

Battle River Alliance  
For  
Economic Development

**COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE REPORT**

**Submitted to**

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**By**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

BRAED's competitive advantages have been identified through research conducted in the course of developing a Regional Agriculture Profile, a Regional Tourism Profile and a Regional Investment Profile. It should be noted that this report identifies areas in which BRAED can compete, on a favourable basis, with its fellow regional alliances. The report does not provide a direct comparison with the other regional alliances since this would require additional research efforts on all the other provincially-supported alliances as well as other economic development alliances such as Mounties to Mountains and the Leduc-Nisku Economic Development Authority.

## AREAS OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

### People

It quickly became apparent, during the course of the research conducted by the Clear Solutions team, that BRAED's most valuable asset and greatest competitive advantage is its people. The region's communities are populated by people who are, in some cases, fourth generation residents. Rooted in the land, these people choose to live in the BRAED region because they are truly a part of it and it of them. They are stable, hard working, and non-migratory. They have realistic expectations and dreams: to maintain a healthy, comfortable life for themselves, their elders and their children. Although each BRAED community would no doubt welcome the arrival of new industry on their doorstep, when they were surveyed regarding wish-list items for their communities, the community administrators expressed need for everyday amenities such as convenience stores, grocery stores, hair salons and barbers, mechanics, electricians and plumbers. These businesses would provide greater comfort for residents and an increased sense of wholeness for the communities, as well as additional assets that could be used to attract new residents and additional businesses.

Another important demographic factor is that 18.8% of BRAED's population is 65 years old or more, compared with 10.4% in the rest of the province. In the City of Camrose it is estimated that approximately 2,000 people work in the health-care and seniors-care industries. This large employment sector will continue to grow and offer advantages throughout the region as the boomers age and require goods and services.

It is interesting to note that although most occupation groups in the BRAED region earn lower wages than the rest of the province, the overall workforce is not shrinking to any degree. Population levels are stable with a 1.06% regional increase in the five years between censuses. This indicates that BRAED's residents would rather remain in the area they call home than become transitory. This speaks volumes about the residents' practicality and sense of community.

This practicality is further demonstrated by the BRAED Board of Directors. The Board has requested that it be given a clear, uncompromising picture of every aspect of the region, including opportunities and challenges, strengths and weaknesses, so that issues can be approached with open minds and comprehensive information. They are willing to try new strategies such as The Edmonton Journal Economic Outlook Project and a reverse trade show to accomplish their goals and avoid stagnation.

## **Information**

BRAED has indicated a willingness to become an information clearinghouse for its membership and others in the region. To this end, the alliance has commissioned a number of reports that have provided solid, relevant information regarding important regional issues (i.e. the *Water Resources* report, the *Shared Services* report).

In developing the Regional Investment Profile, the BRAED manager, chairperson and contractor devised an information-gathering strategy that would provide the most factual statistical picture ever developed for a regional alliance: the Profile's data was gathered on a community-by-community basis, rather than by geographic area. The conclusions drawn from this data are not tempered by inferences about census divisions or unrelated communities; they are targeted and specific to BRAED and only to BRAED.

BRAED has also been provided with several value-added projects in addition to the Regional Investment Profile. An Regional Agriculture Profile, a Regional Tourism Profile, an Economic Activity and Assets survey, and the Alberta-Central Tourism Destination Region Marketing Report have all been submitted to the BRAED manager, and a list of recommendations provides suggestions, based on current research, for future projects that will build and enhance BRAED's existing information capacity. By continuing the data-gathering process, BRAED will increase both its own value to its members, and its competitive advantage in the marketplace.

## **Business**

The expansion of CFB Wainwright offers opportunities for regional businesses to become involved in supplying goods and services. BRAED has proposed to host a reverse trade show which will give its business the chance to compete with the Federal government's traditional suppliers.

It's been said that as Fort McMurray goes, so goes the Town of Hardisty. With the boom in oil and gas extraction in the North, and throughout Alberta, the tank farm expansion at Hardisty offers many opportunities for BRAED's businesses. For example, 300+ tank trucks pass through Hardisty each day yet the community has no truck stop or tire shop and only one small hotel.

Comparatively low wages throughout the region (in most industry and occupation groups) offer an advantage for businesses although this presents the common dilemma of the double-edged sword. If area businesses can increase their revenues, they will find wage increases a realistic way to reward and retain their employees.

Small communities that are distant from regional centres offer convenience to their residents and businesses. Wainwright, in particular, has the opportunity to become a plug for regional trade leakage to the east in much the same way that Camrose has stemmed the flow to Wetaskiwin and Edmonton.

### **Transportation Infrastructure**

BRAED's rubber-tire and railway infrastructure is plentiful and in good condition, for the most part. Several of the secondary highways in the area have been upgraded from gravel to pavement in recent years. Although railway cutbacks have led to the removal of some spur track, the area is still serviced regularly by both Canadian National and Canadian Pacific. In some cases, producer groups have increased rail traffic in the region (see "Agriculture").

### **Agriculture**

Setting aside the current beef crisis, BRAED's primary competitive advantage in terms of agriculture is the sparse population, particularly in the eastern portion of the region, which provides opportunities when combined with site specific water supplies and the political will to nurture confined livestock development opportunities (cattle feedlots and pigs).

Secondly, the innovation of the people of the region is evidenced by projects such as producer cars (train cars which are commissioned and loaded with specific produce for market), a digester for electrical power generation, and pea crop diversification and processing.

Lastly, the region is populated with a large agriculture-ready workforce that can use its knowledge and skills to endure through the current crises and emerge with new and improved operational strategies that will revolutionize the way agriculture is practiced.

### **Tourism**

Travel Alberta has observed that rural tourism is the best area for future growth in the province. The transportation corridors within the BRAED region are already well established as travel routes for seasonal visitors. This is an advantage in that the region is already familiar to many people. BRAED now has the opportunity to develop strategies to encourage stopping places along the way so that its member communities can trap some of these potential tourism dollars. The 2005 Centennial celebrations offer a stepping-stone that could be used to influence the behavior patterns of the traveling public for the long term.

To aid the growth of rural tourism, both Travel Alberta (Edmonton) and Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) offer assistance. The

AAFRD initiative for Growing Rural Tourism is timely for the BRAED region as traditional agriculture practices continue to face a challenging future.

With its strong agricultural base, BRAED has the advantage of having built-in rural tourism infrastructure. In the 2002 Criterion Research study conducted for Travel Alberta, 70% of the survey's respondents stated they would like to visit Alberta's farm and ranch heritage, while 63% indicated interest in horses and riding, and 67% stated interest in gardening. Farmers' markets, country fairs, rodeos, country suppers, horse-related activities were all experiences that respondents indicated they were somewhat or very likely to take part in. Visiting provincial parks, birding, hiking, sightseeing, bike riding and museums were also high on the list and are compatible with agri-tourism experiences.

There are also pockets of innovation and collaboration within the region at this point. The Provost area is poised to take advantage of the Bodo archeological find, for example. Galahad has taken a vacant school and, with minor improvements, made it a facility that groups can rent to use for tournaments, family reunions, and other events. Alliance is growing a successful artist's colony and promoting it through its bi-annual "Day at the Gallery" event. In addition, the numerous trail groups (Trail of the Buffalo, Waskahegan, etc.) and the Kalyna Country Ecomuseum initiative are active in marketing and attracting visitors. Efforts like these demonstrate again that BRAED's people, and their positive, hard-working attitudes, are a considerable advantage.

Apart from the Alberta Central Tourism Destination Region, which encompasses a very large geographic area, there is no current, consistent, coordinated effort to define, develop and package tourism services, products and attractions in the BRAED region. This represents a unique, "ground-floor" opportunity for BRAED to become the lead tourism development, marketing and coordinating body for its members.