

Province moves ag events-centre forward with \$3.2 million

By George Brown

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Closer to reality: With the presentation of a cheque for \$3.2 million from the provincial government, the proposed Ponoka Ag-Events Centre moved one step closer to a construction start. Gathered at the site Sept. 26 are Ponoka County deputy reeve Gawney Hinkley, Ponoka Stampede Association rep Rick Wierzba, MLA Ray Prins, Ponoka Ag Society treasurer Cec Dykstra, Culture and Community Spirit Minister Lindsay Blackett, ag society director Greg Bowie, ag-events society president Charlie Cutforth, ag society rep Dale Olsen and Ponoka Mayor Larry Henkelman.

Ponoka's growth as an agricultural service community will take root with a provincial grant to build the Ponoka Ag-Events Centre.

The \$3.2-million grant will assist with the development of the \$8-million multi-purpose centre, including construction of an indoor arena, banquet area, concession, stock pens, indoor barns, administrative areas and parking.

"This new centre will help to meet the year-round agricultural, equine, recreation and special events needs of residents in Ponoka and many surrounding communities," said Lacombe-Ponoka MLA Ray Prins. "This partnership is an example of strong commitment to the community and foresight of community leaders."

"This has been a long time coming," added Prins, who was given credit for moving the grant application through the provincial government's bureaucracy.

Because Ponoka County extends west in MLA Ty Lund's Rocky Mountain House constituency, the former ag minister was also convinced to top up the grant available in Lacombe-Ponoka with \$1.5 million.

Prins said he and Lund spent time over the last five years meeting with stakeholders, municipal politicians and cabinet ministers and eventually "convinced the minister this was a worthy project."

Society president Charlie Cutforth welcomed guests and representatives from the four partners in the Ponoka Agricultural Event Centre Society to the cheque presentation Sept. 26. “This is a terrific day for the Ponoka community.”

The project, in various guises, has been in the works for at least seven years but really took off in the last year with the enthusiastic support of the Ponoka Agricultural Society, Cutforth added.

Working together to benefit the community, the Ponoka Stampede Association, the Ponoka Agricultural Society, Ponoka County and Town of Ponoka “are doing things we can’t possibly do in some of our larger cities,” said Lindsay Blackett, minister of culture and community spirit.

“Collaboration can lead to amazing accomplishments,” he said. “Thank you to all the groups involved in this important project. I am confident that funds provided for this new facility will enhance Ponoka’s already rich heritage, while boosting both tourism and the local economy.”

Blackett said the \$3,204,904 Major Community Facilities Program (MCFP) grant “helps build facilities and in doing that, enhance communities.”

“Our programs are not just about giving out money, it’s about giving a hand up to a community who’s already invested time and effort,” Blackett said. The government is eager to step in to help communities achieve their goals when there is a collaborative effort and sweat equity.

Ponoka Mayor Larry Henkelman thanked the committee members for their hard work and the government members for their financial support of the project. The project also has the support of the town’s economic development board, the Ponoka and District Chamber of Commerce and other businesses and community organizations.

“It will improve our whole community,” Henkelman said. “Once completed, we’ll see a big economic spin off from it.”

“It’s a great day,” said ag society director Greg Bowie. “It will be an excellent day when we finally get the shovel in the ground, which shouldn’t be too far into the future now.”

Cutforth expects the sod turning to be held within three weeks and construction to begin in April. “One year from now, optimistically this time next year, the doors should be open.”