

# Operational Plan 2025- 2026



Prepared by Peter Casurella, Executive Director  
March 2025 for the SouthGrow Management Board.

## OPERATIONAL PLAN 2025 / 2026

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These are actionable projects within each Strategic Pillar that we build one-year timelines for. Each tactic is fleshed out with a SMARTER goal, desired outcomes, measures of success, specific targets, and a three-year work-plan broken down by quarter to allow the organization to remain flexible yet on-pace.

These projects are proposed. Due to board approvals and other possible extenuating circumstances, we may not initiate all projects in the 2024-2025 year, however all Government of Alberta funding will be spent on programs and operations listed in this operational plan.

Finally, the Executive Committee has recommended a number of projects for potential implementation subject to funding availability. These are listed under section 6, Targets of Opportunity. Staff and Board members will look for opportunities throughout the year to pivot and address items on this list. This provides us with a suite of ready to go project ideas in case funding becomes available or in case a project on our active list becomes infeasible.



# Operations Plan Summary

## Pillar I: Strategic Collaboration

- I. **Member Engagement**
  - A. Annual Council Presentations
  - B. Regional Training
  - C. Government Relations
  - D. Economic Development Summit
  - E. Organizational Sustainability
  
- II. **Build and Sustain Collaborations**
  - A. Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership
  - B. Southern Alberta Investment and Trade Initiative
  - C. Canada's Premier Food Corridor and Canada's Western Gateway
  - D. Highway 3 Twinning Development Association
  - E. REDA Collaboration
  - F. Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta
  
- III. **Sustain or Expand Membership**
  - A. Sustain Membership
  - B. Expand Associate Memberships

## Pillar II: Marketing & Communications

- I. **Regional Promotion**
  - A. Website Improvements
  
- II. **Internal Communications**
  - A. Newsletters
  - B. Regional Sponsorships

## Pillar III: Economic Development & Innovation

- I. **Ag-Tech Market Development**
  - A. Agri-food Scholarship Program
  - B. Agri-food Conference Representation
  
- II. **Community Supports**
  - A. Grant Advice Hot Line



**B. Community Economic Development Plans**

**III. Special Projects**

- A. EV Bus Project (Final Year)
- B. Blackfoot Language Signage (Year 3)
- C. Export Expansion Project

**IV. Flagship Project**

- A. SouthGrow Power Project

**V. Targets of Opportunity**

- A. Local Waste Solutions Study
- B. Farm and Crop Conference
- C. Labour Attraction Marketing
- D. Energy Innovation Pilot Project with FortisAlberta



# Operations Capacity Map

<b>Pillar I: Strategic Collaboration</b>		<b>Brief Description</b>	<b>HR Load</b>	<b>\$ Load</b>
<b>I. Member Engagement</b>				
A.	Annual Council Presentations	Present to 40% of Councils	Low	Low
B.	Regional Training	Annual Program of Lunch and Learns	Low	Low
C.	Government Relations	Build relationships with key stakeholders	Medium	Medium
D.	Economic Development Summit	Provide high quality info for region	High	High
E.	Organizational Sustainability	Sustain organization through funding cuts	High	Low
<b>II. Build and Sustain Collaborations</b>				
A.	Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership	Advance Rural priorities with EFL and promote region	High	Medium
B.	Southern Alberta Investment and Trade Initiative	Market region globally	Medium	High
C.	Canada's Premier Food Corridor and Canada's Western Gateway	Sustain and support collaborations	Low	Low
D.	Highway 3 Twinning Development Association	Sustain and support collaboration	Low	Low
E.	REDA Collaboration	Work with fellow REDAs on joint efforts	Low	Low
F.	Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta	Serve on Committee and Support	Low	Low
<b>III. Sustain or Expand Membership</b>				
A.	Sustain Membership	Maintain membership	Low	Low
B.	Expand Associate Memberships	Expand membership	Medium	Low
<b>Pillar II: Marketing &amp; Communications</b>		<b>Brief Description</b>	<b>HR Load</b>	<b>\$ Load</b>
<b>I. Regional Promotion</b>				
A.	Website Improvements	Continuous Improvement	Low	Low
<b>II. Internal Communications</b>				
A.	Newsletters	High quality info for our people	Medium	Low
B.	Regional Sponsorships	Support local initiatives	Low	Low
<b>Pillar III: Economic Development &amp; Innovation</b>		<b>Brief Description</b>	<b>HR Load</b>	<b>\$ Load</b>
<b>I. Ag-Tech Market Development</b>				
A.	Agri-food Scholarship Program	Invest in students and promote industry	Low	Medium
B.	Agri-food Conference Representation	Stay abreast of industry trends	Low	High
<b>II. Community Supports</b>				
A.	Grant Advice Hot Line	Support communities and nonprofits	High	Low
B.	Community Economic Development Plans	Build Community Ec Dev Plans	Very High	High
<b>III. Special Projects</b>				
A.	EV Bus Project (Final Year)	Finalize pilot project	High	Medium
C.	Blackfoot Language Signage (Year 3)	Support and sustain collaboration	Low	Medium
D.	Export Expansion Project	Research opportunities and direction	High	High
<b>IV. Flagship Project</b>				
A.	SouthGrow Power Project	Build Solar Farm to sustain assoc.	High	High
<b>V. Targets of Opportunity</b>				
A.	Local Waste Solutions Study	Ensure region is progressing on solutions	Low	Low
B.	Farm and Crop Conference	Look for opportunity and partners to implement	Low	Low
C.	Labour Attraction Marketing	Watch for grants for ad funding	Low	Low
D.	Energy Innovation Pilot Project with FortisAlberta	Seek to land FortisAlberta pilots in region	Low	Low



Figure 1.1: HR and Spend Load by Tactic

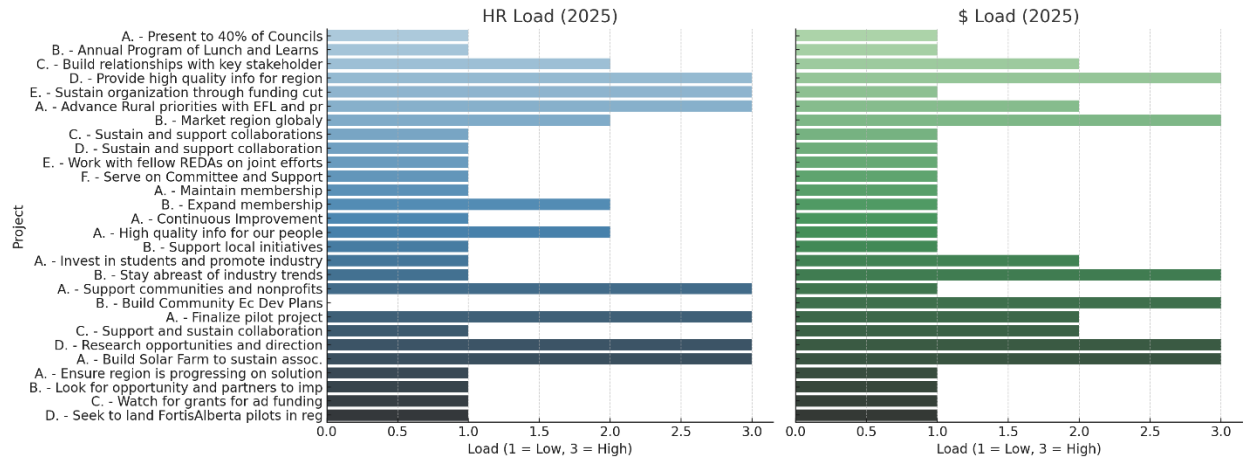
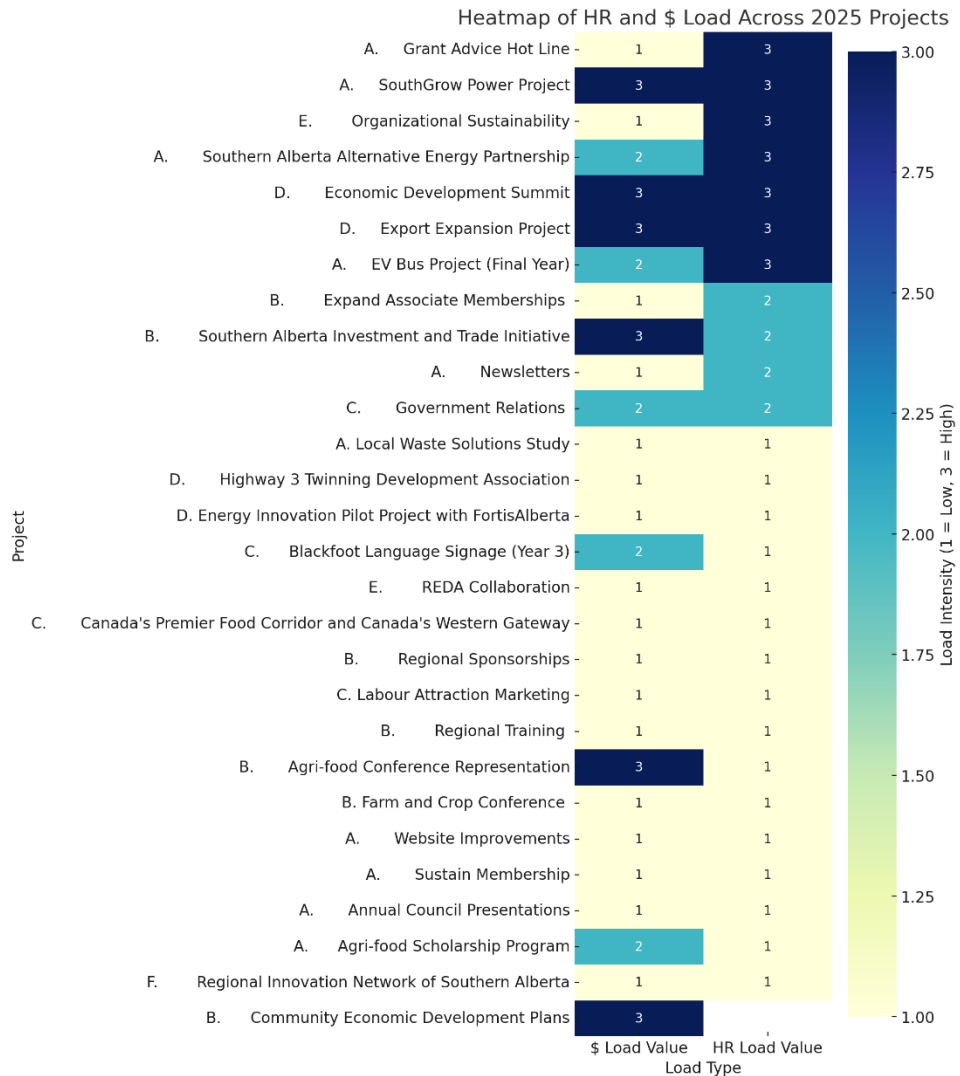


Figure 1.2: Heatmap of HR and Spend by Tactic



## Explanation of Staff Breakdown 2025

SouthGrow staff are drawn from Progressive West Consulting's roster of employees and the whole company collaborates to achieve outcomes for SouthGrow. While SouthGrow's contract with PWC reflects a 2.0 FTE equivalency, the functional reality is that SouthGrow tasks are divided up amongst the team.

In this operational year SouthGrow will formally contract:

- 1x FTE Executive Director who represents the organization and focuses on regional projects
- 1x FTE Economic Development officer who focuses on community economic development

To meet these obligations, Progressive West Consulting provides:

- Peter Casurella, Executive Director
- Kim Welby, Director of Economic Development
- Jessie Stilson, Marketing Manager (on leave)
- Emma Dering, Grants Manager (on leave)
- Morgan Elemans, Grant Manager (filling maternity leave)
- Makayla Gross, Marketing Coordinator (filling maternity leave), and incoming Economic Development Officer
- Mark Serebryansky, Communications Coordinator (part time)
- Greg Wagland, Data Analyst (Subcontracting as required)



## Part II: Tactical Plan

### PILLAR I: STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

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#### I. Member Engagement

##### Annual Council Presentations

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Deliver direct annual reports to at least 40% of member councils, supplemented by monthly Mayors & Reeves reports to all members, to keep councils informed on SouthGrow's progress.
- **Expected Outcomes:** ~40% of SouthGrow members receive in-person reports to council; 100% receive monthly operational updates (ensuring every member is kept informed).
- **Targets:** 40% of member councils visited with presentations within the year; a recorded annual report is distributed to all members and associate members.
- **Workplan:** Schedule council visitations in mid-year (after annual report release) and present updates from August through November; provide monthly written updates (Mayors & Reeves reports) to all member councils.

##### Regional Training

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Host at least six training webinars over the year to deliver high-quality, timely information on relevant topics to municipal councillors, staff, and other stakeholders.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Increased access for staff and officials across the region to expert knowledge on current issues, supporting progress in local initiatives.
- **Targets:** 6 training sessions held during the year, with a minimum of 20 attendees at each.
- **Workplan:** Identify and plan webinar topics with input from the team and board; secure speakers and schedule sessions; promote each webinar to maximize attendance; handle logistics (platform, Q&A, etc.); and follow up by collecting feedback and reporting on participation.

##### Government Relations

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Proactively advocate for SouthGrow's key priorities – including securing multi-year operational funding (at or above current levels), preserving the province's 10-year commitment to twin Highway 3, retaining core elements of Alberta's rural economic strategy – by engaging provincial ministers and officials with neutral, data-driven communications.



- **Expected Outcomes:** Strengthened relationships with key Government of Alberta ministries (economic development, agriculture, transportation, etc.) and tangible progress on extending the REDA funding partnership and other regional priorities.
- **Targets:** Renewal of SouthGrow’s provincial partnership/funding beyond the current term and reaffirmation of commitments to Highway 3 twinning and rural economic development initiatives.
- **Workplan:** Arrange meetings and briefing sessions with relevant Ministers and senior staff; provide concise briefing notes (including for venues like ABMunis and RMA conferences); ensure SouthGrow representation at these major municipal conferences to discuss priorities; and cultivate “champion” officials who will advance SouthGrow’s issues within the government.

### Economic Development Summit

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Organize a regional Economic Development that brings together stakeholders for expert presentations and dialogue on emerging economic trends and issues impacting southern Alberta. The event will be planned with regional partners with a vision to grow it into a broad southern Alberta collaboration over time.
- **Expected Outcomes:** A successful summit hosted in a SouthGrow member community with strong attendance (exceeding the previous year’s ~100 participants) and active engagement from local leaders and partner organizations. The summit strengthens regional networks and sets the stage for expanded partnerships in future editions.
- **Targets:** >115 attendees from member municipalities, regional partners, and other stakeholders participating in the summit. Positive feedback from attendees and at least one new partnership or collaborative initiative emerging from the event.
- **Workplan:** Secure a host community and venue; develop an agenda with high-value speakers/panels on relevant topics; market the event to all member councils (especially newly elected officials) and partners; coordinate event logistics (registration, catering, etc.); and execute the summit, followed by collecting attendee feedback and reporting outcomes.

### Organizational Sustainability

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** By Q2 2025 (AGM), SouthGrow will present a comprehensive sustainability plan to the Board, seeking ratification of key recommendations and direction on long-term implementation.
- **Expected Outcomes:** SouthGrow Board endorses a defined path forward to secure the organization’s financial and operational future. This includes ratified strategic actions ensuring sustainability with or without continued provincial funding.
- **Targets:** Sustainability plan completed and presented at the AGM (Q2); Board votes to approve or amend core recommendations; follow-up decisions in Q3 with full implementation planned for next fiscal year.



- **Workplan:** Complete work by facilitator doing plan development (in partnership with Alberta JET); gather Board and stakeholder input by Q2; hold strategic session to finalize sustainability options; draft the plan and circulate for review; present for formal approval at the AGM; and initiate follow-up on approved recommendations.

## II. BUILD OR SUSTAIN COLLABORATIONS

### Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership (SAAEP)

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Economic Development – Enabling Infrastructure
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Provide leadership to the SAAEP partnership throughout 2025, refocusing it on investment attraction in the alternative energy sector. Update the SAAEP website, pursue funding to identify renewable energy investment zones under new regulations, and represent the partnership in Energy Futures Lab initiatives.
- **Expected Outcomes:** SAAEP partners are re-aligned around investment attraction goals. A refreshed digital presence and actionable investment zone strategy are delivered. SouthGrow’s participation in the Energy Futures Lab strengthens the partnership’s innovation profile and expands its network.
- **Targets:** Website overhaul completed by Q2; funding secured or identified for investment zone work by Q3; SouthGrow participates in 3+ Energy Futures Lab activities representing SAAEP; clear project scope and milestones approved by all SAAEP partners by year-end.
- **Workplan:** Coordinate SAAEP meetings to confirm priorities; redevelop website content for investor audiences; apply for external funding for investment zone mapping; engage stakeholders to define target zones; and actively contribute to Energy Futures Lab projects aligned with SAAEP goals.

### Southern Alberta Investment and Trade Initiative (SAITI)

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Sustain SouthGrow’s active participation and leadership in SAITI, executing a robust slate of trade and investment promotion activities. Key initiatives for 2025 include: auditing and improving the SAITI website by Q2, producing up to six new promotional video ads for the region, sending a SouthGrow representative on a trade mission to a target market, and maintaining a global digital marketing campaign for southern Alberta with performance metrics tracking.
- **Expected Outcomes:** SAITI’s platform, content, and global presence are elevated. The website becomes a more effective lead-generation tool; new promotional videos enhance regional visibility; and trade mission participation builds concrete investor relationships.
- **Targets:** Website audit and updates completed by Q2; six new regional promo videos produced by Q3; one outbound trade mission attended; digital campaign achieves 10M+ impressions with measurable engagement; five qualified investment leads generated by year-end.



- **Workplan:** Finalize SAITI annual work plan with partners; oversee website improvement process; contract production of video content; coordinate trade mission logistics with Invest Alberta or partners; execute digital marketing campaign with monthly performance tracking; and report lead generation outcomes to SAITI stakeholders.

### Canada's Premier Food Corridor (CPFC) & Canada's Western Gateway (CWG)

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Actively support these sub-regional collaborations (CPFC and CWG) that promote key industry clusters in southern Alberta. SouthGrow will assist by convening or hosting meetings when needed, providing advisory and administrative support, connecting these groups to resources/opportunities, and amplifying their branding and messaging through SouthGrow's own communications channels. This support is continuous throughout the year to help both initiatives thrive.
- **Expected Outcomes:** The CPFC and CWG initiatives remain vibrant and self-sustaining. Each group continues to independently pursue marketing projects and investments that raise the profile of the region's agri-food and trade/logistics sectors, respectively. SouthGrow's involvement ensures these collaborations stay aligned with regional strategies and that successes are shared broadly.
- **Targets:** CPFC and CWG stay active with their member-driven leadership. Each initiative undertakes its own marketing or investment projects during the year, and both maintain financial contributions from their members for those initiatives. In short, CPFC and CWG remain active, managed by their memberships, and investing in their own cluster development efforts.
- **Workplan:** Regularly attend CPFC and CWG meetings and planning sessions. Invite and involve these groups in relevant SouthGrow projects or events to foster integration. Periodically check in with the municipalities or partners leading CPFC and CWG to stay updated on their progress and needs. Share any suitable opportunities (funding calls, investor leads, marketing platforms, etc.) with CPFC/CWG contacts to support their missions.

### Highway 3 Twinning Development Association (H3TDA)

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Economic Development – Enabling Infrastructure
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Support the Highway 3 Twinning Development Association in advancing the twinning of Highway 3. SouthGrow will contribute up to \$3,000 in matching funds and provide in-kind support, maintain an active presence on the H3TDA board, and help rally continued buy-in from member municipalities. The goal is to ensure H3TDA remains a vibrant, impactful organization driving the highway twinning agenda.
- **Expected Outcomes:** H3TDA is able to carry out its planned activities for the year (studies, advocacy, etc.) with SouthGrow's financial and organizational support. The association stays on track toward its long-term goal of a fully twinned Highway 3, maintaining strong engagement from communities along the corridor. SouthGrow's involvement helps H3TDA meet matching fund requirements and keeps regional leaders aligned behind the project.



- **Targets:** H3TDA continues to implement a defined work plan of advocacy and development actions. The association utilizes the available \$3,000 support from SouthGrow (as needed) and remains on track with its strategic goals for Highway 3 twinning. Progress is evidenced by the fulfillment of H3TDA’s own milestones and the retention of government commitments to the project.
- **Workplan:** Attend H3TDA board meetings regularly and contribute to discussions/strategies. Provide the budgeted matching funds when requests align with H3TDA’s projects and proper approvals. Assist in communicating H3TDA’s updates and successes back to SouthGrow members to maintain broad regional support for the Highway 3 initiative.

## REDA Collaboration

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Collaborate with Alberta’s other Regional Economic Development Alliances (REDAs) to highlight the value of regional economic partnerships and to strengthen our collective influence with the provincial government. In 2024, facilitate at least one meeting of all REDA Chairs and one joint meeting between the REDA Chairs and the Minister responsible for economic development (e.g. Jobs, Economy and Trade). These engagements aim to encourage continued provincial support (e.g. renewing multi-year funding) and to position the REDAs as key partners in Alberta’s economic development ecosystem.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Improved alignment and teamwork among Alberta’s REDAs, and a higher profile for REDAs at the provincial level. SouthGrow (and fellow alliances) achieve progress on shared goals such as the extension of the provincial REDA funding program and increased involvement of REDAs in provincial initiatives. Communication channels with the Government of Alberta are strengthened, helping ensure rural economic priorities are heard.
- **Targets:** A meeting of all REDA Chairs is held to coordinate strategy, and the REDA Chairs collectively meet with the Minister (JET) to discuss partnership opportunities. Additionally, REDAs collaborate on having a presence at both the Alberta Municipalities and RMA (Rural Municipalities) conferences, partner to co-sponsor the 2024 Economic Developers Alberta (EDA) Summit, and contribute joint content (e.g. a showcase article in the Invest Alberta Magazine) to promote rural economic development.
- **Workplan:** Work with other REDA executives to organize a Chairs meeting and set an agenda. Coordinate scheduling with the Minister’s office for a REDA leadership meeting. Plan joint REDA initiatives for major municipal conferences (e.g. shared trade show booth or panel) and arrange SouthGrow representation at those events. Pool resources with other REDAs to sponsor the EDA conference and prepare a collaborative submission for the Invest Alberta publication. Attend and actively participate in all these collaborative activities, reporting back outcomes to the SouthGrow board.

## Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA)

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration



- **SMARTER Goal:** Remain an active partner in the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta. SouthGrow will continue to serve on RINSA’s board of directors and support RINSA’s programs by sharing information region-wide, ensuring rural communities’ needs are considered, and referring local businesses or entrepreneurs to RINSA resources where appropriate.
- **Expected Outcomes:** RINSA maintains a strong presence and service offering in the SouthGrow region, effectively supporting rural innovation and business development. SouthGrow’s involvement guarantees that RINSA initiatives (such as innovation training, funding programs, etc.) reach rural stakeholders and that those stakeholders derive value from RINSA’s services.
- **Targets:** A SouthGrow representative actively participates in all RINSA board meetings and planning sessions. SouthGrow regularly disseminates RINSA opportunities (workshops, funding programs, etc.) to all member communities through newsletters, emails, and social media channels. At least several SouthGrow member municipalities or local businesses engage with RINSA programs because of these communications.
- **Workplan:** Attend RINSA board meetings and contribute a rural economic development perspective to discussions. Integrate RINSA news and program announcements into SouthGrow’s communication schedule (e.g., include RINSA updates in monthly newsletters and social media posts). Identify and connect suitable local companies or projects with RINSA’s innovation support programs whenever the opportunity arises.

### III. SUSTAIN OR EXPAND MEMBERSHIP

#### Sustain Membership

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Maintain membership fee revenue within  $\pm 10\%$  of the previous year by retaining at least 90% of current municipal members through consistent engagement and value demonstration.
- **Expected Outcome:** SouthGrow retains its municipal membership base and preserves its core funding stability, ensuring continued delivery of regional services without major revenue disruption.
- **Targets:** 90%+ of 2024 members retained; membership fee revenue within \$10,000 of prior year; no more than two municipalities exit the alliance.
- **Workplan:** Distribute the Annual Report to all councils; proactively book council presentations with any disengaged or at-risk members; respond quickly to member concerns; and empower board members to conduct peer outreach where necessary to support retention.

#### Expand Associate Memberships

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Strategic Collaboration
- **SMARTER Goal:** Retain at least 8 current associate members and recruit 2 new organizations to grow SouthGrow’s associate membership to 10+ by year-end.



- **Expected Outcome:** A diverse network of associate members (businesses, institutions, utilities) actively contributes to SouthGrow’s mission, expanding collaboration, capacity, and reach beyond municipalities.
- **Targets:** Minimum of 8 associate members active by December 2025; 2 new memberships added; 100% retention of existing associate members unless withdrawals are unavoidable.
- **Workplan:** Reconnect with current associate members to reaffirm value and maintain participation; identify and approach potential new members (with focus on shared interests or strategic alignment); offer flexible entry points or reciprocal value; and provide clear onboarding materials and engagement invitations for new recruits.

## PILLAR II: MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

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### I. REGIONAL PROMOTION

#### Website Improvements

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Marketing & Communications
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow updates and enhances its website by Q3 2025, updating resources and content and integrating this content across partner sites to better serve member communities and attract external investors.
- **Expected Outcome:** SouthGrow’s online presence is modernized and more useful – member communities can access up-to-date resources, and site selectors (investors) find the regional information they need, improving the region’s visibility.
- **Targets:** Website content refreshed by end of Q3 2025, increased web traffic and resource downloads compared to last year.
- **Workplan:** Allocate staff time to audit and update website content and update resources on SouthGrow’s site; ensure updated information is also posted to partner websites; and regularly promote the enhanced site to stakeholders and investors.

### II. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

#### Newsletters

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Marketing & Communications
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow issues bi-weekly newsletters throughout 2025 to keep members and stakeholders well-informed of economic development news, opportunities, emerging threats, and relevant government initiatives impacting the region.
- **Expected Outcome:** SouthGrow members stay consistently informed about key trends and programs, leading to greater engagement and a well-prepared network of communities addressing regional challenges and opportunities.



- **Targets:** At least 24 newsletters distributed by year-end (approximately one every two weeks); subscriber list and open rates maintained or increased over the previous year; Board members continue to receive daily government news briefs via the SouthGrow office.
- **Workplan:** Maintain a regular editorial schedule for newsletters; collect and curate high-value content (funding opportunities, policy updates, event notices); grow the distribution list by inviting new subscribers; and monitor engagement (opens/clicks) to refine content as needed.

### Regional Sponsorships

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Marketing & Communications
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow provides strategic sponsorships to support important partner and stakeholder initiatives in 2025 – focusing on events or projects that deliver economic benefits to multiple member communities – and ensures the entire sponsorship budget is effectively utilized.
- **Expected Outcome:** Key regional events and initiatives (within member communities) receive SouthGrow’s support, helping them succeed and strengthening SouthGrow’s partnerships and regional economic development outcomes.
- **Targets:** 100% of the allocated sponsorship funds (\$2,000) are disbursed to eligible initiatives by end of 2025; each sponsored initiative involves multiple SouthGrow member communities or organizations and reports positive results (e.g. event success, attendance) due to the sponsorship.
- **Workplan:** Advertise the availability of SouthGrow sponsorship support to members and regional organizations; review incoming sponsorship requests and prioritize those with broad regional impact; obtain Board approval for funding as required; and issue sponsorships, then follow up to document the outcomes of each supported event/project.

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## PILLAR III: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & INNOVATION

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### I. AG-TECH MARKET DEVELOPMENT

#### Agri-food Scholarship Program

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Support for Labour Force and Skills Development
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow, in partnership with regional post-secondary institutions, delivers an agri-food scholarship program in 2025 – awarding three scholarships (e.g. ~\$2,500 each) to students at Lethbridge College, University of Lethbridge, or Red Crow College who plan to pursue agri-food careers in southern Alberta.
- **Expected Outcome:** Local youth have greater awareness and incentive to enter the high-tech agriculture and food sector, helping build a skilled future workforce for the region’s ag-tech and agri-food industries.



- **Targets:** Three students selected and awarded scholarships by Q3 2025; additional sponsorships or donations are pursued (and at least one secured) to expand the scholarship fund; at least 10 qualified applications received, indicating strong interest in agri-food careers.
- **Workplan:** Convene a committee (with education partners) to confirm scholarship criteria and promotion; solicit contributions from members or industry to augment the fund; announce the scholarship and open applications by mid-year; promote the opportunity via schools and social media; evaluate applications with partner input; award scholarships at the start of the academic year and publicize the recipients and sponsors.

### Agri-food Conference Representation

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow will represent southern Alberta at one major agri-food industry conference or trade show in 2025, to promote the region’s opportunities and build investment relationships – coordinating with regional partners to avoid overlap and maximize collective reach.
- **Expected Outcome:** Increased awareness among global agri-food investors and companies about southern Alberta’s opportunities (e.g. value-added agriculture, ag-tech), evidenced by new contacts and leads that can be followed up by SouthGrow and its partners for potential investments.
- **Targets:** Attend at least one high-profile agri-food conference or trade show by end of 2025; initiate ~5 meaningful conversations with prospective investors or partners, leading to at least 5 follow-up introductions between those prospects and appropriate local stakeholders/businesses after the event.
- **Workplan:** Identify, with input from partners (like Canada’s Premier Food Corridor or Alberta Agriculture), the top international agri-food event to attend; budget and arrange attendance (booth, materials, travel) for SouthGrow representatives; collaborate with other Alberta delegates to present a unified regional message and ensure no duplication of effort; actively network and collect contacts during the event; afterwards, follow up promptly on leads and provide a report to the Board detailing the connections made and next steps for each.

## III. COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

### Grant Advice Hotline

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow staff operate a “grant advice hotline” throughout 2025, offering on-demand guidance to member municipalities, local businesses, and non-profits on finding and leveraging appropriate grants and funding programs to support their projects.
- **Expected Outcome:** Members and regional organizations have an expert resource to turn to for funding advice, resulting in more grant applications and successful funding wins in the region (as organizations pursue opportunities they might otherwise miss or not fully understand).



- **Targets:** At least 10 member or community organizations are assisted with grant inquiries and strategy in 2025; a running log of inquiries is maintained, and multiple success stories (at least 2–3 grant wins or well-developed applications) result from the advice given.
- **Workplan:** Publicize the grant support service in SouthGrow newsletters, social media, and on the website (clear “call to action” for assistance); respond promptly to incoming requests via phone or email; research and advise on suitable grant programs, stacking options, and application tips for each inquiry; follow up with clients to track outcomes (submitted applications, successes) and use this feedback to continuously improve the advice service.

### Community Economic Development Plans

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow facilitates the creation or update of economic development strategic plans for at least two member communities by the end of 2025, providing expertise, templates, and coordination to ensure each plan defines clear local economic priorities and actions.
- **Expected Outcome:** Member municipalities (especially those without current plans) will have up-to-date, actionable economic development plans in place, strengthening their capacity to attract investment, pursue funding, and guide local economic growth initiatives in a coordinated way.
- **Targets:** Two member municipalities complete new or refreshed economic development plans with SouthGrow’s support by Q4 2025; each plan identifies concrete projects or focus areas (e.g. business attraction, tourism development, infrastructure needs) and is formally adopted by the respective council.
- **Workplan:** Early in 2025, survey members to identify communities needing planning assistance; develop a basic planning framework or template for consistency; host a workshop or kickoff meeting in each selected community to outline vision, gather input, and form a local working group; provide ongoing guidance or connect the community with a consultant to draft the plan; review draft plans by Q3 and help refine as needed; assist with presenting the final plan to council for approval.

## IV. SPECIAL PROJECTS

### EV Bus Project (Final Year)

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Economic Development-Enabling Infrastructure
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow brings the multi-year electric vehicle (EV) bus pilot to completion in 2025 – securing the delivery of an electric bus for the Claresholm and Vulcan handibus group and launching the pilot transit service, thereby demonstrating EV public transportation in the region.
- **Expected Outcome:** The EV bus pilot is fully implemented: the electric vehicle(s) is operational on its route, providing service between communities in the region. This showcases improved



regional transit infrastructure and provides data on EV performance, helping determine the viability of expanding such services in the future.

- **Targets:** EV bus procured, delivered, and in operation by the end of the operational year; pilot service running according to the programming of the proponent organization with ridership being tracked; all grant funds expended as planned and project reporting requirements met.
- **Workplan:** Finalize any additional funding arrangements (e.g. apply for remaining grant portions if needed) and partnership agreements for operations; coordinate the purchase and customization of the bus (working with the selected vendor and conversion facility if applicable); arrange delivery and handover of the vehicle to the operating agency; oversee the launch of the service (route schedules, promotion to the public); and monitor pilot metrics (ridership, costs, performance) throughout the year, providing a summary report to stakeholders at project's end.

### **Blackfoot Language Signage (Year 3)**

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Marketing and Promoting Rural Tourism
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2025, SouthGrow and its partners (Community Futures Lethbridge Region, Tourism Lethbridge, Blood Tribe, Reconciliation committee, and others) fully implement the third year of the Blackfoot Language Signage project by granting funds and support to install a new wave of Blackfoot-language place name signs across southwestern Alberta, utilizing the program's branding and ensuring all allocated funding is deployed.
- **Expected Outcome:** A significant number of additional Blackfoot language signs are installed in communities, at institutions, and tourism sites around the region. This visibly advances reconciliation (by honoring Blackfoot heritage and language on the landscape) and enhances cultural tourism appeal, as visitors encounter and learn from the Indigenous place names.
- **Targets:** All remaining program funds (approximately \$70,000 or more if new contributions were added) are distributed as micro-grants by mid-2025; at least 10 new signs featuring Blackfoot language and English are produced and installed by the end of 2025 in various locations; and the Blood Tribe elders or language experts approve all translations, with no fewer than 5 communities or organizations participating in this year's intake.
- **Workplan:** Confirm a lead organization for administration (ensure Community Futures or another partner continues to manage grant disbursement); secure any last partner contributions or matching funds early in the year; reopen the application intake for communities/organizations to apply for signage grants (Q1–Q2 2025); coordinate with the Blood Tribe on language translation for each approved sign; award micro-grants and assist recipients with procurement of signage consistent with the program's design standards; support partners in publicizing the new sign installations (media or ribbon-cutting events); and compile a summary of the year's deployments and impacts to discuss the program's legacy or potential continuation beyond 2025.

### **Export Expansion Project**

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow's Economic Resiliency Taskforce will complete a three-phase research project in 2025 to explore how regional economic developers can support trade



diversification. This includes a literature review (by June), stakeholder interviews (by July), and a final report with actionable recommendations (by October).

- **Expected Outcomes:** A region-specific strategy for trade diversification informed by research and expert input. The final report delivers five+ strategic recommendations, supported by real-world examples, implementation guidance, and funding opportunities.
- **Targets:**  $\geq 20$  sources reviewed in literature phase;  $\geq 20$  stakeholders interviewed;  $\geq 5$  strategic recommendations delivered in the final report; roadmap includes actionable steps, policy ideas, and sector-specific opportunities.
- **Workplan:**
  1. Conduct literature review and summarize findings (Q1–Q2)
  2. Complete stakeholder interviews and business visits (Q2–Q3)
  3. Draft and review recommendations with the Taskforce (Q3)
  4. Finalize and release report (October)
  5. Present findings to SouthGrow board and regional stakeholders

## V. FLAGSHIP PROJECT

### SouthGrow Power Project

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Economic Development Capacity Building
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow drives its flagship <5MW solar power project toward a conclusion by improving the business case under current regulatory conditions, completing regulatory approvals, completing land rezoning and development permits, securing investment from Prairies Canada, and securing the loan from the FCM clearing the way for construction in 2026. either securing the needed partnerships and funding to proceed with construction or making a clear recommendation to cancel the project. By Q4 2025, SouthGrow will either have obtained commitments (including up to ~\$1 million in external funding) to move the project forward or will have responsibly wound down the effort if it's deemed unviable.
- **Expected Outcome:** A definitive path forward is established for the SouthGrow Power Project. If viable, the project is ready to advance – with a validated business case, stakeholder support (e.g. Lethbridge County's approval), and major capital funding lined up – positioning SouthGrow to proceed to construction. If not viable, the project is concluded with Board and partner concurrence, avoiding further resource expenditure and allowing focus on other initiatives.
- **Targets:** Updated feasibility analysis and business case completed by mid-2025; if the business case is positive, at least one significant funding source (e.g. federal or provincial grant) is secured or approved by the end of 2025, and Lethbridge County formally agrees to host the project (land/permit) if it proceeds. The approvals from the AUC are complete by the end of 2025. If the business case is negative, a recommendation to terminate the project is presented to the Board by the end of 2025.
- **Workplan:** Q1–Q2, revisit the solar project's financial model in light of new energy regulations or market changes; consult with experts and the SouthGrow Board to review risks and returns; engage Lethbridge County officials early to discuss continued support or concerns; based on the updated analysis, prepare applications to potential funders (e.g. NRCAN or provincial programs) seeking capital contributions; re-engage with any private or public partners as needed (such as confirming equipment quotes, land agreements, etc.); by Q4, make a go/no-go decision with



Board approval. If “go”, begin preliminary development work (permits, detailed design, securing contractors) in late 2025 after funding and approvals are confirmed. If “no go”, document the reasons and inform all stakeholders, then reallocate remaining effort/funds to other strategic priorities.

## VI. TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY

*(The following projects will be pursued if and when additional funding or capacity becomes available during 2025.)*

### Local Waste Solutions Study

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Economic Development-Enabling Infrastructure
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow conducts a regional “Local Waste Solutions” study in 2025 (if resources permit) to explore innovative waste management and waste-to-value opportunities. The goal is to complete a detailed assessment of current waste streams in member communities and identify at least three feasible projects (such as waste-to-energy, advanced recycling, or regional composting initiatives) that could reduce waste disposal issues and create economic or energy benefits.
- **Expected Outcome:** The completed study provides member municipalities with actionable recommendations to turn waste challenges into economic development opportunities. Communities will gain insight into how they might lower costs (or generate revenue) through better waste management infrastructure, and the region will be better positioned to pursue funding for a selected solution (e.g. a pilot project or new facility) based on the study’s findings.
- **Targets:** Study plan ready and funding secured by mid-2025; research and stakeholder consultations conducted in the second half of 2025; final report delivered by year-end. The report should highlight 3+ high-potential waste solution options, complete with cost-benefit analysis and next steps for implementation. At least one grant application or partnership opportunity is identified to potentially carry out a pilot project from the recommendations.
- **Workplan:** Define the scope of the study and seek grant funding or partner contributions (possibly from Alberta Environment or a research institution) in early 2025; hire a consultant or assemble a task force to collect data on municipal waste volumes, costs, and challenges across SouthGrow communities; evaluate technologies and case studies of waste-to-energy, recycling, and circular economy projects applicable to rural settings; engage regional stakeholders (municipal public works, waste authorities) for input; draft the analysis and options by Q4; and share the final study with all member councils along with a briefing on recommended next steps and potential funding sources.

### Farm and Crop Conference

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Rural Business Supports and Entrepreneurship
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow coordinates a “Farm and Crop” conference in 2025 (contingent on additional support) to convene local producers, agri-businesses, and experts for knowledge



exchange. The conference will be a one-day event in the region by fall 2025 that showcases the latest in farming practices, crop innovation, and ag-tech, aiming for strong attendance and valuable learning/networking outcomes for participants.

- **Expected Outcome:** Regional farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs gain new insights, techniques, and contacts that can improve their operations and encourage innovation. The event also reinforces SouthGrow’s role in supporting the agriculture sector, and success could lead to making it an annual gathering for continual capacity building in our farming community.
- **Targets:** Conference planned and delivered by Q4 2025 with at least 100 attendees from across SouthGrow’s municipalities. Secure 5+ expert speakers or panelists (including researchers, successful producers, etc.), and involve relevant exhibitors or resource providers (e.g. input suppliers, government programs). Post-event surveys indicate >80% of attendees found the content useful and intend to apply something learned or follow up with a new contact.
- **Workplan:** Partner with local agencies (e.g. Alberta Agriculture, ag societies, or Community Futures) to form an organizing committee and leverage resources; confirm a venue and date (targeting late fall after harvest) and develop an agenda of high-interest topics (such as drought-resilient crops, value-added processing, farm succession, etc.); recruit speakers and sponsors (if available) by mid-year; promote the event through municipal channels, agricultural networks, and media to maximize turnout; execute the conference (logistics, hospitality, speaker facilitation); and gather feedback via a survey to measure impact and gather ideas for future events.

### Labour Attraction Marketing

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Support for Labour Force and Skills Development
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow rolls out a labour attraction marketing campaign in 2025 to help address workforce shortages in member communities. The campaign will highlight the region’s employment opportunities and quality of life, using targeted online advertising and promotional materials to reach skilled workers in other regions/countries. By the end of 2025, the goal is to significantly increase the visibility of SouthGrow communities among job-seekers and to support local employers in filling critical roles.
- **Expected Outcome:** Increased interest from outside workers in relocating to or commuting for jobs in SouthGrow’s region. Member municipalities and employers should report higher inquiries or applications from qualified candidates, partially attributable to the campaign’s messaging about the region’s opportunities and lifestyle. In the long run, this contributes to alleviating labour gaps in sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and healthcare.  
**Targets:** Launch the campaign by mid-2025, achieving at least 100,000 impressions/views across chosen platforms (e.g. social media, job boards, and immigration portals) by year-end. Engage a minimum of five major employers or industry groups in the region to contribute job listings or testimonials for the campaign. By the end of 2025, at least a handful of successful hires (5 or more) can be linked back to the increased awareness from the marketing efforts (as reported by employers or new hires during recruitment).
- **Workplan:** Gather input in Q1 from members and businesses on the most pressing labour needs and unique selling points of the region (affordable housing, community life, etc.); develop campaign materials – a digital toolkit including a dedicated webpage, videos/graphics, and social



media content featuring stories from the region; coordinate with Alberta labour attraction initiatives (to amplify reach) and possibly leverage existing programs (e.g. Rural Renewal Stream for immigration); deploy targeted ads in selected markets (urban Alberta, other provinces, or abroad depending on needs); track engagement metrics monthly; and communicate with local economic development officers and HR managers to capture any uptick in applicants or hires, adjusting the campaign focus if needed.

### **Energy Innovation Pilot Project with FortisAlberta**

- **EDRAP Pillar:** Economic Development-Enabling Infrastructure
- **SouthGrow Budget Pillar:** Economic Development & Innovation
- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow partners with FortisAlberta in 2025 to design and implement an energy innovation pilot project in a SouthGrow member community. The pilot will test a new technology or approach (such as a micro-grid, battery storage integration, or smart grid enhancements) aimed at improving local energy reliability and efficiency. The objective is to have the pilot project agreed upon and initiated within 2025, providing a model that can be scaled to other communities if successful.
- **Expected Outcome:** The selected community benefits from being a test bed for cutting-edge energy infrastructure, gaining improved service (for example, fewer outages or optimized energy use) and recognition as a leader in innovation. SouthGrow and FortisAlberta obtain valuable insights from the pilot’s performance data, informing future investments in rural energy solutions and strengthening our partnership with the utility.
- **Targets:** Memorandum of understanding or project plan co-signed with FortisAlberta by mid-2025 outlining the pilot’s scope, roles, and objectives. Pilot equipment installed and operational in at least one community by the end of 2025. Initial performance metrics (such as reduction in peak demand or improved outage response times, depending on the project type) collected and analyzed, with a preliminary report available for the SouthGrow board and Fortis by early 2026.
- **Workplan:** Starting in Q1, meet with FortisAlberta to identify a suitable pilot concept that aligns with both regional needs and Fortis’s innovation goals (e.g. testing battery backups in a remote hamlet or solar + storage at a municipal facility); secure any necessary funding or regulatory approvals for the pilot (potentially via Alberta Innovates or the Alberta Utility Commission if needed); engage the local municipality selected for the pilot to coordinate site selection, permits, and community communication; implement the project in the field (Fortis leads technical installation, SouthGrow assists with logistics and public outreach) by Q3–Q4; monitor the system through the remainder of the year; and document results, lessons, and recommendations, to be shared in a joint evaluation report and possibly a public case study.





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**About SouthGrow Regional Initiative**

SouthGrow is an economic development alliance of twenty-eight south central Alberta communities committed to working together to achieve prosperity for the region. Representing over 180,000 people, SouthGrow is committed to assisting communities, organizations, businesses, and people in the region to further their economic development goals and to maintain the high quality of life.

[southgrow.com](http://southgrow.com)

