

Investing in Market Access for Southern Alberta Business

Issue

Global commerce is increasingly reliant upon the ability for goods to reach local, regional and international markets. As such, it is imperative to consider the crucial role that transportation networks play in economic development. Current infrastructure in and around Southern Alberta requires serious upgrades and advancements to maintain and leverage a competitive edge in advancing business success in Southern Alberta.

Background

Recent refocusing of economic priorities within the province of Alberta, combined with a growing international demand for high-quality foods and agri-food products, has positioned Southern Alberta to be a global leader in the distribution of products to local, regional, and international markets. Moreover, the relative economic stability of the region, combined with low infrastructure and land costs, and the proximity for major producers and distributors to raw agricultural products, has cast an attractive light on Southern Alberta as a place to invest. The opportunity currently exists to leverage these advantages to help diversify and grow the Canadian economy by improving local transportation infrastructure.

Located at in Southern Alberta's agricultural heartland, is a growing network hub for the export and import of large quantities of goods. Goods flow east and west through the region via Highway 3, and connect to Highway 1. Additionally, several major north-south corridors (Highways 6,2,62,4,889, 41 and Interstate 15) move goods through the region, particularly into the United States thru the twenty-four hour Coutts/Sweetgrass border crossing. Furthermore, an extensive rail network (Canadian Pacific) exists, with lines moving goods both east/west and north/south.

Yet despite this not-inconsiderable network, there is the distinct impression amongst the business community of Southern Alberta that clear opportunities will be missed by not investing now, at this crucial time in redirecting the Province's economy, in improving or expanding local transportation networks to encourage the growth of key industries. The development of Lethbridge and region as an agricultural and manufacturing hub would be encouraged by the accelerated twinning of major highways that pass through the region (eg. Highway 3), the development of an inland, intermodal port, which would open new possibilities for producers and industry stakeholders, and significant development to local airports, which would enable new opportunities for international and inter-regional trade and commerce.

These possibilities are real, and are highlighted by several recent large investments in the region, including an expansion by Richardson Oilseed (\$120 Million), and by Cavendish Farms (\$350 Million). Lethbridge is a growing centre, with a population of almost 100,000, and a larger catchment area of almost 500,000. (EDL Study). Moreover, the recent crash in commodity prices left Southern Alberta largely unaffected, due to the diversified nature of the local economy. Stability, in uncertain economic times, encourage

investment, and a commitment from public sources to expand local transportation networks could easily tip the scales for major stakeholders who may be considering this region as a viable option.

The Government of Alberta's 2016 Capital Plan has earmarked approximately \$4.6 billion for roads and bridge networks across the Province – with a clear lack of expenditure on these vital networks in Southern Alberta. Compounding this, five-year funding projections do not show distribution of funds to large-scale development in the region's road network. It is the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce's view that this represents a critical oversight, which if corrected, would immensely aid the Government of Alberta's clearly stated mission to invest in the diversification of the provincial economy.

In short, Southern Alberta is well positioned to become a major Agri-food and Manufacturing center, and a global leader in the distribution of goods to local, regional and international markets. With access to major highway infrastructure, extensive rail infrastructure, and growth potential to localized airports, Southern Alberta is ready to become a leading economic force in a retooled and refocused economy.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Canada:

1. Work with rail operators to ensure open and fair access to rail transportation, through the reduction in regulations affecting wider usages of rail as a preferred form of transportation for Canadian goods to:
 - a. National and International Markets,
 - b. Shipping Ports; and,
 - c. Transportation Hubs.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

2. Expedite the twinning of Highway 3, considering the economic impact and growth-potential of opening up access to Highway 1 and national markets across Canada.
3. Work towards a plan for sustainable growth in local airports as a portion of local economic progression, with an eye to growing international and inter-regional opportunities