

Ponoka partners stampede toward new exposition building project

By Brenda Kossowan - Red Deer Advocate

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Drawings are ready and much of the money is in place for an elaborate new agricultural centre in Ponoka. At an estimated cost of \$8.5 million and located at the south side of town, the Ag-Event Centre and related facilities are a joint project of the Town of Ponoka, Ponoka County, the Ponoka Agricultural Society and the Ponoka Stampede Association, partnership president Charlie Cutforth said on Thursday.

The plan is to provide a multi-use building similar to the Agricentre at Red Deer's Westerner Park along with two livestock barns, said Cutforth, who is also chief administrative officer for Ponoka County.

"It's more than just simply an arena," he said. "One of the major priorities is youth groups and, in particular, groups like 4-H. We also have our local Ponoka Composite High School. They've established a rodeo/equine academy or are in the throes of it.

"It's designed so it can handle various things like trade shows, cars, farm equipment shows, that kind of thing."

Initially a project of the Stampede Association, planning for the centre moved into full swing about a year and a half ago, with the other three partners jumped onboard to form the Ponoka Ag-Event Centre Society, said Cutforth.

"It wasn't until the ag society and the Stampede association and the town and county got together collectively that, really, we got serious about it," he said.

Having the full community involved gave the project considerably more credibility with sponsors, including provincial funding programs.

"It's very unique, even on the provincial scene. That's why the reaction of the provincial government is so strong in support, is because of the collective co-operation here."

The project has commitments totalling \$5 million, said Cutforth.

"Because we're a small community here, the economic spinoff for the local business and so on, the potential is terrific," he said.

Formal fundraising has kicked off with plans to start construction in spring.

"We're not sure exactly what the province is going to provide. We know what the minimum is, and with what they are providing and others, we're already at \$5 million."

Land for the project was donated by the Ponoka Stampede Association, which had purchased a number of parcels near its rodeo grounds. Located immediately south of the Ponoka Legion, the site will be subdivided off and granted to the new centre under a separate title, said Cutforth.

People interested in getting a closer look at the project are invited to attend a public information meeting at the Ponoka Legion at 7 p.m. on Monday, Nov. 17.

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