

Operational Plan

2026- 2027



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March 2026 for the SouthGrow Management Board.

OPERATIONAL PLAN 2026 / 2027

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 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.



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PILLAR I: STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

I. Partnership Projects

Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership (SAAEP)

- **SMARTER Goal:** Provide leadership to the SAAEP partnership throughout 2026, refocusing it on investment attraction in the alternative energy sector. Update the SAAEP website, pursue opportunistic funding to identify renewable energy investment zones under new regulations, and represent the partnership in Energy Futures Lab initiatives.
- **Expected Outcomes:** SAAEP partners remain aligned around investment attraction goals. The Website is refreshed. SouthGrow's participation in the Energy Futures Lab supports inclusion of rural priorities in provincial policy development and encourages a path back to investment readiness.
- **Targets:** Website update completed by Q4, SouthGrow participates in 3+ Energy Futures Lab activities representing SAAEP.
- **Workplan:** Coordinate SAAEP meetings to confirm priorities; update website content, apply for external funding if feasible, and actively contribute to Energy Futures Lab projects aligned with SAAEP goals.
- **Why it matters:** This initiative positions southern Alberta communities to attract renewable energy investment by identifying viable development zones and ensuring rural priorities shape emerging provincial energy policies.

Southern Alberta Investment and Trade Initiative (SAITI)

- **SMARTER Goal:** Sustain SouthGrow's active participation and leadership in SAITI, executing a robust slate of trade and investment promotion activities. Key initiatives for 2026 include several trade and export missions, continuous improvement to the website, creation of additional ad content, and sustained awareness marketing of southern Alberta as a destination for agri-food investment.
- **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 and further enhances awareness of our value proposition.
- **Targets:** Website audit and updates completed by Q4; at least 3 new regional promo videos produced by Q3; at least one outbound trade mission attended; digital campaign achieves 10M+ impressions with measurable engagement, SouthGrow charts our participation in assisting leads in the region.
- **Workplan:** Oversee website improvement process; contract production of video content; coordinate trade mission logistics with Invest Alberta or other partners; execute digital marketing campaign with monthly performance tracking; and report lead generation outcomes to SAITI stakeholders.
- **Why it matters:** This project brings global attention to southern Alberta's agri-food sector, helping every community benefit from increased investor awareness, export opportunities, and business attraction to the region.



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

- **SMARTER Goal:** Actively support these sub-regional collaborations (CPFC and CWG) that promote key industry clusters in southern Alberta. In 2026 this means working to ensure that the CPFC brand is retained by the region (in one form or the other) and that the website remains active and supported following completion of their funding cycle in the fall of 2026. For CWG, this means supporting their work to develop and industry cluster along Highway 4 with in-kind work.
- **Expected Outcomes:** The CPFC and CWG initiatives remain vibrant and active, providing marketing brand value. 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. Overlap in services remains minimal, relationships good, and collaboration ongoing.
- **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.
- **Why it matters:** Supporting these industry clusters strengthens southern Alberta's reputation as a leading agri-food production and logistics hub, creating opportunities for local producers, processors, and transportation networks across multiple communities.

Highway 3 Twinning Development Association (H3TDA)

- **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.
- **Why it matters:** Advancing Highway 3 twinning improves transportation safety, freight efficiency, and trade connectivity for communities along the corridor, strengthening economic competitiveness across southern Alberta.

REDA Collaboration

- **SMARTER Goal:** Collaborate with Alberta's other Regional Economic Development Alliances (REDAs) to highlight the value of regional economic partnerships by attending Alberta Municipalities and sponsoring the Economic Developers of Alberta annual conference.
- **Expected Outcomes:** A higher profile for REDAs and their value proposition at the provincial level.
- **Targets:** SouthGrow sends a representative to either the Alberta Municipalities or RMA conference to network and engage in municipal issues. Sponsor the annual EDA conference in collaboration with other REDAs
- **Workplan:** Select conference and attend at Board Direction and submit sponsorship with partners.
- **Why it matters:** Collaboration with other regional alliances amplifies southern Alberta's voice in provincial economic discussions, helping ensure rural communities receive attention, policy support, and investment opportunities.

Border Wall Roadside Attraction

- **SMARTER Goal:** Within the fiscal year, SouthGrow and our partners complete site selection, create visuals, build and initiate a crowdfunding marketing campaign, cost the project, and submit enough at least \$500,000 worth of grant applications (if they continue to be available) towards the capital costs of the project. By fiscal year end, funding is pending, crowdfunding is in process.
- **Expected Outcomes:** An impactful roadside attraction along a major route has funding avenues advanced. Significant publicity is attracted.
- **Targets:** Design visuals are created in Q2 of the fiscal year, Crowdfunding is initiated by Q3, \$500k in grants submitted by end of Q4.
- **Workplan:** Complete site selection, work with designer to create visuals based on early community consultation, create crowdfunding campaign and initiate, hit grant funding milestones.
- **Why it matters:** This project turns a simple roadside location into a high-visibility, story-driven destination that draws travelers off the highway, boosts local spending, and builds regional identity through a bold, memorable attraction that can pay back economically and reputationally over time and which has the potential to provide a pool of funding to help support regional economic development.



II. Administrative Projects

Annual Council Presentations

- **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.
- **Why it matters:** Regular engagement with member councils ensures each community clearly understands the projects, partnerships, and funding opportunities being pursued on their behalf.

Membership Retention and Expansion

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow works to actively retain members by communicating the value of membership, providing special presentations to councils upon request, and expand the membership to non-member communities and associate members.
- **Expected Outcomes:** SouthGrow Retains at least 90% of its member base.
- **Targets:** SouthGrow retains the bulk of its membership to enable continuation of services. SouthGrow onboards additional members as opportunity allows within our traditional geographic zone of operation. SouthGrow onboards additional associate members as opportunity allows.
- **Workplan:** Schedule council visitations with councils who need to hear the value proposition. Reach out to non-members and offer council visits. Identify two additional associate member targets and pursue discussions.
- **Why it matters:** A strong and growing membership base allows SouthGrow to deliver more regional projects, secure larger funding opportunities, and create benefits that extend to every participating community.

SouthGrow Power Project

- **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 2027. By Q4 2025, SouthGrow will either have obtained commitments (including up to ~\$1 million in external funding) to move the project forward with a solid business case 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:** At least one significant funding source (e.g. federal or provincial grant) is secured or approved by the end of 2026. The approvals from the AUC are complete. If the business case is negative, a recommendation to terminate the project is presented to the Board by the end of 2026.
- **Workplan:** Seek a resolution to FCM and Prairies Can funding by the end of Q2, 2026. If successful, complete LUB and Development permit applications with the county by the end of 2027. Seek out bridge financing option. Schedule construction for 2027 and line up work-flow to complete this.
- **Why it matters:** If successful, this renewable energy project would demonstrate how rural municipalities can develop local clean power assets that generate long-term economic returns and energy resilience for the region and also help us sustain the association without costly member rate increases.

RINSA Fiscal Management

- **SMARTER Goal:** Onboard formal fiscal administration of RINSA and set up systems for successfully managing project and financial flow to sustain the operations of the RIN for the three year term.
- **Expected Outcomes:** By the end of Q2, contracts are complete and fiscal agent systems are set up. By the end of Q3, operational tempo is established. By the end of Q2, capacity is onboarded to assist with monthly work-flow.
- **Targets:** RINSA is able to continue operations for the next three years with minimal disruption.
- **Workplan:** Sign contracts, set up new banking and separate quickbooks, onboard administrative capacity, set up workflow and policies and procedures, supervise monthly rhythm and trouble-shoot, remain actively involved in board leadership.
- **Why it matters:** Managing RINSA's finances ensures southern Alberta maintains a functioning innovation network that supports entrepreneurs, startups, and commercialization opportunities across rural communities.

RINSA Marketing

- **SMARTER Goal:** Maintain RINSA website and market RINSA events, opportunities, and programs across the region annually.
- **Expected Outcomes:** The RINSA website is maintained and updated. RINSA programs, events, and opportunities are regionally marketed with paid and digital advertising and communications to ensure broad regional awareness.
- **Targets:** Baseline is not yet established, but we are targeting 1 major website update, and a slate of rolling online advertisements plus newsletters to ensure broad regional awareness. Spend will depend on funding, and spend will determine baseline metrics for Year 2.
- **Workplan:** Sign contracts, take over administration of website and social accounts, set up Loomly account, build marketing flow and assign administrative capacity to deliver marketing. Begin campaigns and track metrics.



- **Why it matters:** Promoting RINSA programs and events increases regional awareness of innovation supports, helping entrepreneurs and businesses in southern Alberta communities access resources that drive local economic growth.

PILLAR II: MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

I. Events

Monthly Lunch and Learns

- **SMARTER Goal:** Host at least 10 lunch and learns 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:** 10 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.
- **Why it matters:** These sessions give municipal leaders and staff across southern Alberta practical knowledge and expert insights that help communities make better decisions, adopt new opportunities, and respond effectively to emerging economic challenges.

Southern Alberta Economic Summit

- **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 120 attendees) 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:** >120 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 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.
- **Why it matters:** Bringing regional leaders and partners together around emerging economic trends helps communities align their strategies, build partnerships, and identify new collaborative



opportunities that benefit the entire southern Alberta economy.

Ag Producer Conference

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow coordinates a “Farm and Crop” conference in 2026 to convene local producers, agri-businesses, and experts for knowledge exchange. The conference will be a one-day event in the region by fall 2026 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.
- **Why it matters:** This conference equips local producers with new knowledge, technologies, and industry connections that help strengthen farm profitability, support innovation, and sustain the agricultural backbone of southern Alberta communities.

I. Communications and Marketing

Newsletters

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow issues monthly newsletters throughout 2026 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 12 newsletters distributed by year-end (approximately one every month); 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.
- **Why it matters:** Regular newsletters ensure that every community receives timely information about funding programs, policy changes, and emerging opportunities that could directly support local economic development initiatives.

Website Improvements

- **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.
- **Why it matters:** A stronger regional website makes it easier for investors, businesses, and site selectors to understand southern Alberta’s advantages, helping communities attract new projects, talent, and investment.

Government Relations

- **SMARTER Goal:** Proactively advocate for SouthGrow’s key priorities – including restoring multi-year operational funding, preserving the province’s 10-year commitment to twin Highway 3, retaining core elements of Alberta’s rural economic strategy, raising awareness of the need to re-establish a business case for renewable energy, and other topics of importance to the members that may arise.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Strengthened relationships with key Government of Alberta ministries (economic development, agriculture, transportation, etc.) and tangible progress on key issues.
- **Targets:** Renewal of SouthGrow’s provincial partnership/funding beyond the current term (unlikely) and reaffirmation of commitments to Highway 3 twinning, investment attraction for renewable energy, 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.
- **Why it matters:** Strategic advocacy ensures that the priorities of southern Alberta communities are heard by provincial decision-makers, increasing the likelihood of infrastructure investment, supportive policies, and continued funding for regional development initiatives.



Sponsorships

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow provides strategic sponsorships to support important partner and stakeholder initiatives – 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 fiscal year end; 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.
- **Why it matters:** Targeted sponsorships help strengthen regional events and initiatives that promote economic activity, tourism, and collaboration across multiple communities in southern Alberta.

Agri-food Scholarship Program

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow, in partnership with regional post-secondary institutions, delivers an agri-food scholarship program – 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.
- **Why it matters:** Supporting students entering agri-food careers helps build the next generation of skilled workers and innovators needed to sustain southern Alberta’s globally competitive agriculture and food sector.



Global Awareness Marketing

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow continues its global awareness marketing on select social media platforms targeting global agrifood executives, with a new focus on Asian markets where English fluency is high. SouthGrow runs active marketing for at least 10 months of the year in target markets achieving at least 10 million ad views of our messaging.
 - **Expected Outcomes:** Increased global awareness – notably in Asian markets like Singapore and Japan – of the agrifood value propositions of Southern Alberta.
 - **Targets:** 10 Months of targeted active digital marketing with at least 10 million ad views across all platforms.
 - **Workplan:** Re-evaluate 2025 marketing outcomes. Retool new ad content from 2025 work, lay out 2026 content calendar, run advertising with monthly reviews and A/B Testing on content and delivery methods. Produce monthly reports.
 - **Why it matters:** Global marketing campaigns raise awareness of southern Alberta’s agrifood strengths among international investors and partners, helping communities attract new investment, export opportunities, and business relationships.
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PILLAR III: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & INNOVATION

I. Community Economic Development

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 the year, 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 15 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

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow completes the creation of economic development strategic plans for all 29 member communities by the end of Q2 of 2026, presents on all of the plans to CAO, Councils, or the respective EDOs by the end of Q3 of 2026, and develops an after-care coaching plan for 2027 for each member.
- **Expected Outcome:** Member municipalities all have a SouthGrow-provided Economic Development plan (or appropriate substitute), have been coached on their use and implementation, and have a follow up action plan established in writing for 2027.
- **Targets:** 29 Plans completed with coaching plans in place for 2027.
- **Workplan:** Complete plan writing for final communities by end of Q2 of 2026. Book virtual reviews with key figures to test fit and assumptions, do edits, present reports to councils by end of Q3, complete follow up plans by end of Q4.

South Saskatchewan Trans Canada Trail Connection Project

- **SMARTER Goal:** Throughout 2026, SouthGrow assesses the feasibility of registering the South Saskatchewan River corridor from Medicine Hat through Taber to the City of Lethbridge as an official waterway segment of the Trans Canada Trail network, identifying infrastructure



requirements, partnership commitments, and a practical action plan toward formal registration by 2027.

- **Expected Outcomes:** A clear understanding of the technical, infrastructure, and partnership requirements needed to designate the South Saskatchewan River corridor as part of the Trans Canada Trail network, along with a coordinated regional strategy for closing identified gaps.
- **Targets:** A feasibility review completed by Q3 2026; identification of infrastructure gaps and partnership requirements; and development of a preliminary implementation roadmap outlining steps required to achieve official registration by 2027.
- **Workplan:** Engage with Trans Canada Trail representatives to confirm designation requirements; conduct a corridor-level assessment of existing access points, safety considerations, and supporting amenities; coordinate discussions with municipalities and relevant partners along the river corridor; document infrastructure gaps and potential funding sources; and produce a short action plan outlining next steps toward official registration.
- **Why it Matters:** Connecting the South Saskatchewan River to the Trans Canada Trail network would elevate the region's tourism profile, attract outdoor recreation visitors, and create new economic opportunities for communities along the river corridor.

EV Bus Project (Final Year)

- **SMARTER Goal:** SouthGrow brings the multi-year electric vehicle (EV) bus pilot to completion in 2026 – 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 – OR – returns the money to the funder and winds down the effort unsuccessfully.
- **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.
- **Why it Matters:** This pilot tests whether electric transit can work in rural southern Alberta, giving communities practical data on costs, performance, and ridership that can guide future regional transportation solutions and improve mobility between towns.

Blackfoot Language Signage (Year 4)

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, SouthGrow and its partners (Community Futures Lethbridge Region, Tourism Lethbridge, Blood Tribe, Reconciliation committee, and others) fully implement the fourth 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:** Program funds are fully spent on projects, at least 10 new signs featuring Blackfoot language and English are produced and installed by the end of 2026 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:** Secure grant funding and partner funds for Community Futures, Meet to discuss partner efforts to market, push the program to regional businesses, attend committee meetings, help do targeted reach outs to secure program participants.
- **Why it Matters:** Expanding Blackfoot language signage strengthens cultural recognition and reconciliation while enriching the visitor experience, helping communities across southern Alberta celebrate Indigenous heritage and differentiate the region as a culturally authentic destination.

Economic Development For Elected Officials Training

- **SMARTER Goal:** Host a group in-person session of Economic Development for Elected Officials in May of 2026 (already booked) for up to 30 elected officials from SouthGrow Communities
- **Expected Outcomes:** Increased knowledge for regional councils of their role in enabling economic development in their communities
- **Targets:** 1 session is held with a maximum attendance of 30 individuals who complete the training.
- **Workplan:** Session and trainer are booked. Find host venue. Secure catering. Market event and sign-up attendees. Host event.
- **Why it matters:** Training elected officials strengthens local leadership capacity so councils across the region better understand how their decisions influence investment attraction, business growth, and long-term prosperity in their communities.

Regional Business License Project

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, SouthGrow advances development of a Regional Business Licence (RBL) program by working with member municipalities to evaluate participation, develop standardized bylaw amendments and intermunicipal agreements, and prepare the administrative framework required to implement a voluntary regional licence model that could launch in 2027 as a sustainable own-source funding stream for regional economic development.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Member municipalities gain a clear understanding of how a Regional Business Licence model could operate within existing municipal licensing systems, including the financial implications, governance structure, and administrative requirements. Participating municipalities are positioned to adopt the program through local bylaw amendments if councils choose to proceed.



- **Targets:** Development of a standardized Regional Business Licence framework by the end of 2026, including draft bylaw amendment templates, a model intermunicipal agreement, revenue projections, and an implementation roadmap; engagement with member municipalities representing a majority of the regional business base; and preparation of materials required for potential program launch in 2027.
- **Workplan:** Present the Regional Business Licence concept and business case to member municipalities and regional partners; coordinate discussions with CAOs and finance staff to review feasibility and administrative implications; develop standardized bylaw amendment templates and revenue remittance procedures; prepare a draft intermunicipal agreement outlining participation terms and governance; refine financial projections and reporting frameworks; and provide the SouthGrow Board with a final implementation package and recommendations for municipal adoption.
- **Why it Matters:** A Regional Business Licence program would create a stable, locally generated funding stream tied directly to the regional business community, strengthening SouthGrow's long-term ability to support investment attraction, business growth, and economic development services across southern Alberta. Importantly, it will reduce red tape and business costs, making it easier for businesses from all across the region to move freely around the region without constant stacking of fees for crossing municipal boundaries.

II. Investment and Export Development

Trade Mission Participations

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, SouthGrow participates in select Government of Alberta and Government of Canada trade missions, including missions to Amsterdam and China, while maintaining operational flexibility to join additional missions as invited in order to promote southern Alberta's investment opportunities and strengthen international business relationships.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Southern Alberta's economic strengths in agri-food, logistics, and emerging sectors are promoted to international investors and partners, generating new leads, partnerships, and increased awareness of the region as a destination for trade and investment.
- **Targets:** Participation in at least two international trade missions during the year; representation of southern Alberta's value proposition in meetings, networking events, and site selector discussions; and follow-up engagement with prospective investors or partners identified during missions.
- **Workplan:** Coordinate with provincial and federal trade officials to identify appropriate missions and confirm participation; prepare regional investment promotion materials and briefing documents highlighting southern Alberta opportunities; attend mission events and investor meetings; promote the region's assets to potential partners; and track and follow up on leads generated through mission participation in collaboration with regional partners.
- **Why it Matters:** Participating in international trade missions connects southern Alberta directly with global investors and partners, helping local communities compete for new business investment, export opportunities, and strategic economic relationships.



Japan Industry Mission

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, SouthGrow organizes and leads a targeted industry mission to Japan, contingent on grant funding approval, bringing a small delegation of regional industry leaders to pursue trade development opportunities and deepen relationships established through exploratory work conducted in 2025.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Southern Alberta's agri-food and related sectors strengthen direct relationships with Japanese buyers, investors, and industry partners, advancing concrete trade discussions and positioning the region as a reliable supplier within the Japanese market.
- **Targets:** One industry mission delivered in Fall 2026 with participation from up to four regional industry leaders; completion of structured meetings with Japanese industry partners, distributors, or institutional stakeholders; and documented follow-up trade leads or partnership opportunities emerging from the mission.
- **Workplan:** Secure external funding support to enable the mission; coordinate with provincial trade officials and in-market partners to develop a focused meeting program; identify and recruit participating industry leaders from southern Alberta; prepare market briefings and promotional materials highlighting regional capabilities; execute the mission in Japan including meetings, site visits, and relationship-building events; and coordinate structured follow-up with identified partners after the mission.
- **Why it Matters:** Direct engagement with Japanese partners helps southern Alberta producers and processors expand export opportunities, strengthen long-term trade relationships, and position the region within one of the world's most stable and high-value agri-food markets.

IEDC Attendance

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, SouthGrow participates in the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) conference, contingent on securing external funding, to reconnect with U.S. economic developers and site selectors, strengthen cross-border relationships, and better understand emerging economic development trends affecting Canada–U.S. trade and investment flows.
- **Expected Outcomes:** SouthGrow develops new relationships with U.S.-based economic developers and site selectors, gains insights into evolving U.S. investment priorities and supply chain shifts, and identifies opportunities to position southern Alberta within emerging North American trade and investment strategies.
- **Targets:** Participation in the IEDC conference with representation from SouthGrow; engagement in structured networking sessions and industry discussions; and identification of at least five new professional contacts or potential investment leads relevant to southern Alberta's economic development priorities.
- **Workplan:** Apply for funding support to enable conference participation; register for the IEDC conference and coordinate travel logistics; prepare briefing materials and regional investment promotion content; participate in conference sessions and networking opportunities focused on investment attraction and site selection; and follow up with contacts made during the conference to explore potential partnerships or investment opportunities.



- **Why it Matters:** Building relationships with U.S. economic developers and site selectors helps southern Alberta stay connected to its largest trading partner, ensuring communities remain visible and competitive in evolving North American investment and supply chain networks.

FDI Strategic Plan

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, contingent on successful grant funding, SouthGrow commissions a consultant-led review of its global investment attraction activities and develops a three-year Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) strategy that identifies priority markets, sector targets, and coordinated actions to strengthen the region’s investment attraction efforts.
- **Expected Outcomes:** SouthGrow and its member communities gain a clear, evidence-based roadmap for international investment attraction, including defined priority markets, sector opportunities, and coordinated regional actions to pursue foreign direct investment.
- **Targets:** Completion of a comprehensive FDI strategy by the end of 2026, including a global market analysis, identification of priority countries and sectors, and a three-year implementation framework for regional investment attraction activities.
- **Workplan:** Secure grant funding to support the project; procure a qualified consultant through an appropriate selection process; provide the consultant with data on current marketing, trade missions, and investment attraction activities; conduct stakeholder interviews with regional partners and industry representatives; complete a global market opportunity assessment; and develop a final three-year FDI strategy with recommended actions, priority markets, and performance metrics.
- **Why it Matters:** A focused investment attraction strategy helps southern Alberta communities pursue the right global markets and investors, improving the region’s ability to attract new capital, jobs, and economic diversification.

FDI Training – Business Investment & Attraction (EDA)

- **SMARTER Goal:** If Grant funded, in 2026, SouthGrow hosts a regional training session delivered by Economic Developers Alberta focused on Business Investment & Attraction (or a comparable session delivered in collaboration with the REDAs team) to strengthen the capacity of municipal staff and economic development practitioners across southern Alberta to pursue investment opportunities.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Municipal staff and regional economic development practitioners gain practical skills and tools related to business investment attraction, site selection readiness, and investor engagement, improving the region’s collective ability to respond to and capture investment opportunities.
- **Targets:** One in-person or hybrid training session delivered in 2026 with participation from at least 20 municipal staff, economic development officers, or regional partners; post-session feedback indicating strong value for participants and increased confidence in investment attraction practices.
- **Workplan:** Coordinate with Economic Developers Alberta and REDA partners to confirm course availability and content; secure a venue and schedule the training session; promote the



opportunity to SouthGrow member communities and regional partners; manage registrations and event logistics; and gather participant feedback to inform future training initiatives.

- **Why it Matters:** Strengthening local expertise in investment attraction helps southern Alberta communities better compete for new businesses and projects, ensuring local leaders are prepared to turn opportunities into real economic growth.

III. Research and Policy Development

SouthWest Alberta Labour Profile Project

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, contingent on successful Labour Market Partnerships (LMP) funding, SouthGrow collaborates with Economic Development Lethbridge, Lethbridge Polytechnic, Alberta SouthWest Regional Alliance, and other partners to support development of a comprehensive labour market profile focused on strengthening the resiliency and adaptability of the manufacturing workforce in southern Alberta.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Regional employers, educators, and economic development organizations gain a clear understanding of workforce shortages, skills gaps, emerging technologies, and training needs within the manufacturing sector, enabling coordinated workforce development and training strategies across southern Alberta.
- **Targets:** Completion of a regional manufacturing workforce forecast, skills shortage assessment, wage benchmarking analysis, and automation/AI workforce strategy; development of supporting reports and tools that identify training gaps and labour market opportunities; and engagement of regional manufacturers through stakeholder consultations and industry events.
- **Workplan:** Support Economic Development Lethbridge in coordinating stakeholder engagement with manufacturers across the region; contribute regional insight and outreach through SouthGrow's municipal network; participate in project oversight and advisory roles; assist with promotion of workforce conferences and dissemination of project findings; and help ensure final reports, tools, and strategies are shared with municipalities, employers, and regional partners.
- **Why it Matters:** Understanding workforce gaps and future skills needs helps southern Alberta communities strengthen their manufacturing sector, support local employers, and prepare workers for emerging technologies and evolving industry demands.

Biofuel Supply Chain Study

- **SMARTER Goal:** In 2026, contingent on successful grant funding, SouthGrow commissions a regional Biofuel Supply Chain Study to evaluate the feasibility of establishing biofuel production in southern Alberta by assessing feedstock availability, supply chain logistics, technology pathways, and investment requirements, ultimately identifying whether the region is positioned to support biofuel processing facilities.
- **Expected Outcomes:** Regional stakeholders gain a clear understanding of southern Alberta's potential role in emerging biofuel markets, including the scale of available feedstocks, viable processing pathways, infrastructure requirements, and the investment conditions necessary to support commercial biofuel production.
- **Targets:** Completion of a comprehensive study by the end of 2026 that includes a regional feedstock inventory, supply chain logistics analysis, techno-economic feasibility assessment, and identification of priority investment opportunities and facility models suitable for southern Alberta.
- **Workplan:** Secure grant funding to support the project; procure a qualified consultant to undertake the study; assemble regional data on agricultural feedstocks and industrial byproducts;



conduct stakeholder engagement with producers, processors, and logistics providers; analyze transportation networks and supply chain infrastructure; evaluate viable biofuel production technologies; and produce a final report outlining feasibility findings and recommended next steps for investment attraction.

- **Why it Matters:** If viable, biofuel production could create a major new value-added industry for southern Alberta agriculture, generating demand for regional feedstocks, attracting industrial investment, and diversifying the rural economy.



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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.

