# Views of the Future in South Eastern Rural Alberta

Rural Development Symposium
Medicine Hat, Alberta
October 14-16, 2009

*"Rural business people value living and working in the countryside – they can be trusted to look after it. A successful local rural economy provides community cohesion and creates opportunities for people to live and work in the same area helping to create sustainable communities. A successful rural economy can counteract many of the traditional long term problems faced by our rural communities whether it is limited access to services, poor transport infrastructure or lack of affordable housing."*

*- Linda Walton*

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## Contents

## Note on Special Areas

The Special Areas cover about 2.1 million hectares of southeastern Alberta. More than 30 hamlets (communities smaller than villages) are located there. The three areas all experienced particular hardship in the Depression and drought of the 1930s.

In 1938, the Alberta government established a special governing body to provide municipal services to these three areas. That body is called the Special Areas Board. The board has its authority delegated to it from the Minister of Alberta Municipal Affairs through a Ministerial Order.

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*growing* in Rural Alberta

In mid October of 2009, 120 delegates attended the 4th annual Growing in Rural Alberta –A Rural Development Symposium. The symposium targets elected and non-elected leaders of the region as the decision makers that drive the future of Southeast Alberta.

The Symposium  is a regional response to Alberta's Rural Development Strategy "A Place to Grow" released in 2005.  This strategy emphasized that a cross government approach was needed for the rural development strategy to be effective.  In southeast Alberta regional representatives of the Ministries of Culture and Community Spirit, Employment and Immigration and Finance and Enterprise  took up the challenge and created the "Growing in Rural Alberta" Rural Development Symposium, where local leaders can learn about new ideas related to building community capacity., developing the workforce or creating wealth in communities.

The 4th symposium in 2009, included an opportunity for these leaders to take part in a scenario planning exercise. interactive approach to community futures.  Used both publica nd private sector locations around the world, it people to explore key drivers these drivers in terms of and explore and describe the

*Scenario planning is a cutting edge approach to  exploring regional, community, and organizational futures.*

Scenario planning is an exploring regional and with great success with decision makers in many provides an opportunity for shaping the future: assess importance and uncertainty future under four plausible scenarios, considering social, economic and environmental dimensions.

The majority of "Growing  in Rural Alberta"  participants  came from across the Palliser region in southeast Alberta.  Delegates also came from outside the region looking for ideas to further rural development in their own regions.  They were mayors, reeves, councilors, economic development officers, farmers, business people, community college representatives and representatives of not for profit organizations. They brought a  diversity of skills, interests, and backgrounds but all had the same goal, to help the community and region in which they live prosper and grow.

This report summarizes the work of the delgates, their deliberations and their conclusion. Through it decision makers in southeast Alberta can see four plausible futures for the region and how their decision making  along the two dimenstions considered most important, will affect the future they are hoping to create.

# Southeast Alberta at a Glance

Southeast Alberta sits on the Alberta side of the Palliser Triangle a semiarid geographic area nearly equally distributed in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The area was named after John Palliser who led an 1863 survey expedition to Canada's west.  Palliser discovered it was a dry land with no trees; thus, he thought it would be unsuitable for growing crops.   A few years later John Macoun, a government official, argued that it would be good for growing wheat and advertised it as such to immigrant farmers.  The region is frequently referred to as the Palliser region.

Short grass prairie, wind, big skies and low rainfall have always defined the Palliser region of Alberta.  The area is home to gas, oil and coal reserves that have been drivers of the economy in the past and continue to be so into the present. Agriculture is present in all its forms, dry land farms in the north of the region and irrigation farming in the south as well as livestock operations.  In recent years the defence research taking place at CFB Suffield has influenced a rise in technology and defence related businesses.

Economic indicators for the region show that while the entire region has experienced a growth in population, further examination reveals that this growth has taken place in the biggest centres.  The rural municipalities and the smaller urban centres in these rural municipalities are struggling  with declining population and loss or downsizing of services such as schools and hospitals. (Elvira will send a new sentence)

Palliser region is large encompassing 6.8% of the provinces' land mass, but has a low population representing only 3.2% of the province's population. The region has population of 105,181 and nearly 2/3 of this population resides in the two major cities.  The largest city in the region is Medicine Hat, famously described by Rudyard Kipling in his 1907 visit as "the town with all Hell for a basement" referring to the prolific natural gas field discovered just 300 metres below the city.  Medicine Hat has grown 11.2 % between the census years of 2001 and 2006 to a total of 56, 997 persons.  The City of Brooks, 107 km away, has 12,498 inhabitants.  There are 19 other municipalities in the region, rural municipalities, villages, and Special Areas.

The rural part of the Palliser region continues to rely heavily on the agricultural sector, which is experiencing difficult economic times. The region also has energy opportunities. However these are subject to recessionary pressure and activity has declined since August of 2008, with some companies ceasing operation entirely. Furthermore the industry is based on conventional oil and gas and these reserves are beginning to enter the sunset phase.

The City of Brooks has a significant recent immigrant population, who have come to work at the meat packing plant.  The rest of the region is not experiencing the same immigration trends.

Youth out-migration is a concern in most of the smaller centres. (elvira new )

During the Rural Development Symposium "Growing Rural Alberta", participants explored a range of overarching trends likely to impact the region's future. These included global population growth, energy consumption, climate change, migration patterns, education, and income levels to name a few. Participants then discussed and identified the 20 trends most likely to impact how the region's future plays out, and ranked them in terms of importance and uncertainty. The ranking process yielded a visual way to group the trends into these important clusters.

### Responsiveness to external economy

- Economic decline in USA
- Growth in developing countries
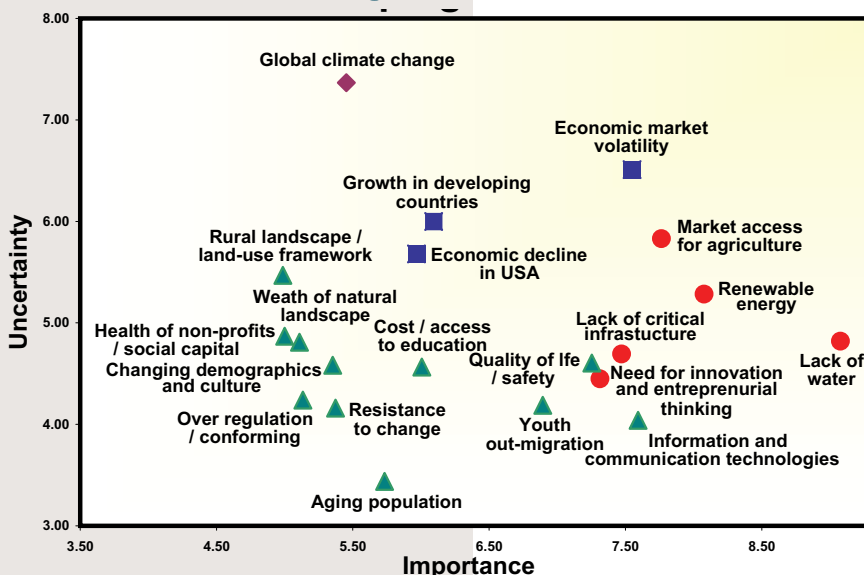- Economic market volatility

### Ability to capitalize on local resources

- Market access for agriculture
- Renewable energy
- Lack of water
- Need for innovation and entrepreneurial thinking
- Lack of critical infrastructure

The two clusters, "Responsiveness to external economy" and "Ability to capitalize on local resources," are two distinct dimensions of the region's future – the external influences and local efficacy realms. In combination, they define four plausible ways in which the future could unfold, as shown in the figure on page 7. Each represents a different combination of decisions about the extent to which we respond to external forces and utilize local resources.

With these scenarios roughly identified, workshop participants broke into four groups, each developing a detailed scenario narrative. They also named their scenario and considered its characteristics against the triple bottom line of society, economy, and environment.

## Scenario Shaping Clusters of Drivers



The scatter diagram represents the average scores for each of the 20 drivers against axes of importance and uncertainty.
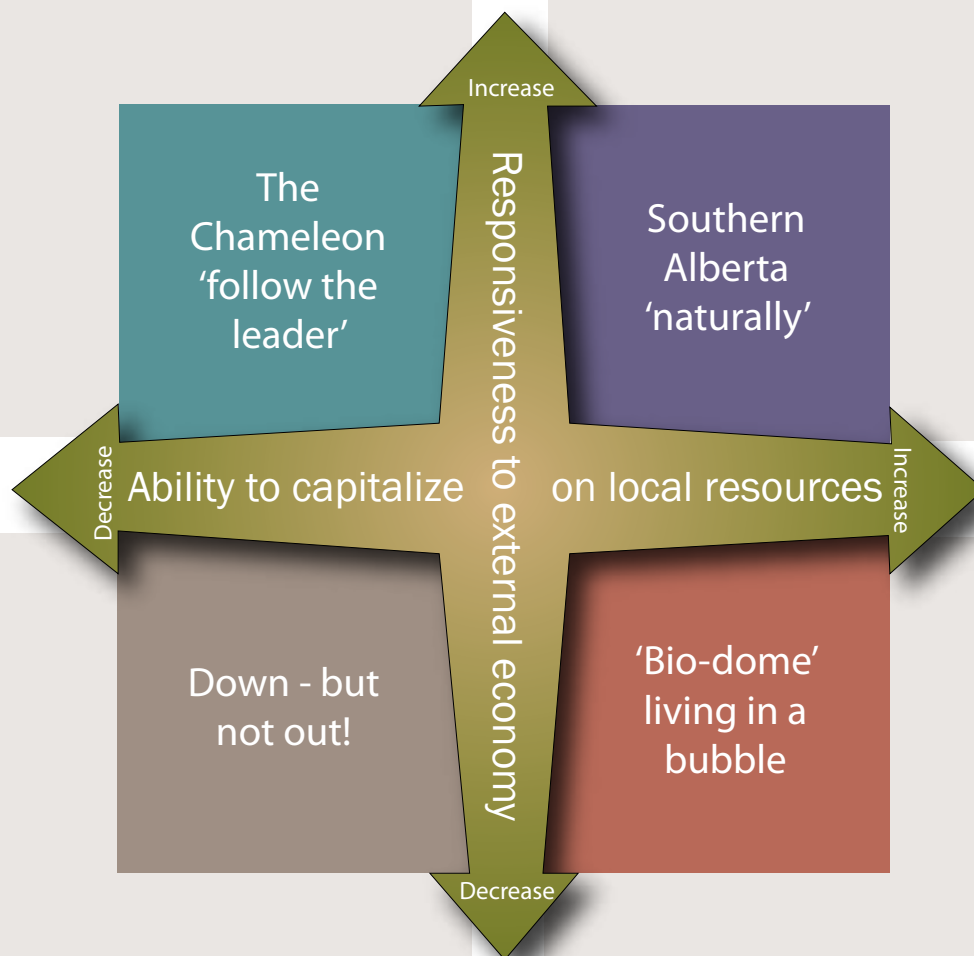
# Scenario Snapshots

## The Chameleon 'follow the leader'

**Society:** Connected globally

**Economy:** Dependant on larger economy and unable to capture local

**Environment:** High-tech solutions, future loss

## Southern Alberta 'naturally'

**Society:** Cultural Diversity, mobile society

**Economy:** Innovation and partnerships

**Environment:** Participatory planning and sustainability

The Chameleon 'follow the leader'

Southern Alberta 'naturally'

Responsiveness to external economy

Increase

Decrease

Ability to capitalize on local resources

Decrease — Increase

Down - but not out!

'Bio-dome' living in a bubble

## Down - but not out!

**Society:** Apathetic with a family

**Economy:** Simplification and little growth

**Environment:** Water depletion

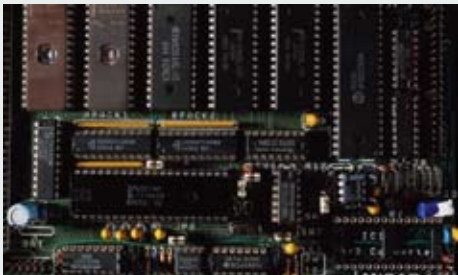## 'Bio-dome' living in a bubble

**Society:** Focus on local and self sufficiency

**Economy:** Entrepreneurship for us

**Environment:** Saving the natural resources

# The Chameleon 'follow the leader'

This scenario illuminates a community that is highly dependant on the global economy and is able to see global influences. As the global economy shifts, so does the community. The inability of the community to capture local resources leaves a community in this scenario unable to differentiate themselves and not only not fully rally local resources to take full advantage of the global economy but also not able to build-up local capital to sustain in the global economic shifts.

**This scenario** is shaped by the forces of increased ability to respond to external economic influences and decreased ability to capitalize on local resources. This creates a future where the is highly regulated by the global external fluctuations in the economy but is unable to organize the local resources to capitalize on those forces.

## Social and Cultural Characteristics:
- More Education options focuses on niche opportunities
- Become "Energy Technology Hub"
- More educated population drives more cultural activities (theater, music, etc)
- More cultural activities drives tourism
- Stabilized population
- Demographics - more young people broader age distribution
- More movement to rural locations from urban

## Economic Characteristics:
- Decline in traditional economies (oil, gas, agriculture)
- Increase in ability to take advantage of new opportunities
- More global environmentally conscious citizens
- Government support and incentives in research and development
- New regulations and policies to support change
- Increased efficiencies
- Export opportunities of knowledge base in a traditional economy
- Connection to external expertise to exploit new economic opportunities

## Environmental Characteristics:
- Going up instead of out by saving agricultural land and transportation services more economical
- Higher densities in cities to preserve water and other resources
- More global environmentally conscious citizens
- Local resources become depleted
- Ability to utilize new innovations in natural resources

## Triple Bottom Line Possibilities

| Social | Economic | Environmental |
| --- | --- | --- |

**Social**

**2010**

Population is continuing to age. The workforce has become an energy based "hands on" workforce. There is a trend of low formal education and technical expertise is valued.

**2020**

These is an increase in education opportunities that are driven by industry related to the needs of the global trends. There is a stabilization of the age of the population and overall demographics.

**2030**

There are expanded post secondary educational capabilities. Business and education have been inspired to create new educational partnerships that are inspired by industry growth. Population is stable

**Economic**

**2010**

There is an overall resistance to change in the community but there are signs of awareness building and a start of acceptance to global change effects. New pressures are mounting over municipal tax base. There is a redistribution of our demographic population to new industry. Focus on capitalization on new industry and methods.

**2020**

There is a growing maturity in the high technology industry but the community is unable to capture those resources to fully take advantage. Rural population is decreasing due to the increased inability to embrace the unique aspects of those communities.

**2030**

Proliferation in access to new markets, but only partially able to embrace locally.

**Environmental**

**2010**

Resources are managed more efficiently through the use of new technologies. These technologies such as low flow timed irrigation have saved the community money and protected resources. The overall population is very environmentally conscious to global issues but is doing little to see that as a reason to keep tabs on local environmental impacts.

**2020**

More self-sufficient energy housing is created by tapping into new technologies. Multi-family condos are increasing. Walking trails, golf courses, recreation areas are following global trends in technology and offering communication advances to complement these recreational activities.

**2030**

Local resources have become depleted and gas and water are now rare commodities and government controlled. Traditional industries in the region are leaving due to this depletion and hundreds of jobs have been lost.

# Southern Alberta 'naturally'

This scenario is shaped by increased responsiveness to the global economy as well as the ability to capitalize on local resources. This creates a future where the communities are able to see and react to global economic trends. They also are able to protect and utilize local natural, human & built resources to capitalize on those trends.

Although it is easy to see this scenario as utopia, it can also create issues for a community as it is able to quickly adapt to global trends, if the trends are devastating (as the breaking of the dot.com bubble was) the community may also suffer.

## Social and Cultural Characteristics:

- Diversified approaches to education refocuses toward extensive networking and increased focus on research and development.
- Farming has gone corporate and many small farms have been consolidated into large corporations in order to become sustainable.
- Society has become mobile and many are taking advantage of new technologies to distribute where work takes place
- Bedroom communities are created with a migration of population from urban to rural areas.
- There are widespread cultural and sporting events
- Increased life span has created a need for more services to seniors.
- Increase in diversity of culture that has integrated into the culture.

## Economic Characteristics:

- Education is focused on meeting the global needs by creating a higher focus on educating for 'knowledge jobs'.
- Energy resources have been diversified to adapt to global needs while preserving local resources.
- Preemptive infrastructure is created to prepare for trends.
- There is an increase in a focus on local amenities such as tourism and recreation.
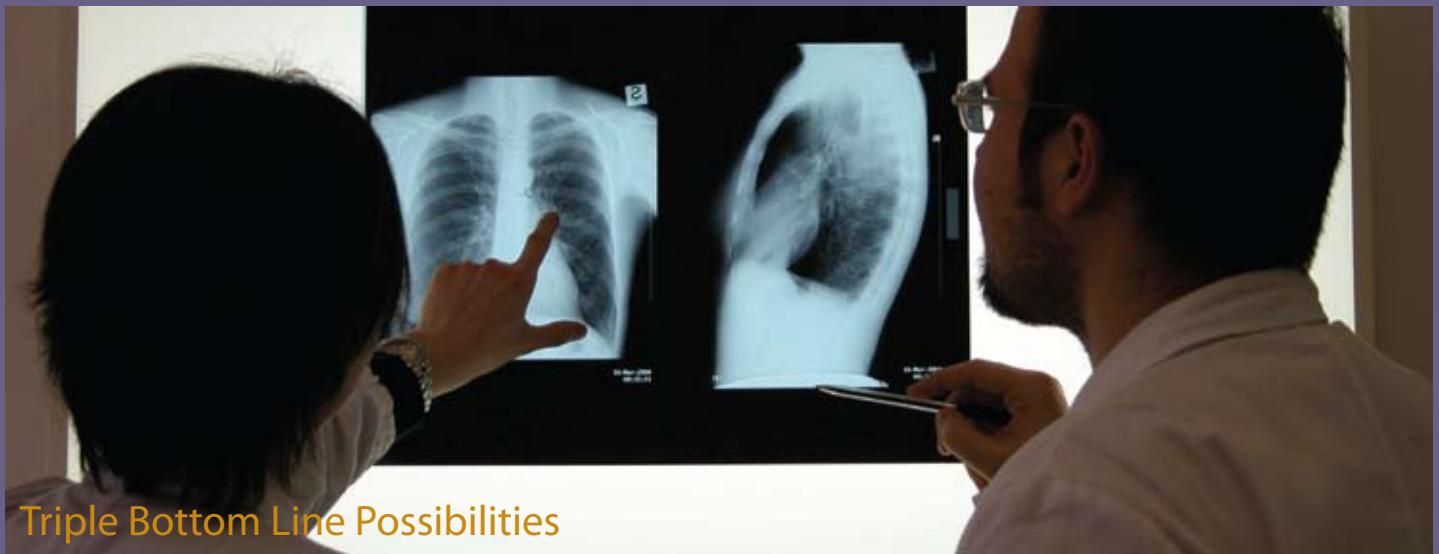- Agriculture is diversified with new trends in organic and niche crops.

## Environmental Characteristics:

- There is a new focus on water and agricultural resources and the community comes together to draft strategies for conservation and land use planning.
- Technological advancements will allow for a new focus on alternate energy that is affordable and attractive.
- The efficient use of water and resources maximizes sustainable productive capacity.
- The communities have a renewed interest in controlling air quality and have made strides to take advantage of technology incorporated production practices.

## Triple Bottom Line Possibilities

| Social | Economic | Environmental |
|---|---|---|
| **2010** | **2010** | **2010** |
| There is a first wave of large scale immigration and the community is at first wrestling with how cultures are integrated. Education stays generally traditional and is planning for the next needs. There is a general loss of traditional family farms. The society has become more mobile and a focus on community increases. ***In construction are some bigger recreation centers for large events. Senior services are a new focus with an increased life expectancy. Evidence of cultural diversification first shows through new restaurants and ethnic food supplies. | The local economy is agriculture, oil and gas based and serves the needs of the global communities' need and the local resources. Planning is shifting toward balancing the local needs with the global requests. Small technology companies are starting to pop up around the region. | Public participation increases in concerns about global environmental trends and local finite resources. Participatory planning groups have emerged to make local plans for; water, technological solutions think tank, land use, air quality, waste and environmental education. This encourages local government to engage citizens in local visioning efforts for full scale regional planning. |
| **2020** | **2020** | **2020** |
| Immigration continues and cultural diversity is being celebrated throughout the community with many diverse community events. Entrepreneurship is a central focus in education and is matched with a robust research and development program, many of these programs are offered online. Alternate energies have been embraced. Farms are larger with a focus on organic and tourism. Local airports capacity is increased and housing has focused on condo living. | Population has started to increase and new markets are opening based the diverse cultures. New focus areas for supporting the economy are build on tourism and recreation. A bigger airport, better roads and redesigned uses of rail now serve the international industries. New alternate energy manufacturing facilities have been created with government grants. Oil and gas are still large industries, but a diverse economy is being created to sustain the region. | Through planning, provinces along the watershed have come together to create reciprocity agreements to dam rivers for water sustainability, distribution and usage. Proliferating advancements in technology have given access to affordable alternate energies. Regional planning continues and focuses on natural resources and land use. Incentives are given and received for conservation efforts. |
| **2030** | **2030** | **2030** |
| Cultures are now diversified and celebrated as a community. Education is fully integrated internationally. Small farms have re-emerged to niche tourism markets. Tourism is a major area of focus as the community welcomes wealthy | New infrastructure has been created to conserve water supplies and sustain agriculture. The airport has become international serving the new booming tourism industry, energy manufacturing and new university. The region and educational institutions have become partners and are now working together on a research and development hub making a world renowned technology transfer facility. | The region has grown and has increased tourism throughout with sound natural resource management especially with water. Alternate energy programs, that were started in the last decade, have recovered costs. Air quality is improved and monitored. Good planning and implementation has increased population with a focus on local resources. World renowned in recycling efforts |

## Social and Cultural Characteristics:

- The region demographics are aging and the economically vital youth are being lost to larger communities that can offer higher wages and sustained employment.
- The local features are enhanced by making niche markets for agriculture, crafts and various natural amenities.
- Diversity is celebrated, enhanced and integrated with various ethnic groups creating unique community events, restaurants and service industries.
- At first the community is on high with what seems like increased small business, diverse cultural offerings, and local insulation from global trends.
- Education is focused on the local needs and community partnerships are flourishing.

## Economic Characteristics:

- The region is satisfied with traditional economic relationships and have not kept up with exploring new emerging economies and opportunities.
- New economic opportunities are encouraged and supported from a local level and newly developed goods and services are based on local resources.
- There will be initial proliferation of entrepreneurial activities and self-sufficiency will be a source of pride.
- Out-migration of youth has impacted local industry to retain employees.

## Environmental Characteristics:

- New focus on conservation of water as a limited resource.
- New focus on oil and gas reserves to maximize output and minimize environmental impact.
- Local use of alternate energy to reduce energy costs.
- Recycling programs are utilized to reduce the impact of local waste.
- New focus on soil conservation for agriculture needs.

**This scenario** is shaped by decreased responsiveness to the global economy coupled with an increased ability to capitalize on local resources. This creates a future where there is an initial boost to local economy where citizens are focused on sustainability of local resources and meeting regional needs. It lacks the ability to situate the region globally and cannot attract new resources outside of the regional context.

This scenario initially looks positive as it leads to a boost in the local economy with jobs based on the local resources and needs of the community. However, the region is not connected to the larger global economy and cannot sustain itself without global support and a connection to the vast changes in technology and innovation.

# Triple Bottom Line Possibilities

## Social

### 2010

The region has a complacent attitude toward the global changes and focuses all of its attention toward identifying and maximizing local resources. Social groups celebrate tradition and local culture. Family ties are strong and the attitude is "it takes a community to raise a child", everyone is helping each other out. Culture does not become very diverse and close bonding ties become stronger

### 2020

Aging population does not contribute to workforce and youth out-migration is increasing. Enrollment in education is low at all levels. The needs of the health system grow due to aging population and less outside funding.

### 2030

Loss of local institutions due to decreasing population. Rural communities are lost as they cannot maintain themselves without regional and provincial support. Characteristics of the community are homogeneous and people have become more complacent.

## Economic

### 2010

The community celebrates a good lifestyle that is satisfied with traditional economic relationships. Employment is still steady with the development of local goods. Self sufficiency is a source of pride for the community and leads the region to ignore new, emerging economies and opportunities. There is a slow but steady out-migration of youth from rural areas to larger populations. A focus to attract young families back to the community for quality of lifestyle.

### 2020

Lifestyle has turned complacent with population levels consistent, but a growing number of population over 65. There are increased economic demands on the community to diversify the economy to support local life and the community is actively pursuing alternate economies such as wind, biofuels and tourism. There are emerging issues from industry on water security and many are actively researching new communities that have more abundant water resources. Infrastructure is improved from local resources and the tax level is increased to support these improvements.

### 2030

Taxation is now at an all time high due to an inability to get outside funding for local needs. Out-migration is epidemic and business is in decline as a result of competitiveness and loss of markets. There is a new focus on challenging "slow learners".

## Environmental

### 2010

In order to support local life and industry there is a new focus is on water conservation. Realizing that the region is oil and gas dependant, discussions are emerging to learn about alternative energy options. A new focus to balance conservation and use of local resources is implemented. Air quality remains an issue.

### 2020

Policy to develop infrastructure and policy to support water conservation is implemented. Community has initiated alternative energy sources and use policies with lower impact on the environment - but continue to be dependant on oil and gas. Agricultural practices have shifted in light of these new polices and a sustainable land use policy is developed. Reduced dependence on oil and gas has positively impacted air quality.

### 2030

The Region implemented policy ***reduced demand with policy to meet the local availability. Reduced dependence on oil and gas and increased reliance on alternative energy. There is an increase of land dedicated to green space and natural conservation. Improved air quality from greenspace and reduced carbon emissions from oil and gas.

# Down - but not out!



## Social and Cultural Characteristics:

- There is overall decreased government support and increased demand on the volunteers to support an aging population.
- Overall feeling of disempowerment and a greater resistance to change
- New community members are not welcomed into the region and find it increasingly difficult to be accepted.
- Regional facilities are degrading with the declined use.
- Overall sense of apathy waiting for some outside force to help.
- Communities are safe as everyone watches out for their neighbor.
- Social and family values decline.

## Economic Characteristics:

- Self supporting initially and feeling of sustainability (until the tractor breaks).
- Economy losses traction on oil and gas and many of those industries are dried up as alternative energies are proliferating globally.
- There is a high dependency on land-based products and skilled labor prevails.
- Niche markets sustain the economy, but are not predictable or planned.
- Increase in unreliable small businesses that service equipment.

**This scenario** is shaped by the forces of decreased responsiveness to the global economy coupled with decreased ability to capitalize on local resources. This creates a future where there is a rapid spiraling down which impacts on multiple facets of the region.

This scenario is a "worst case" scenario for the region.

## Environmental Characteristics:

- Large agricultural units
- Air quality is good and lowered pollution due to changing industries
- After depleting the local supply, water is transported in and is very expensive
- Population is consolidated due to the water access
- More regulation and less resource funds for environmental upgrades.

# Triple Bottom Line Possibilities

## Social

### 2010

A "Me" attitude is created. People are commuting to shop and work. There is youth out-migration. Cuts in government social services affect community spirit, mental, emotional health. Recreation facilities are closed and the community is quiet. There is an increase in user fees and school closures. Community created a "silo" atmosphere.

### 2020

Overall pressure of the region has created a "we" attitude. There is stable population and an increase in responsibility, connections and volunteerism. Many that have stayed in the community are teleworking. Communities act together given the need and school consolidation.

### 2030

Rural communities become more isolated along with youth out migration. There are both negative and positive grassroots activities.

## Economic

### 2010

Decreasing industries include packing plant, oil and gas. Agriculture stays steady. There is an overall high unemployment as the young tend to migrate to larger economic areas. Infrastructure is good and populations of towns have stayed steady with older populations retiring with steady incomes.

### 2020

Agricultural farms get bigger with needed consolation of holdings. Fewer people are farming and there is an increase in immigration of cheap labor. There is an increase of small businesses to support insular community. Exports are under pressure from global shifts in energy focus.

### 2030

No real economic growth and the economy is simplifying. Cheap labour - new immigrants create opportunities to invest.

## Environmental

### 2010

Water stress pressures create a need for a water management policy for efficiency in irrigation and metering water allocation. There is increased arm and ranch consolidation. Increasing regulation with classification of water plant operators, Land Use Framework, wastewater regulations and chemical trespass.

### 2020

Oil industry not permitted any surface potable water use. More containment and better surface water management driven by urban demand. Further consolidation. Regulations are more effectively enforced.

### 2030

Small communities pipe in water to fill demand. More drought tolerant crops created but may be too late. External forces drive changes in agriculture.

# The Scenarios in the Palliser Region

The new complexities in changing rural landscapes have recently emphasized the importance in the abilities of rural regions to flourish in the light of vast global and regional change. In considering the future of such a region, most observers tend to focus on the ability of a community to be sustainable during great change. These scenarios for the Palliser Region are no exception. The four scenarios, which were developed by the participants, were based on the 'global/local' axis and focused on the ability of the region to harness resources in the light of change at both these levels. Part of the power of scenario planning is the ability to account for both the major 'axes' concurrently and uses them to position key drivers.

Tracking key drivers to try to identify how the future may be unfolding in reality is a critical part of using scenarios in this way. There is a natural tendency for people to choose their preferred scenario (usually the most positive one) or to attribute a greater likelihood to one scenario or another, or aspects of it/them, but it is neither appropriate nor accurate to do so. What may be considered to be unlikely outcomes could easily come to fruition. Scenarios may help to prepare us for such eventualities.

It must be remembered that scenarios are non-judgmental regarding the appropriateness or validity of decisions and approaches. Just like the scenarios, the actual future will develop from a combination of action and inaction by the 'players' involved as well as external forces and 'players'. There is no attempt to apportion fault or blame in the case of undesirable outcomes, but merely to have some preparedness or contingencies for them.

This summary is a first step in providing a resource to help to extend these scenarios beyond the participants and their immediate sphere of influence. This resource will be used to prompt discussions amongst the wider community as to possible implications and impacts of various future events and strategic decisions.

For More Information, please contact:
David Beurle, CEO
Future iQ Partners
Tel: +1 715 559 5046
david@future-iq.com
www.future-iq.com