

Good evening.

This evening is all about celebrating our successes, both as an organization and as a region. Recognizing and celebrating our accomplishments, whether they're small or great, is an integral part of engagement, and moving to the forefront of Leadership and capability. Developing leadership, whether it's as an individual or as a group, takes courage, tenacity, ambition and reflection.

I'm thrilled to see so many of you here tonight, accepting your Regional Awards for Excellence, for you are the local leaders within your municipalities.

Much like yourselves, the Grande Alberta Economic Region is also a leader within our own region, and as we continue to mature as an organization, we can proudly recognize our accomplishments of the last year, while we look ahead to the increasingly new challenges of the future.

This past year, we worked to increase awareness of regional challenges facing our region, such as sustainability and diversification. We were successfully able to secure funding and partnerships so as to carry forward our 'Community Diversification', 'Tourism Development' and 'Branding the Region for Labour Attraction' strategies in an effort to better promote, advance and embark on the new challenges that our economy and region face in these unprecedented times.

Last year the key issue for GAER was the Mountain Pine Beetle initiative and planning for the post-beetle future by means of a community based approach. Much has changed since the inception of this initiative as GAER's resource based economy has been challenged amidst the global economic downturn.

The GAER 'Community Diversification Strategy' aims to create solutions before a crisis is reached. The goal is to develop local strategies and activities through a community-led consultation and design process. By engaging community influentials, such as yourselves, will help us develop community diversification business plans for each GAER member municipality. From these individual plans, we'll develop a relevant and current regional plan, which will identify diversification opportunities that can grow member municipality economies, while also growing quality-of-life for residents in those communities. This project will generate immediate, mid- and long-term impacts upon GAER communities' sustainability, viability and vitality, while creating new opportunities for innovation and technology.

In keeping with the idea of creating solutions, we have been moving forward on our 'Tourism Development Strategy' report. Last year we determined the feasibility of implementing strategies and recommendations through a two year pilot study. Through successful funding with Rural Alberta's Development Fund, we are able to implement those strategies related to developing new and innovative Tourism products. As well, we are raising awareness of the importance of collaboration and cooperation through

Tourism Operators Networking sessions. Attracting Tourism to our region is an essential factor for sustaining our member municipalities.

Building on our 'Branding the Region for Labour Attraction' strategy, and with input from six consultative focus group sessions attended by business owners and operators throughout the region, a new logo and tagline was created for use in labour attraction outside the region. GAER is now effectively laying the foundation on building brand awareness.

This foundation, along with our other strategy work will be combined in a newly redesigned website for GAER. The Internet is now the number one vehicle for information and research for investors, site selectors, tourists, residents and businesses. GAER has joined the bandwagon and made the investment in our number one marketing tool. Our 'Website Information and Management Plan' provides a vision that supports both the short term and future goals of the region by zeroing in on a valuable, but untapped resource of our regional data. The website will support our economic diversification, tourism development, labour attraction and retention efforts. It will effectively collect, share and publish a one-stop-shopping data base. It will expand our capacity to nurture the regional data in a manner that serves the greater vision and objectives of our member communities, the people who live here, as well as new and existing industries that drive our economy forward. The Plan is about foresight and the increasing power of the Internet as a valuable resource both within the region and well beyond.

GAER is recognized for our solution-focused, cutting-edge leadership and our desire to shape our own destiny. During the spring of 2008, REDA Chairs and representatives of Alberta Finance and Enterprise made a unanimous decision to undertake a process to define what Regional Economic Development Alliances should be in the next five to ten years. GAER, always on the forefront, was the first to complete the REDA stakeholder consultation sessions last fall. Based on this process, recommendations were developed and adopted by the REDAs and were presented to Minister Evans this past March for her review and response.

Over the year, GAER continued to examine the importance of our current roles as well as our future roles in understanding the diversity of the region we serve. We are confident that we are on the right track as we move toward creating sustainable and viable communities.

Identifying our strengths, and working to increase our expanded roles has resulted in progress toward the goals set out in our 2008-2012 Business Plan. The results have been significant and the value of the GAER membership has been recognized, and increased accordingly. At a time where economic uncertainty is high, cooperation amongst the GAER members continues to ensure maximum benefit accrue from investments of regional economic development funds.

Our current business plan is innovative, creative and inclusive; and will provide guidance as we move to the next stages. We will continue to effectively build on our organization's mission, vision and values, as we continue to advance the strategic framework needed for identifying, prioritizing and implementing key initiatives for our region.

We look forward to educating and engaging our stakeholders, and embarking on new opportunities together in 2009-2010; and that includes each one of you here tonight. Each one of you is an "influential". You are an example of leadership within your own communities. Your businesses play an important key role in your own community diversification. You will be the driving edge that will help us expand the sustainability of our region.

In closing, I would like to recognize the strong efforts and support of our Board of Directors, partners, shareholders and staff for their commitment and hard work, without which we would not have accomplished all that we have in this past year; nor would we be able to continue on our path of being an innovative and forward-thinking organization which is leading the way into the future.