Alberta Gathering Sets Co-op Decade on Track

Alberta co-ops focused on participation, sustainability, identity, legal/government relations and capital, conference shows

Jonathan Allan, economic development officer with Vulcan Business Development Society, says attending the award ceremony that capped off the second annual Gathering of Alberta Co-operatives sparked inspiration for him.

The Nov. 1-2 conference hosted by the Alberta Community and Co-operative Association (ACCA) in Red Deer provided attendees with the opportunity to stretch beyond their home co-operative and, for some, to explore the possibilities of a co-op model for the first time.

"The award ceremony was great to see," Jonathan says.

"It provided me with incentive to set a goal that maybe the co-operative I incorporate can win an award some day," Allan says.

He is working with a team to develop an opportunity development co-operative (ODC) in Vulcan, Alta., which the team plans to incorporate in a few weeks. They received an Unleashing Local Capital grant from ACCA and the Rural Alberta Development Fund, which helped them garner $15,000 in services and development support.

The Unleashing Local Capital program and ODCs were focal points of the second conference day, sparking discussions including legal considerations and updates from past and current pilot communities.

"Although we have a lot of great stores in (Vulcan) we have to maintain every single

store. Because we're such a small town, every store counts. In order to expand in our retail offerings, this co-operative will help fill that void," Jonathan explains.

"We're going to leverage local wealth in order to see business that we want to happen in the town actually happen."

The conference attracted a broad representation of people across various sectors, from housing co-ops to gas co-ops.

"The role of the conference was to get people in the room, identify what makes them unique and connects them and to host those discussions," says Seth Leon, ACCA co-op research officer.

Using the framework of the five "pillars" from the Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade, the conference showcased Alberta co-ops focused on participation, sustainability, identity, legal/government relations and capital.

"I found that session to be quite enlightening," Jonathan says, referring to the framework which set out a blueprint for a co-operative decade.

"I love the idea of co-operatives. I love that it stands for responsible capitalism. I love that people who support it, support social democracy and that it represents a means of allowing not just owners but workers to jointly own and operate an entity, which if used properly around the world, can help to contribute toward the amelioration of exploitation and oppression.

"I see co-operatives as a mechanism to contribute to a more just society. I really do."

The final event of the two-day conference honoured Terry Geib with the Co-operative Innovator Award and Harvey Yoder and Dean Chessor with the Co-operative Merit Award.

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