

October 29-30, 2025

Key Takeaways

- Behind Headlines Lie Opportunities: Despite anxiety-inducing news, there are silver linings for communities that look deeper.
- Entrepreneurial Mindset: Quoting Machiavelli—“Entrepreneurs are those who understand that there is little difference between obstacle and opportunity.”
- Call to Action: Communities must stay informed, collaborate, and act strategically to turn uncertainty into growth.
- Southeast Alberta is quietly leading in economic resilience and diversification.
- The region is transitioning from a single-industry base to multi-sector growth, especially in aerospace and agrifood.
- With strategic investment and collaborative infrastructure, the region is poised to become a provincial leader over the next 12–18 months.

Highlights and Takeaways for our Chamber of Commerce

Unified Voice for Regional Leadership & Advocacy

- Champion unified messaging across municipalities and sectors.
- Advocate for interprovincial trade barrier removal.
- Support infrastructure investment and housing innovation.

Promotion and Support for Workforce Development

- Advocate, support and promote youth employment programs and employer engagement.
- Promote skilled trades and non-traditional career pathways.
- Support and promote sector-specific events

Connections and Facilitation for Industry Development and Growth

- Facilitate partnerships and connections
- Support and advocate for industry development and pilot projects
- Advocate for and promote Southeast Alberta as a hub for innovating housing, aerospace, defence, agriculture and agrifood processing.

Highlights and Takeaways for our Business Community

Expand Talent & Workforce Opportunities

1. Partner with schools and colleges for workforce placements and mentorship.
2. Use youth hiring incentives to offset costs.
3. Invest in upskilling and workforce retention strategies.

Explore Opportunities in Sector Growth

4. Aerospace and defense (CFB Suffield partnerships).
5. Agriculture and Agrifood processing
6. Innovative housing & infrastructure

Invest in Operational Resilience

7. Diversify supply chains and build redundancy.
8. Optimize throughput and lean operations.
9. Collaborate through peer networks and regional clusters.

Innovation Adoption

10. Pilot new technologies
11. Diversify energy applications
12. Explore generative artificial intelligence, data management and cybersecurity.

ATB Economic Update

Presentation by Mark Parson, ATB Chief Economist

Global & U.S. Economic Context

- **Trade Wars:** The U.S. trade war under Trump created uncertainty, but the impact has been less severe than feared. Businesses have adapted.
- **Stagflation Concerns:** Slow job growth and persistent inflation. The economy is not expanding, coupled with high inflation and prices for goods, and services are rising rapidly. There is high unemployment with a significant portion of the workforce without jobs. This combination is unusual because inflation typically occurs during periods of economic growth, not stagnation.
- **AI & Data Centers:** These contributed significantly to U.S. GDP growth, despite broader economic challenges.
- **Tourism Trends:** More Americans are visiting Alberta, while fewer Canadians are traveling to the U.S.

Canada & Alberta Economic Insights

- **Tariffs:** Tariffs imposed by the U.S. are largely paid by American consumers, not Canadians. Alberta is less affected, in comparison to other parts of Canada, due to its energy exports.
- **Population Growth:** Alberta has added nearly 1 million people in just over a decade. There has been an influx of interprovincial migration (especially from Ontario and B.C.).
- **Housing Market:** Affordability issues in other provinces are pushing people to Alberta, especially Calgary and now Edmonton and smaller cities like Medicine Hat.
- **Labour Market:** Alberta's job growth is strong, but population growth is outpacing it. Youth unemployment is high, and there's a skills mismatch, especially in trades.

Structural Economic Shifts

- **Diversification:** Alberta is growing without relying heavily on oil and gas investment. Key growth sectors include:
 - Critical minerals
 - Agriculture and Agri-Food processing
 - Manufacturing
 - Technology
 - Energy diversification and emissions reduction (e.g., carbon capture)
 - Aerospace and defense, especially in Southeast Alberta
- **Business Investment:** Canada's business investment per capita is at a 20-year low. Structural reforms are needed to boost productivity and competitiveness.

Strategic Recommendations

To build a more resilient and competitive Canadian economy, we need to:

1. **Build First-Class Major Projects** – Infrastructure like pipelines and energy facilities.
2. **Expand into Overseas Markets** – Reduce reliance on U.S. trade.
3. **Knock Down Interprovincial Trade Barriers** – Improve internal market efficiency.
4. **Scale Up Small Businesses** – Help startups commercialize and grow.

Canada needs to implement structural reforms and investing in productivity.

Weathering the Storm: The Quiet Comeback of Southeast Alberta

Presentation by David Rist, Manufacturing Consortium Manager, Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium

Regional Economic Outlook – Southeast Alberta

- **Positive Growth Despite Challenges:**
 - Tariffs and global uncertainty persist, but manufacturers in the region are planning expansion.
 - Aerospace and agrifood sectors are expected to grow significantly.
 - Brooks is emerging as a vital economic hub.
 - Hydrogen and geothermal developments are promising.
- **Economic Performance:**
 - Southeast Alberta is projected to outperform other regions in Alberta on the low-growth side and match them on the high-growth side (1–3.6%).
 - Southeast Alberta's GDP growth (2.25%) is set to exceed that of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and per capita growth will surpass Manitoba.

Workforce Resiliency & Labour Market Trends

- **Youth Engagement:**
 - Increasing participation of 18–25-year-olds in skilled trades and manufacturing.
 - Strong interest in upskilling and workforce development.
- **Human Capital Investment:**
 - Manufacturers are more open to long-term labour strategies and workforce partnerships.
 - Quality of life and affordability are attracting young families and skilled workers.

Four key regional advantages for manufacturing sector:

1. **Abundant Land** – Ideal for large-scale industrial development.
2. **Low Energy Costs** – A major draw for manufacturers.
3. **Energy Transition Leadership** – Strong foundation in renewables and sustainable manufacturing.
4. **Sectoral Diversification** – Growth in agrifood and aerospace.

Recommendations for Business Resilience: Six strategies for thriving:

1. **Secure Supply Chains** – Build redundancy and local/regional sourcing networks.
2. **Strengthen Pricing Resilience** – Focus on value-added services, not just products.
3. **Lean & Throughput Optimization** – Continuous improvement is key.
4. **Upskilling Programs** – Invest in workforce development.
5. **Peer Networks** – Collaborate regionally to share best practices.
6. **Build Regional Advocacy & Resilience** – Leverage comparative advantages like energy, land, and infrastructure.

Powering Alberta's Economic Centres: The Medicine Hat Energy Innovation Challenge

Presentation by Anouk Kendall, Decentralized Energy Canada

Overview of the Innovation Challenge

- **Three-Year Program** with three components:
 1. **Innovation** – Supporting early-stage technologies.
 2. **Demonstration** – Piloting innovations in real-world municipal infrastructure.
 3. **Investment** – Connecting entrepreneurs with investors.

Purpose: Help scale Canadian energy entrepreneurs by integrating their technologies into municipal systems — a rare opportunity in Canada.

Why Medicine Hat Is Ideal

- Medicine Hat owns its entire energy system:
 - Gas distribution pipelines
 - Power generation
 - Retail services
- This makes it Canada's largest theoretical microgrid, capable of producing and consuming energy within its own boundaries.
- Unlike larger utilities (e.g., Hydro-Québec, BC Hydro), Medicine Hat's structure is streamlined, allowing for easier innovation integration.

Challenges & Opportunities

- **Infrastructure Pressure:** Rapid population growth and energy demand are straining existing distribution networks.
- **Costly Upgrades vs. Innovation:** Instead of spending millions to upgrade infrastructure, the challenge explores integrating distributed energy resources (DERs) to optimize existing systems.

Funding Partners

- PrairiesCan (50% of funding)
- City of Medicine Hat
- Apex Alberta
- Emissions Reduction Alberta
- Natural Resources Canada

Connections to Quantum Computing & Data Sovereignty

- **Quantum Advantage Theme:** Addressing the limits of classical computing in managing complex energy data.
- **Use Cases:** Faster data processing (e.g., aerial imaging), advanced metering infrastructure, and cybersecurity.
- **Pilot Projects:** Exploring quantum computing applications in energy systems with partners

Strategic Importance

- **Technology Sovereignty:** Canada must own and protect its energy and data systems.
- **Defense Applications:** Decentralized energy and data systems are critical for national security.
- **Municipal Leadership:** Medicine Hat is pioneering a model for integrating energy innovation at the community level.

Hydrogen Hubs - Expanding the Network

Presentation by Mitchell Iwaasa, Brooks Region Economic Development

Hydrogen as an Energy Opportunity

- Hydrogen is the most abundant element and a promising energy carrier for a low-carbon future.
- It's versatile: used in fuel cells, turbines, industrial processes, and as energy storage to stabilize grids.
- Hydrogen can be produced in various ways:
 - Green hydrogen: via electrolysis using renewable energy (low emissions).
 - Blue hydrogen: from natural gas with carbon capture.
 - Grey hydrogen: from fossil fuels without carbon capture (most common today).

Why Hydrogen Hubs Matter

- Hydrogen hubs reduce transportation costs, foster regional economic development, and build community readiness.
- They support decentralized energy systems, producing energy where it's needed, reducing reliance on costly infrastructure.

Southeast Alberta's Strategic Position

- Alberta is a national leader in hydrogen due to advanced carbon capture and storage capabilities; a skilled workforce from the oil and gas sector; a robust industrial base.
- Southeast Alberta, especially Brooks, is actively developing a rural hydrogen hub to demonstrate hydrogen's viability in real-world settings.

Brooks Hydrogen Hub Activities

- **Feasibility studies** to assess technical and economic viability.
- **Pilot projects** to test hydrogen applications.
- **Community engagement** to build awareness.
- **Partnerships** with academia and industry to drive innovation.

Potential Applications

- Agricultural equipment
- Local power generation
- Heating systems
- Fuel for transportation

Challenges

- Attracting investment
- Building technical capacity
- Establishing Brooks as a testbed for rural hydrogen deployment
- Navigating funding processes (e.g., recent setback with Emissions Reduction Alberta)

Opportunities

- Positioning Southeast Alberta as a leader in rural energy innovation
- Creating new industries and jobs
- Inspiring similar hydrogen initiatives across Canada
- Leveraging support from organizations like Alberta Innovates and the Hydrogen Centre of Excellence

Vision for the Future: The Brooks Aqueduct is used as a metaphor: a century-old infrastructure project that transformed the region, showing how vision and collaboration can overcome challenges. Hydrogen can similarly transform rural communities, making them cleaner, more resilient, and economically diverse.

Fireside Chat with Defence Research Development Canada

Featuring Mike Onieu, Hugh Atwell

Overview of DRDC and CFB Suffield

- CFB Suffield is Canada's largest military base by land area (2,700 km²), with a portion designated as a National Wildlife Area.
- DRDC Suffield Research Centre is one of seven national centres, each with specialized domains. Suffield's unique geography and history (dating back to WWI and WWII chemical testing) shape its current research focus. DRDC Suffield also offers live agent training to the Canadian Armed Forces, international military, and first responder communities.
- DRDC's work is mission-driven, focused on future threats and sovereign defence capabilities.
- Suffield plays a critical role in Canada's national security, with unique assets and expertise.
- The community should be aware of and proud of the strategic value and economic potential of the military base and defence research

DRDC Suffield offers expertise in military engineering, autonomous intelligent systems, and defence against chemical and biological (CB) agents. Key research areas include:

- Explosives threat assessment and blast effects
- Detection of land mines
- Neutralization of landmines and unexploded ordnance
- Bulk explosives detection
- Novel energetic materials
- CB detection and identification
- Medical countermeasures and toxicology
- CB hazard assessment
- Physical protection against CB agents

Workforce & Collaboration

- Diverse team of scientists, engineers, technicians, and support staff.
- Focus on low Technology Readiness Level (TRL) research, with partnerships to scale innovations.
- Strong collaboration with academia and industry to accelerate innovation.

Major Infrastructure Investment

- \$750M recapitalization project to replace chemical and biological defence labs.
- \$44M neurobehavioral facility for traumatic brain injury research.
- Projects are in the design phase (2 years), with completion expected around 2032.
- Delivered through Defence Construction Canada and contractors

Emerging National Initiatives

- Borealis: Canada's version of DARPA, aiming to streamline defence innovation and connect industry with federal programs.
- DISH (Defence Innovation Secure Hub): Facilitates secure collaboration and classified information sharing between government, academia, and industry.
- DIANA (NATO's Defence Innovation Accelerator): Supports innovation challenges with acquisition pathways for NATO-aligned technologies.

Local & Strategic Implications

- DRDC is open to industry partnerships and base access through established mechanisms.
- Suffield's unique facilities offer nationally critical capabilities.
- Potential for defence manufacturing in the region

Key Challenges in Youth Workforce Development

1. Limited Placement Opportunities
2. Internationalization of Postsecondary Education
3. Rural Accessibility: Students in remote areas lack access to facilities and opportunities.
4. Student Disengagement

Innovative Programs & Partnerships

1. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)
2. Career Services at Medicine Hat College
3. Academy Programs such as the Yuill School of Agriculture
4. MIT Partnership
5. Provincial School Engagement Coordinators
6. Youth Employment Incentive Program: Financial incentives for employers hiring youth aged 15–20.

Measuring Success

- Graduate Employment Rates: 90% currently employed in their field.
- Student Portals: Matchmaking systems for students and employers.
- Tracking Metrics: Attendance, graduation rates, and postsecondary transitions.
- Success Stories: Students hired by industry partners and graduating with credentials

Addressing Gaps

- Changing Perceptions of Trades:
 - Promoting trades as equal to academic paths.
 - Offering advanced diplomas alongside journeyman certifications.
- Support for Non-Traditional Pathways:
 - Programs for Indigenous youth, young women in trades, and students in foster care.
 - Financial support and creative solutions to remove barriers.

How to Get Involved

- **Employers & Parents:**
 - Contact local school coordinators or Medicine Hat College directly.
 - Participate in advisory committees or attend open houses.
 - Use online portals for student/employer/teacher engagement.
- **Upcoming Events:**
 - Exploring Futures Event: Late May
 - Medicine Hat College Open House: November 12

Navigating Uncertainty: The Need for Steady Hands

Brock Dickenson

Metaphor of the Ship's Wheel: Drawing from his Nova Scotia roots, Dickenson likens today's economic and geopolitical uncertainty to steering a ship through a storm—requiring steady leadership and resilience.

Global Instability: The decline of the post-WWII global order, with the U.S. retreating from its role as global enforcer, has led to:

- Increased international conflicts
- Rising piracy, sabotage, and supply chain disruptions.
- Vulnerability in global trade and logistics.

Demographic Shifts and Economic Restructuring

- Aging Populations: Countries like China, Germany, and Italy face shrinking workforces.
- Impact on Manufacturing:
 - China's declining labor force threatens its role as the world's manufacturing hub.
 - A massive restructuring of global manufacturing is underway, with investment shifting back to North America.

Trade Wars and AI-Driven Policy

- **Unpredictable U.S. Trade Policies:**
 - AI-generated tariff policy
 - Lack of clear policy rationale creates confusion and anxiety
- **Canada's Response**
 - Regional tariff relief programs (e.g., grants and loans via Prairies Canada).
 - Nation-building projects (e.g., LNG terminals, nuclear power, carbon capture pipelines).
 - Strategic ambiguity in trade negotiations may benefit Canada.

Emerging Opportunities in Key Sectors

1. **Energy:**
 - SE Alberta's history of energy innovation positions it well for new investments.
 - Examples include biomass projects and clean energy initiatives.
 - Summerside, PEI's success with renewable energy cited as a model.
2. **Modular Housing:**
 - Federal commitment of \$25B to modular housing.
 - Opportunities for local manufacturing using Canadian materials (e.g., softwood lumber affected by U.S. tariffs).
 - Potential for innovation in prefabricated housing components.
3. **Agriculture & Agrifood Processing:**
 - Tariffs on U.S. agricultural imports create domestic opportunities (e.g., baby spinach, lettuce).
 - Retaliatory tariffs from China on Canadian products (e.g., pork, beef) necessitate new markets and value-added strategies.
 - Potential for a renaissance in agrifood manufacturing in SE Alberta.
4. **Interprovincial Trade:**
 - Local innovation (e.g., Lloydminster's cross-border trade workaround) can drive national policy change.
 - Encouragement for businesses to build relationships across provinces to overcome trade barriers.