capacity would be immensely helpful and a longer-term solution. The Implementation Toolkit included in this work will assist Agricultural Societies to pursue some initiatives.

However, a further and equally important issue is the importance for Agricultural Societies to regain their role as relevant facilitators in the ongoing evolution of Alberta's changing rural communities.

Limitations Constraining Success

Many factors limit the success for Agricultural Societies in meeting their goals. Overall, many external factors have caused a change in the "playing field" to which some Agricultural Societies have been unable to respond. These factors include changes in demographics, trend changes in partner-sectors, changes in higher level economic priorities, global financial constraints, the influence of decision making by municipalities and other levels of government to accommodate their own needs, etc., lead us to conclude that one of the most vital issues is to determine a new relevance for Agricultural Societies or to refine and reinforce their positioning in their communities

Agricultural Societies appear to fall into three main groups:

- Those following old mandates,
- Those actively focused on filling gaps or fulfilling perceived needs in the community, and
- Those whose mandate has changed as a result of significant changes in their business environment, through innovation.

Many of the actively focused and progressive Agricultural Societies are concerned that a different model should govern or contain the societies that are not active but are, for example, redistributing their grants

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and contributions to other organizations in their community or “collecting” cash, but not actually operating other programs or activities or saving for major investment initiatives.

Traditional constraints for Agricultural Societies include a variety of factors, such as volunteer burnout, administrative overloads, human resource challenges, attracting youth, challenges in building support, membership, stakeholder perception, less-than-progressive Boards, etc.

Other constraints are associated with changes in the business environment, image, motivation, communication challenges, community relations, competition for funding/volunteers/advertising revenue/sponsorship/etc.

Some societies are quite satisfied with their status and role in their community and do not want to change. However, several of these Agricultural Societies (and others that are more progressive in their focus) are “losing ground” due to a variety of factors. They are distinct from the Agricultural Societies that are quite strategic in keeping up with, or ahead of, changing trends or business conditions or are actively pursuing growth or new direction.

Leading and Emerging Practices

The report summarizes best/leading practices in significant areas of the operation of Agricultural Societies

- Agricultural Societies have reported several key achievements and “success stories”.
- This report identifies several areas in which eminent practices may contribute value to Agricultural Societies. Included are topics such as strategic-level planning approaches, community engagement and communication, innovation, etc.
- Further it identifies several examples of practices that characterize the operation of leading Agricultural Societies and other organizations.

Partnerships and alliances

New partnership and strategic opportunities exist for Agricultural Societies to stimulate enhanced benefits at the community level

- Opportunities exist for individual Agricultural Societies, or groups of societies, to build or actively participate in alliances that will contribute to the continuing evolution of their communities.
- Partnership strategies highlight the value of joint initiatives. It is noted that some Agricultural Societies are quite introspective and may be less likely to pursue these initiatives

Strategic Positioning

Opportunities for strategic positioning and new partnerships and alliances for AAAS to further its objectives

- The consultation program has identified a number of opportunities for AAAS to pursue its strategic and leadership role for the benefit of the industry and for Agricultural Societies.

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- Some opportunities have been identified directly to AAAS so AAAS may take immediate action to pursue them.
- Specific tools have been developed to assist Agricultural Societies to pursue their opportunities and enhance their direction and their image.

Trends

Several external trends influence the industry (several reported above: demographics, trend changes in partner-sectors, changes in higher level economic priorities, global financial constraints, the influence of decision making by municipalities and other levels of government to accommodate their own needs, downloading, increasing competition for resources (includes financial, human, volunteered, and other resources) and are in the process of developing strategies, tools, or actions that would help to address them.

Several internal trends affecting Agricultural Societies were also evident, including challenges in voluntarism, increasing demands for accountability and reporting, increasing core operating costs, slow regeneration of Boards leading to “more of the same, limited awareness of the value of strategic planning, partnerships, changes in technology that significantly impact the way in which Agricultural Societies communicate, etc.

Role of Agricultural Societies in Communities

The recommendation made by Agricultural Societies regarding funding is that it be made based on the extent to which Agricultural Societies are active in their respective communities. This will ensure that funding is being utilized and put onus on the passive Agricultural Societies to get active or risk losing out on funding. However it is important to keep in mind that some Agricultural Societies save up money with a view of spending it on capital projects which can range from facility improvements, building new facilities, buying new equipment and others.

Currently there is a lack of information sharing among Agricultural Societies. An information-sharing platform developed by AAAS, which would be available through various media, would help immensely. This information sharing would entail some of the innovative practices being carried out by Agricultural Societies. These practices can range from partnerships, event hosting, funding procurement, volunteer motivation and others. Such a tool, if developed strategically, would be valuable to help Agricultural Societies that have the desire to move forward, but lack the tools, resources, and experience required to do so.

Priorities and achievements

The implementation of business plans has been a big change for a number of Agricultural Societies not accustomed to formalizing plans. A number of societies received training facilitated by AAAS after the business plans had to be submitted. While changes in reporting are a positive step forward, such changes should be implemented systematically. Training needs to be provided and Agricultural Societies need to be eased into any sort of changes. Agricultural Societies have retained the same board members who have run the organization a certain way for a significant period of time. It would be unrealistic to

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expect these members to change the way they function overnight. A transition phase where appropriate training and support is provided to Agricultural Societies is a must, developing capacity and resourcefulness within the Agricultural Societies is a must to ensure that any operational changes that need to be brought about are integrated into the societies. However, ARD, AAAS, and the Agricultural Societies are to be congratulated on achieving the improvements in planning and accountability.

As is the case with any situation, fear of the unknown creates and compounds negative attitudes. Lack of technical knowledge about business and strategic planning without prior training renders these requirements with a negative connotation. However, planned seminars on topics such as strategic planning, business plans, partnership building, etc., would alleviate these negative attitudes as there would be awareness about these concepts.

Interviewees were unanimously of the opinion that the AAAS conference is the one single most powerful knowledge base for a lot of Agricultural Societies. The conference not only provides societies with the opportunity to listen to guest speakers, but also creates a platform for networking and understanding success stories and lessons from failures of other Agricultural Societies. Such communication is the need of the hour. Increased interaction between neighbouring societies is crucial in raising morale, creating companionship, forging partnerships, and learning from each other.

Challenges and Opportunities

The following recommendations arose from feedback from interviewees:

- Provide societies with a list of funding sources such as grants they can access.
- Provide societies with leadership training.
- A number of societies have mentioned that assistance with paperwork would be immensely helpful. While societies understand the need for transparency and accountability, the added workload is a drain on financial resources and/or time.
- Encouraging increased communication between neighbouring societies. Interviewees have mentioned that the AAAS conference is a great opportunity to learn from other societies. Feedback has also indicated that societies would like to know success stories in other organizations.
- Allot a transition period and sufficient training prior to introducing new requirements such as reporting and business plans. While reporting and accountability are important, not allowing for sufficient training and time would result in inefficient results, which are self defeating.
- Successful and active societies have managed to recruit volunteers who move from urban centres in search of a more relaxed lifestyle.
- Interviewees suggested that AAAS should put more effort into educating urban folks the advantages of living in rural communities, which will automatically result in larger pool of volunteers to recruit from.

Leadership in the Community

The most common response for the type of tools and resources which would help Agricultural Societies play a stronger role in leadership, was the need to be informed about the success stories and types of projects other societies are involved in. This is an important message, which has to be given significant

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consideration. There is a strong need for the development of a communication platform that disseminates information about project details and Agricultural Society achievements and challenges. With this information at their disposal Agricultural Societies can access initiatives and ideas that have been addressed in other communities. Eventually this communication tool can result in a database of projects, segmented into project areas that can be accessed by societies.

Mentorship between societies is another significant opportunity for Agricultural Society development. Feedback from societies has almost been unanimous with regards to providing and receiving mentorship. This will help create capacity within the industry, while developing a social link between the societies. Leadership within the Agricultural Societies is equally important as leadership within communities. This program can have several variations including a rotation of mentors over a time period to increase networking and constantly improve learning and hence leadership.

Communication with the Community

Many Agricultural Societies understand what the best means are to reach their organizations, but lack the tools and resources need to get there. Below are recommendations to enhance communication between the societies and their communities.

- Encouraging a diverse make up on Agricultural Society boards can boost communication between Agricultural Societies.
- Communities understand who their audience is, however they might have a lack of understanding of the means to reach them. Simple print media such as posters, brochures and banners created in a professional manner can go a long way in attracting attention. Providing training seminars on basic computer skills including Paint, Microsoft Office, etc., will prove useful
- While it seems difficult for some Agricultural Societies to attract people in certain communities for certain events, while others do not have such problems. Getting assistance from successful events and organizations can help fill in the gaps, and overcome this barrier.
- Making appearances as an organization at community events, and being involved in community events is important. This helps in getting the organization noticed. Societies can take opportunities such as fairs and suppers to educate the community by volunteering in certain aspects of these events.
- Celebrating success is very crucial for various aspects. Organizations might tend to not publicize success and maintain a modest image. This can often have a negative impact on the organization. Audiences attending events and utilizing services look at this feedback as an important form of communication. It provides them with the opportunity to relate to services they have utilized. Simple and free services such as press releases with photographs must be utilized.

12.0 Implementation Action Plan for Agricultural Societies and for AAAS

The following recommendations for action are developed from conclusions reached through the research. These recommendations are developed to assist Agricultural Societies and AAAS to pursue excellence and to position Agricultural Societies well in their communities and among their stakeholders. The result of successful execution is expected to lead to a stronger and more visible and more viable industry.

In many cases, these recommendations are focused on positioning and enhanced communication.

Positioning and Relevance of Agricultural Societies

The highest priorities for Agricultural Societies to expand their relevance in their community and among their stakeholders are:

1. Through ongoing consultation with community leaders, re-focus the role of the Agricultural Society on its true and historic role in community and rural development.
 - Become, or motivate and support, a community champion to promote the community and to bring about cohesive development strategies to benefit the community's residential and business populations.
 - The Refocusing Tool in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit will assist Agricultural Societies to pursue this recommendation
2. Position the Agricultural Society as the "Community Homestead" and the visionary, but capable motivator for the community.
 - This is a vital role in a rural community and extended "family" of stakeholders.
 - In many cases this will return the Agricultural Society to a position that was theirs in previous years.
 - The Agricultural Society pursuing this recommendation will need to become an example of leadership in its own right.
 - Refocusing will take time to become reality as strong and consistent leaders are identified and selected by their performance as leaders by others who recognize them as leaders.
3. Identify and engage the stakeholders of the Agricultural Society.
 - Stakeholders are people or businesses who may be affected by decisions of the Agricultural Society.
 - Implement a communication strategy and plan to build strong communication with all stakeholders
 - The Stakeholder Engagement tool in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit will assist Agricultural Societies to identify and engage their stakeholders
4. Develop and document a strategic plan to provide strategic direction for the Agricultural Society over forthcoming years and to document context for the three-year business plan.

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- Align strategic planning to accommodate the priorities and desires existing and expected stakeholders and the resources and priorities of the Agricultural Society.
 - Employ strategic target marketing and tracking with respect to key priorities (e.g. engaging youth as consumers and leaders)
 - The Strategic Planning Tool in the Agricultural Society Toolkit will contribute to focusing the strategic plan and monitoring its performance.
5. Embrace and pursue tourism benefits – important for the business community and for community development
- Tourism brings cash flow to the community
 - Non-residents of the community will spend money in the community that may otherwise be spent elsewhere. That spending is often a key benefit in economic development.
 - It is valuable for the Agricultural Society and the community's or region's tourism industry to execute joint strategies to attract non-residents to attend events staged by the Agricultural Society or that are staged by other individuals or organizations in facilities owned or operated by the Agricultural Society.
 - This more than offsets concerns expressed by some local businesses that local residents do not shop when Agricultural Society events take place as their customers are, instead, at the Agricultural Society event.
 - Gather attendance data and estimate spending to illustrate tourism benefits in the community.
 - The tourism tool in the Agricultural Society Toolkit will assist in tourism planning and reporting.
6. Develop joint initiatives on voluntarism with other community organizations.
- This will allow the community to develop its volunteer resource.
 - It will enhance voluntary support for planning and execution of initiatives of the partners in the joint initiative.
7. Through consultation, develop programming relevant to the stakeholders of the Agricultural Society
- Through consultation with other community leaders, innovators, and motivators, develop programming as part of a longer term plan to deliver or encourage events and programming to attract local and regional residents.
8. Attend and report to the Board and to stakeholders on the AAAS Convention and Regional Meetings
- The AAAS Convention and Regional Meetings are excellent opportunities for Agricultural Society Board Members to learn about progressive approaches, success stories, ideas for
 - Reporting on the knowledge gained through presentations and discussion use the knowledge.
9. Develop community alliances to offset silo thinking

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10. Pursue the establishment of a rural community development team, where one does not exist, to pursue community initiatives; integrate priorities in Agricultural Society strategic planning Focus on goals, achievements, and results.

Pursuing Enhanced Performance

The following action steps to implement priorities are recommended to pursue excellence in the operations of Agricultural Societies

1. Prioritize Board training and optimization
 - Many organizations are held back by the nature of their Board of Directors. New vision and vibrancy for the society and its Board is expected to be achieved through the use of specialized or conventional Board training programs
2. Get passion back
 - Attracting the participation in the Board of a vibrant champion or motivator in the community may bring back some of the enthusiasm on the Board and for the Agricultural Society that has been lost over time.
 - Through initiatives identified in this document, induce and encourage younger Board participants
3. Board to direct, committees to execute
 - To alleviate pressures of time on the Board, it is recommended that even in fully volunteer Boards, the Board addresses strategic direction and identified Committees execute programs and activities. This will bring better focus to both the policy and operational priorities of the Agricultural Society.
4. Develop Alliances on programming with neighbouring communities
 - Reduce competitive positioning and create sub-regional activity or event zones that include several neighbouring communities. That will reduce workloads, utilize financial resources better, and will lead to stronger attraction of sub-regional residents
5. Engage in strategic financial planning and adopt a common chart of accounts (to be developed by AAAS in conjunction with accounting organizations)
 - In addition to improved presentation of data, this will assist Agricultural Societies to take a more uniform view of financial operations and will lead to stronger comparability and reporting.
6. Adopt relevant technology
 - Most Agricultural Societies would benefit from enhancements such as social networking, websites, active email, computerized planning and operations programs and computerized bookkeeping.
7. Develop a strategic plan including tracking systems for monitoring and evaluation
 - A strategic plan will assist the Agricultural Society to become more visionary and to look further into the future in conjunction with its key stakeholders.
8. Engage AAAS through Convention, Regional Meetings
 - Make communication with AAAS a two way street to help AAAS to maintain its focus on the most important industry and Agricultural Society priorities.

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9. Actively engage business partners to optimize their benefits
 - Initiate a discussion with business partners of the Agricultural Society to explore their priorities and goals and to assist them to benefit best from their involvement with the Agricultural Society and its facilities and programming.
10. Embrace creativity
 - Initiate a creativity program to attract creative ideas from the community, other stakeholders, and Board members. Create an award for the most creative and executable initiative provided each year.

Highest priorities for AAAS

1. Rebrand, refocus Agricultural Societies
 - Determine and promote re-branding for Agricultural Societies to adopt an identity closer to their current and potential role – that of a Rural Community Development organization.
 - This is consistent with the origins of many Agricultural Societies – in days when the community was focused on agriculture. Many communities are no longer so supported by agriculture. However, they still need the leadership and community-focused vision that has been provided by many Agricultural Societies in the past.
 - Naturally, in communities where agriculture is important that will remain one of several priorities. In all cases, priorities that support and develop local resources (e.g., food, agricultural resources, agricultural competition, agricultural education and training) will remain a foundation for the Agricultural Society. This should be seeded in new branding.
2. Focus on governance for AAAS and Agricultural Societies
 - Intensify the present AAAS focus on governance for Boards of Directors of Member Agricultural Societies and AAAS. This should remain a crucial priority for AAAS. Governance is assessed to be a significant weakness in many Agricultural Societies. While Boards are able to rationalize this challenge, building strong governance will enhance the operation of the Boards and their role with their stakeholders. While the AAAS Board is well focused and the Board Members bring strong vision, passion, and skill, the AAAS Board may position itself as a visible example of the type of Board that should lead Agricultural Societies in their communities.
3. Intensify programming and delivery of Agricultural Society education and training
 - AAAS has been successful in executing education and training initiatives to assist Agricultural Societies to adopt new methods (e.g., business planning) and should build on its success in these initiatives.
 - Establish a certification program for Agricultural Society Board Members in conjunction with an Alberta educational institution, e.g., Red Deer College, Olds College. Make local programs delivered accessible to other organizations in the community.

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4. Develop, document, and communicate a strategic plan for AAAS, including monitoring and evaluation and business plan development
 - A strategic plan will bring further focus to defining AAAS priorities and execution on behalf of its members
 - i. The AAAS Board should own the Strategic Plan direct the CEO to execute it, contributing expertise, support, and other resources as required.
 - ii. The AAAS CEO is responsible to the Board to execute the program.
 - iii. The AAAS Board should monitor the execution and performance of the Strategic Plan.

(NB: It should be noted that a Strategic Plan was developed with the Board of Directors of AAAS as a part of this professional assignment.

5. AAAS should continue to pursue tourism opportunities through ongoing consultation with Travel Alberta and the Tourism Destination Regions.
 - Convey to Agricultural Societies, understanding of the Canadian and US markets for fairs and festivals as documented in the 2008 Travel Alberta Special Reports based on the Canadian Tourism Commission's Tourism Activities and Motivation Study, found at <http://www.tpr.alberta.ca/tourism/research/docs/CDNMarketforFestivalsandFairsAB.pdf>

For the rural Agricultural Societies, specifically focus on the section dealing with Regional Canadian Fairs and Festivals Tourists.
 - Develop a tourism alliance with Travel Alberta and the Tourism Destination Regions to deliver and promote local events and activities through Agricultural Societies in Alberta communities to attract tourism spending.
6. Update the AAAS website to a more current and interactive format including perhaps revenue opportunities for advertisers and other partners
7. Establish, as a revenue opportunity of AAAS, a contract fund-raising mechanism for members to engage AAAS to assist in developing funding for new and ongoing initiatives
8. Pursue strategic change in Agricultural Society classification to encourage the "passive" Agricultural Societies to become more active. Several Agricultural Societies believe this is an opportunity to encourage the lower activity Agricultural Societies to become more active, rather than being distributors of their ARD funding in their community
9. Determine the opportunity to establish attendance at the AAAS convention as a condition of funding
10. Optimize and theme the convention and regional meetings to pursue enhancements in excellence and strategic development for Agricultural Societies
 - Establish a program of awards specifically focused on achieving excellence, innovation, and community development
 - Initiate an award program based on identifying young, progressive Board members who make a difference

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- Continue to develop Convention programs that address excellence, problem solving, partnership development, community leadership, etc.
 - Use Agricultural Societies to convey messages at the Convention.
11. Establish an ongoing research program to gather data from Agricultural Societies.
 - The existing program is valuable. However, optimized data gathering and analysis would be of value for AAAS planning and to assist Agricultural Societies
 12. In conjunction with ARD, optimize Agricultural Society reporting requirements
 - Include a strategic plan and revised financial presentations
 13. Develop a supporting program to assist Agricultural Societies with strategic planning
 - Tools are provided in this research to contribute to this initiative
 14. Expand, coordinate, and promote an industry media relations program
 - Tools are provided in this research to contribute to this initiative
 15. Increase the profile of AAAS and Agricultural Societies at Local Government and Chamber of Commerce association meetings
 - Consider assisting Agricultural Societies in the short term with presentations and facilitation to further awareness of the Agricultural Society in the community
 - Tools are provided in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit to assist in this initiative
 16. Develop standard Chart of Accounts for Agricultural Societies and negotiate standard presentation approaches with accounting societies (ongoing)

Highest Priorities for Partnerships and Alliances

For Agricultural Societies:

1. Develop partnerships with local community organizations
2. Initiate a branded program to promote the use of local foods in recipes combined with cooking and nutrition education for young people
3. Join or integrate a local tourism team
4. Develop joint programming with other Agricultural Societies to deliver local and regional educational/training institutions to build local programming using facilities and communication resources, thus building the local credibility of Agricultural Society

For AAAS:

1. Actively develop strong participation in the provincial tourism team
2. Continue to develop relationships with Economic and Community Developers associations
3. Provincial food and agriculture organizations
4. Entertainment industry ARD delivery team to optimize development of excellence
5. Explore the benefits of a stronger relationship with CAFE to enhance access for AAAS and Agricultural Societies to resources and other benefits

Highest Priorities for AAAS to enhance Member Relations

1. Enhance the AAAS convention (see above)

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2. Expand Regional meetings to add sub regional education and development meetings (perhaps led by AAAS staff)
3. Enhance website to optimize value to members (as users and beneficiaries)
4. Develop an internet-based newsletter program including a feedback component
5. Undertake annual "state of the industry" research among Agricultural Societies with media releases to provide exposure for the industry and for Agricultural Societies
 - a. A tool to assist with this is included in the Agricultural Society Implementation Toolkit

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Related Documents:

1. Implementation Toolkit

This toolkit contains several tools that may assist Agricultural Societies to enhance their operations and communication and build on their community or other business relationships. The tools included were defined through discussions with Agricultural Societies and stakeholders and through consideration of practices appropriate for Agricultural Society excellence.

2. Quantitative Report

This document identifies trends noted among financial and operating data reported by the Agricultural Societies and compares them with data from previous research.

3. AAAS Strategic Plan

A strategic plan was developed with the Board of Directors of AAAS.