

Growing demand for ag-events centre in Ponoka

By George Brown

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Principals are champing at the bit to break ground for the planned \$8-million Ponoka Ag-Events Centre.

The Ponoka Agricultural Event Centre Society spent the summer reviewing plans “so we know exactly what it is we want to build,” said president Charlie Cutforth. “We’re committed to this. This is gonna happen.”

The move to construction has been spurred on by a major grant from Alberta Culture and Community Spirit.

Cutforth said preliminary plans have been reviewed by a construction firm to help identify design concerns and to nail down the cost. Wherever possible local businesses will be invited to bid on the project.

“We’re committed to ensure all local businesses have an opportunity to tender or participate in some way.

“For a public facility such as this, we need to have local business support,” Cutforth confirmed. “And the only way we can expect that is obviously if they are being treated right and have the opportunity to be a part of it.”

EnCana is the major corporate sponsor at this point, committing \$500,000. The four partners have provided funds or gifts in kind: Ponoka County, \$1.7 million; Ponoka Stampede Association, 15 acres of land valued at \$500,000; Ponoka Agricultural Society, \$275,000; and the Town of Ponoka, \$150,000. The Alberta government has contributed two grants: \$500,000 from the Centennial Legacy program and \$3.2 million from the Major Community Facilities Program (MCFP).

“The province loves partnerships and when they see four organizations like ours coming together for a common project like this, that’s very appealing.”

Cutforth said the timing of the provincial government's support for the project couldn't be better; it allows the society to get a start on construction while prices will be competitive, and although pledges from the business community are slow to come in due to the economic recession there are many local businesses and farm operations that have expressed their verbal support for the project — their financial support will come when the economy rebounds.

“All four partners are adamant that we have to have the money in place, that there will be no borrowing to construct this building,” Cutforth said.

The preliminary phase 1 concept for the 75,000-square-foot ag-events centre includes an indoor area with a dirt floor and 1,500 seats (expandable to 2,500), a banquet room, and lobby and concession areas. The outdoor components include stock pens, trailer parking and car parking. Phase 2 would include two indoor barns and more trailer and car parking.

Depending on where the construction bids come in, it's possible the second level would not be finished until after the centre is open and making money, Cutforth said. “We have to stay within the dollars we've got.”

The municipal partners will not contribute toward the annual operating costs of the ag-events centre. “It has to pay for itself,” Cutforth said.

RC Strategies conducted a survey of potential users in central Alberta and found there is a growing demand for an indoor agricultural centre in the Ponoka area to host livestock shows and equine events, clinics and riding lessons, banquets and club meetings, rodeos, auctions and auto and machinery shows.

“We had no idea the kind of demand that is out there,” Cutforth said. “It opened my eyes.”

While major rentals will drive the revenue side of the ag-event centre budget, rental charges must be within reach of the centre's bread and butter clients — local organizations.

“This has to be affordable to our local users one way or another. These guys operate with limited funds.”

The ag-events centre is intended to provide new opportunities and services to the agricultural community.

“We're not trying to compete with existing facilities,” Cutforth explained. “In a community this size, duplicating facilities doesn't make any sense.”

It may be groups that now have few options about where to hold their events, will move to the ag-event centre. Cutforth said venues such as the Ponoka arena are not well suited to 4-H shows and would open up for different uses should 4-H move to the new centre.

Major annual anchor attractions will help to solidify Ponoka's position as a tourism destination, building on the region's rodeo and agricultural heritage. It's possible agricultural service businesses would expand or come to Ponoka to benefit from the ag-events centre.

"We certainly think it will enhance existing businesses in turn, just by attracting visitors," Cutforth said.

With its prominent location at the south entrance to Ponoka on Highway 2A, the ag-events centre also will complement nearby amenities and attractions such as the Ponoka Legion, Ponoka Stampede and Frank Mickey Campground, Ponoka County Fair and the planned Broncs Rodeo Academy.



The move to construct the \$8-million Ponoka Ag-Events Centre has been spurred on by a major grant from Alberta Culture and Community Spirit. Preliminary plans have been reviewed by a construction firm to help identify design concerns and to nail down the cost.