

FALL 2022

PORTFOLIO



Alberta Prairie Railway

The little (economic) engine that could

Although many of the rail lines that once connected small Canadian communities are now distant memories, one small Alberta town's heart still beats with a familiar *ka-thunk ka-thunk ka-thunk* of a short line railway. For Bob Willis, general manager of Alberta Prairie Railway, a lightweight rail line based in Stettler, the roots of the railway run deep—both in his hometown and on a more personal level.

“My granddad was superintendent for CN in Southern Alberta, so I’ve got railways in my family,” he says, pausing before describing what a career on the rails would have looked like in his grandfather’s day. “When a train would arrive at a station, the crew would get out and help the station people unload the train. While the train was en route though, the crew had time to sit on the caboose and talk

for hours, so they became really good at telling tales. Railway workers are expert storytellers.”

For nearly 30 years now, Willis has worked with Alberta Prairie Railway, managing the company’s passenger and freight operations. On the passenger side, the railway operates a historical train excursion, complete with food and entertainment, attracting guests from all around the world. He’s been on board since the early 1990s, when two local businessmen saw a light rail train operation as a chance to foster economic growth for the entire community.

“Stettler is a beautiful place. There are rolling hills, nice people, but no major tourist attraction here. So Don Gillespie—he’s a grocer here in town—and Jean MacDonald from MacDonald’s Resort in Buffalo Lake put together a group of likeminded folks who were in it for the long term,” he says. ►

Money on a mission.

Put simply, the Social Enterprise Fund (SEF) is a loan fund. We invest in social entrepreneurs who want to make things better in the community and in the world. We provide patient capital at reasonable rates to help put dreams to work.

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“Unfortunately, this poor group of mostly businesspeople didn’t really know a lot about operating trains. They knew what they wanted to do, but they had no idea how to do it, so they made some pretty serious mistakes in their first couple of years of operations.”

As the years passed, however, the group got back on track and developed a strategy that focused on two lines of operations: the first, a historical train experience to drive tourism to the community, and the second, a more behind-the-scenes operation focused on freight and shipping.

“We realized these kinds of tourism trains that were successful were an adjunct to an active railway. The railway keeps the track maintained, and the passenger or tourism side of things is just the icing on the cake,” he says.

Over the years, the freight side of the business grew, serving as a shipping line for goods like fertilizer and grains. It remained the profitable side of the business, and kept the railway itself in working order for the tourism operation to continue. The tourism side of things also grew, as the company developed a well-rounded experience for riders, complete with musical entertainment and dining. Things went so well, in fact, that the railway would routinely sell out throughout the summer months — creating increased

traffic that would not go unnoticed by other local businesses.

“You can’t bring 1,600 people into a town of 5,000 over the course of one weekend and not have an impact on the businesses there,” says Willis. “Our function is to drive traffic to the community, employ people, and generate payroll and economic benefits for the community. With both freight and passenger trains operating, we’re doing that.”

Operations on both sides of the tracks came to a screeching halt in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began to take shape. Tours were put on hold for the summer, which opened an unexpected and profitable opportunity for the would-be freighters.

“When COVID came, we couldn’t use the passenger track, so we had storage space for empty tank cars,” says Willis, explaining the shift nearly doubled the line’s storage capacity, from around 400 to 800. “We don’t have to keep that track cleared because we’re not using the passenger train, so we had space to hold cars that weren’t being used, as the price of oil also fell in Alberta. And now, every time we move those cars in, or out, or store them, we get paid.”

Increased profits from storage weren’t the only opportunity the pandemic afforded the railway. Shuttered passenger operations also presented a chance for the company to refurbish steam engines and repair aging rail line — improvements that would have been challenging to complete in a year with a more conventional schedule.

In the summer of 2021, as the province reopened with reduced pandemic restrictions, operations gradually returned to normal for both sides of the railway.

As with so many other elements of the business, Willis notes slow and steady wins the race.

“We’re not interested in rushing through this to start risking anyone’s health, so as we open we’ll be taking it very slowly,” he says. “We’ve got to protect our community, our passengers, our staff—that’s our whole function right now. We’ll get back to more “normal” one day, we just want to make sure we’re safe in doing so.”



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Sustainitech

The Future of Farming

For nearly a decade, Joey Hundert has been perfecting the art of growth—in business, technology, even literal agricultural. As the Founder and CEO of Sustainitech, a purpose-driven AgTech company, Hundert has been on a long journey to develop containerized aqua- and aero-ponic farms as an answer to climate instability and food insecurity.

“Looking at a climate unstable future, my concern has been how do we continue to provide quality of life to billions of people in a way that doesn’t deplete resources as quickly as we have in the last few hundred years?” he says. “Indoor farming to me has the potential to answer these challenges in a few ways, including moving agricultural production closer to where it’s consumed.”

For Hundert, it all started in a conversation with the former Mayor of Fort McMurray, a mid-sized municipality located more than 400 km north of Edmonton. She mentioned the challenges of living in a Northern community with only one road in and one road out. The community was considered a food desert,

limited by climate and location in the crops that could be grown there.

“She just asked me, ‘What happens if the highway shuts down? How many days do you think our grocery stores should be empty? What do we do about that?’” he says. “That really made me think about how you could create climate-impervious agriculture and build agricultural production that could withstand minus 35 in the winter, and then plus 35 in the summer.”

Curiosity sparked, Hundert set to work developing Sustainitech’s first containerized farms. Using a vertical farming system custom-built in insulated shipping containers, Sustainitech developed an aquaponic garden system, which uses plants, fish and naturally occurring bacteria to grow vegetables—all without soil. After nine months in production, the containers were delivered to Fort McMurray. To Hundert’s delight, they worked.

“It was quite the thing to walk up to the system and open these giant doors from -35 degrees outside in Fort McMurray. The steam would just come billowing out of them from the temperature change, and you would close the doors behind you and suddenly just be in this super well-lit tropical environment,” he says. “Once I saw

that was possible, that’s when we solidified Sustainitech as its own corporate entity.” SEF provided a small startup loan.

Soon after this first success in Fort McMurray, another curious opportunity presented itself, this time in conversation with a Manhattan-based Orthodox Jewish produce company. The company was interested in insect-free produce and hoped Hundert could help. Kosher rules expressly forbid the consumption of insects, which made the growth and harvesting of leafy greens, which are prone to insect infestation, nearly impossible.

“They’d heard about what I was up to and they just asked, ‘well, can you grow produce without any bugs on it?’” he says. “And I said, ‘Well, we’ve got a better shot than anybody.’”

Once again, Hundert set to work, redesigning the indoor farming systems Sustainitech had previously developed from the ground up. Rather than using aquaponics, the kosher system used aeroponics, a soil-free variant in which the roots of plants are sprayed with a fine mist of water and nutrients. The container was under pressure, so that if the doors were opened, an air current would rush out, making it nearly impossible for insects to enter. ▶

When the first crops were ready, a team of Orthodox rabbis flew to Edmonton to inspect the produce. As they started a process of carefully harvesting and examining the leaves, Hundert anxiously awaited the results.

“They had these magnifying glasses, almost like jewelers, and they looked over every leaf over a light box to see if there were any bug parts on the leaves. If they had found even one, the whole container would have been not kosher,” he says “They did this for hours, and I’ll never forget the moment where the lead of the group put down his magnifying glass and said, ‘No bugs.’ And then quick, they set up a blessing and a prayer and started almost melting down to finally have fresh spinach again after years without it.”

Pleased with the success of this first kosher crop, Sustainitech set to work exporting vegetables to shelves across New York City. Over the next few years, Sustainitech continued to perfect and scale up its containerized farms and technology, partnering with other grocers and meal delivery services along the way. The crops they were producing not only offered consumers a choice with a lower carbon footprint, but one that tended to last longer as well. One of the most important features of indoor farming, Hundert notes, is that the spoilage rate of the produce tends to be much lower than conventional crops. While traditional produce might have a spoilage rate of 35% or more, indoor farms offer a rate closer to 0%.

“In addition to food that has to be shipped from across the country or around the world, there is a whole greenhouse gas liability on the spoilage side that is poorly understood. But the benefit of growing indoors is the plants are in plant heaven, their whole life. There’s no dust or bugs, and the plants don’t go through as many supply chain hands where there are different temperatures to cause condensation in the package, which is what begins the produce breaking down,” he says.

Yet even as Sustainitech grew with operations and partnerships across Canada, Hundert’s curiosity was still active. He wanted to do more. This time, however, he wanted to focus outside of the

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agriculture industry to find an efficient use for the heat and energy given off by industrial sources.

“For instance, most power plants are only 30-35% efficient and the rest goes up as heat. So I’ve been very curious how to get those things to pair. It turns out it’s really, really hard,” he laughs.

Although it was a challenge, in time, Hundert and the team at Sustainitech solved it, finding a way to adapt their technology to partner with large industrial energy producers like power plants, natural gas plants, or petrochemical companies. This type of partnership not only provides an opportunity to capitalize on the waste energy from these large industrial producers, but to offset carbon emissions from them as well.

“We figured out how to gather waste energy, put that energy to work in indoor farming and offset our own energy utilization by a lot. And that creates thousands of metric tons of offsets for the energy partner too,” he says. “In essence, we’re able to harness the waste energy off of say, a natural gas plant, to really drive everything that’s going on in our indoor farms.”

In 2020, Sustainitech took its first steps to making this goal of harnessing waste energy a reality. It partnered with ARC Resources, a Calgary-based natural resource firm, in developing Sustainitech Alberta Complex One (SACO One), a 120,000 square-foot indoor farm. The farm will make use of waste energy from ARC Resources’ Gold Creek Natural Gas Plant to produce crops for Canadian consumers.

In addition to having a positive ecological impact, the project will have a lasting social impact as well. By partnering with the First Nations in and around Gold Creek, Sustainitech hopes to provide long-term jobs. SEF has invested in this new project.

With construction at Complex One now underway, Hundert shows no signs of slowing down. He has already begun planning the next four Sustainitech facilities to be built within the next five years, with Complex Two expected to be seven times larger than the first.

“With the climate getting weirder and weirder, the reality is some crops are going to need to be brought fully indoors,” he says. “We’re just trying to be ready for that.”



Camp Warwa

Helping generations of Albertans connect with the outdoor world

For more than 40 years, Camp Warwa has offered children and families from across Alberta the chance to experience and enjoy outdoor pursuits. Located an hour northwest of Edmonton on the shores of Lac St. Anne, the camp is a year-round destination, hosting more than 8,000 children annually for seasonal camping trips, outdoor education programs, and leadership programs.

As the camp prepared for its milestone 40-year anniversary in 2020, things were looking good. Over the years, the camp had grown thanks to the support of volunteers and staff who helped to build and

maintain outdoor pavilions, gathering halls, and accommodations for staff and campers. Thanks to the generous donations of modular buildings from oil and gas camps, Camp Warwa had been able to keep most of its facilities up to date as the years passed, but there was one critical update left to be done: the dining hall.

“The dining hall was the last domino left to fall for us,” says Gerrit Leewes, executive director. “It had a capacity of 120, but we were holding camps for 160 kids. It wasn’t sustainable, especially as our programs kept growing.”

Finally, in the year of the camp’s 40th anniversary, plans for a new dining facility were coming together. In the spring of 2020, the camp secured financing to allow for the project to go ahead. The groundbreaking was set to move forward that fall, after the peak summer camp season had passed. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, things changed. ►

“The day the camp was required to close for COVID, we finalized a grant we’d been waiting on from the Alberta government,” says Leewes. “At that point we were really wrestling with what to do. Should we move forward with a 1.75 million-dollar project when we’re potentially about to lose all of our revenue for the year? The feeling in the industry was that we were standing on a cliff and the cliff just went out from under us. We were falling and we had no control over it, but we did have the choice to try to jump and take control of where we were landing.”

Rather than hold back in the face of uncertainty, Gerrit and team chose to jump, leaning into the planned redevelopment. For all the uncertainty they faced, they found opportunity, including financial support from SEF. They were able to negotiate a better rate with their builder, who, at the time, was also facing the uncertain economic realities of life in the pandemic. With the camp closed for the summer, the project moved ahead at full speed. By the time spring 2021 rolled around, the new 7,000-square-foot dining hall stood proud on the campground, with space for 210 people inside and room for an additional 50 on the outdoor patio—space that was particularly important in the face of pandemic-driven capacity changes.

“Obviously we weren’t planning to need the additional space to accommodate reduced capacity,” says Leewes. “But the way this has all played out, it’s definitely helpful for us to have more room.”



In summer 2021, the camp reopened with reduced capacity for its summer programs. Although operations aren’t quite back to where they were pre-COVID, Leewes notes the camp experience might be exactly what children and families need to get back to a sense of normalcy.

“Pre-COVID, the benefits of camp were great for kids, socially, environmentally, and just in terms of personal growth. We operate around a four-pillar structure, helping kids to connect with themselves, their community, the natural world and other generations,” he says. “After this year of being apart and disconnected from one another, camp is going to be more vital than ever.”



Edmonton Ski Club

Recreation in the River Valley

For more than a century, the Edmonton Ski Club has helped Edmontonians hit the slopes in the heart of the city’s scenic river valley. In that time, the club has faced its fair share of uphill journeys — and not just those made easier by a tow rope.

After missing two ski seasons due to the challenges of aging infrastructure, it reopened in December 2019 with renewed energy and community support from both the City of Edmonton and the Government of Alberta. For Adam Luciuk, until recently the club’s general manager, the reopening was a rebirth of sorts; a chance for the aging organization to start anew.

“This was really an opportunity for the club to refocus a bit. It allowed us to work with the greater community to diversify our services and better meet what people want and need,” he said.

The key to the Ski Club’s continued success is collaboration and creativity. The organization’s board of directors used the closure period to rebuild and develop a strategic plan for the coming years. Since reopening, they’re taking an innovative approach to encourage year-round operations and greater financial sustainability. By collaborating with other local organizations and events, such as Flying Canoe Volant, the Edmonton Folk Music Festival and the Cloverdale Community League, the Ski Club is making the river valley a year-round destination.

“We had a chance to look at what other parts of the community were doing and adjust our offerings. Now in the winter, we’re expanding our ski and snowboard programs, we’ve opened a tube park and snow school for all ages and skill levels,” said Luciuk.

“In the summer, we’re operating a bike service and repair shop, along with an outdoor family-friendly patio. We’re in a good position to help people enjoy the river valley, year-round.”

The Ski Club’s central location offers users easy access to recreation in the heart of the city. When the Valley Line Southeast LRT opens, the nearest stop will be a mere 400 metres from the hill, meaning that a day on the slopes — whether in winter or summer — will just be a short train ride away.

The Club’s new energy has earned recent votes of confidence from both the Government of Canada and the City of Edmonton, as both levels of government committed to support a project to build a modern lodge replacing the old facility. So the Ski Club, founded in 1911, will look forward to new skiers — and maybe even another budding Olympian — carving the hills.



Northern Alberta Pioneers and Descendants Association/Pioneers' Cabin

Connecting Edmontonians to the city's pioneer roots

It's an Edmonton landmark: a quaint, picturesque log cabin with breathtaking views of the city's verdant river valley. Built in 1956, the Pioneers' Cabin has long been a highly sought-after venue for weddings, meetings and other events thanks to its distinct character, rustic charm and convenient location. Situated along an arterial road just minutes from the downtown core, the Cabin is a daily sight for commuters. But what many might not realize is that the Cabin is more than simply an event venue—it's also home to one of Edmonton's oldest chartered clubs: the Northern Alberta Pioneers and Descendants Association (NAPDA).

Founded in 1894, NAPDA works to collect and preserve the stories of the hardy pioneers who built northern Alberta. Initially, membership was limited to those who could trace their family lineage in the area to 1905 or earlier, but over time it has expanded to include any Canadian citizens living in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, the Northwest Territories or Yukon.

Today, although the bulk of the association's work comes from operating the Cabin as an event venue, NAPDA remains committed to its original mandate of preserving the area's history. Venue rentals serve to finance the organization's programs and initiatives, but also offer modern-day users a glimpse into Edmonton's heritage.

Part of the building's charm lies in its traditional appearance, with its field stone foundation, planed poplar floors and solid spruce log walls. But after years of use as an event space, parts of the venue began to look dated. By the time Dorinda Emery stepped into the role of NAPDA's executive director seven years ago, the Cabin was in dire need of renovations. Although the

building was designed to have a certain antique appeal, its aging facilities and fixtures were rapidly becoming less charming to prospective renters.

"We knew we needed to update the washrooms—badly—but also wanted to move our administrative offices to the basement of the building," says Emery, explaining that the basement had once been home to a live-in caretaker for the property, who had resided there with his family for more than 40 years. Now that it was vacant, NAPDA was ready to start renovations.

Before beginning renovations, however, NAPDA needed approval from the City of Edmonton. The Cabin is a designated municipal historic resource, located on park land, so any construction or updates Emery and NAPDA wanted to have done needed to be coordinated and approved by the City in advance. And what was intended to be a small project quickly grew in scope.

"We were preparing to do some small renovations, but ultimately there was too much about the building that wasn't up to current standards and codes," says Emery. "The costs kept going up as well, which was challenging at first for an organization of our size. We were very fortunate to have been able to work with SEF to make the work a reality."

Today, the Cabin's transformation is nearing its completion. From the

outside, the building has maintained its old-fashioned charm. But the interior now features modern amenities, including a chic bridal dressing room, and modern bathrooms akin to those found in a luxury hotel.

"Over the past seven years, we've ended up changing the whole building," says Emery. "If you saw what it was like when I first walked into it, you wouldn't believe it."

The hard work is paying off. The Cabin's booking calendar is full, hosting around 100 weddings a year as well as dozens of corporate meetings, community events and celebrations. The venue keeps Emery busy, but its popularity enables NAPDA to continue to focus on connecting Albertans with the province's pioneer heritage.

"We can't lose sight of the fact that the reason the association exists, and the reason we operate the Cabin and do these rentals, is to maintain historical ties," she says. "It's a fine balance, but we're optimistic about what we can do."

Once renovations are complete, Emery hopes the venue's popularity will have an impact on NAPDA's membership numbers. "As we have business people and community groups coming in here for events, we certainly want to see how we can get them involved. There's a lot of room for growth in that regard," she says. □

From the outside, the building has maintained its old-fashioned charm. But the interior now features modern amenities, including a chic bridal dressing room, and modern bathrooms akin to those found in a luxury hotel.



Pioneer Trail North Foundation

Bringing the classroom outdoors

You might call them pioneers, or at the very least, trailblazers, who have dedicated their lives to preserving nature. For over 35 years, Richard and Vera DeSmet have been stewards for areas in Alberta's Horse Hills region, located northeast of Edmonton. Throughout that time, they've worked with other organizations, like the Nature Conservancy of Canada, to protect the land they call home.

Although their long and storied careers

saw them take on a variety of roles doing everything from working as a farrier, to working in the energy industry, to more traditional office work, it's perhaps their most recent endeavour that is the most meaningful. As caretakers for the Pioneer Trail North Foundation, the couple now help young people connect with the outdoors.

"We've been part of the entrepreneurial world. We've been involved in the private sector and the not-for-profit realm, to varying degrees of success in each," laughs Richard. "Eventually we came to realize that we did some of our best work with non-profits. And so the Pioneer Trail, and the work we do here, well, that's where we're supposed to be."

The Horse Hills region holds a special place in Richard's heart, as he grew up not far from the land that is today home to the Pioneer Trail North Foundation. ►



The rolling hills, serene wetlands and open fields were his backyard, rife with adventure and discoveries. By his estimation, the land they now oversee was once an important link to the Athabasca Landing Trail, a traditional trading route connecting Edmonton with northern communities.

The couple purchased the land in 2000, but only began developing it for more public use in the last few years. But the trail as it is today was almost the dream that never was, thanks to financing difficulties encountered when the mortgage on the property came up for renewal.

“The concept of what we wanted to do here was in the works for many, many years, but we almost didn’t end up making it happen. We were almost having to walk away from it, but thankfully that’s when we learned of SEF,” says Richard.

Today, the DeSmets’ Pioneer Trail North is an 80-acre natural paradise with 22 km of trails to explore. Hanging at the entrance to the property is a sign reading, *Iskwahtem*, a Cree word meaning door or portal. It’s a sign of what the DeSmets hope those who visit will experience: the doorway to nature.

“We’ve seen the effect nature has had on us two, on our children and now on our grandchildren,” says Vera. “We know the impact it has on raising healthy kids, particularly on kids who might have challenges or might be acting out in school. When they come out to nature, we often see that they transform—suddenly they’re leaders, they’re thriving.”

Each year, the DeSmets welcome classes from kindergarten through to grade 12, who enjoy activities ranging from educational nature walks to responsible outdoor recreation and survival skills.

But the question of how to help more students and families understand and appreciate nature was not an easy one to answer. Looking for opportunities, Richard cold-called the nearby Sturgeon Public School Division. He was connected with Mark Lockwood, the then-director of curriculum for the division. The two immediately hit it off, and before long Lockwood was visiting the property

with an outdoor pursuits teacher. At the time, the property was still quite untamed, with few trails or facilities in place. But that visit was the start of a relationship that would bring hundreds of students to the property in the coming years.

“All it took was having one teacher buy in to what we were doing. We just needed someone like Mark to come out and see this place, and see what we envisioned for it,” says Richard.

It’s thanks to that first visit that the Trail is now alive with the sounds of running, laughing, excited schoolchildren. Each year, the DeSmets welcome classes from kindergarten through to grade 12, who enjoy activities ranging from educational

nature walks to responsible outdoor recreation and survival skills. They’re particularly busy in September and June, but welcome groups for full-day and overnight visits throughout the year.

“To think that we almost folded everything up and walked away from doing this...” Richard shakes his head. “I can’t believe we almost had to do that. And I’m so glad we didn’t.”



Evergreen Theatre and Community SPACES

Cultivating community through SPACES

Just inside the front entrance of the Evergreen Community SPACES lies a cozy, wooded world. Silhouettes of trees and wildlife line the walls, while intricate wood carvings of friendly, waving bears sit down every hallway. As the sounds of muffled music and children laughing waft down the hall, it’s clear that this is a space for community use — a place where arts and culture of all kinds are practised, studied and celebrated.

For Sean Fraser, executive director of Evergreen Theatre, the path to cultivating this forest of community has been a long and tumultuous one. After more than 20 years in the private corporate sector, he joined Evergreen as its president in 2004, before taking on the role of executive director in 2007. While Evergreen Theatre was well-established in the educational field (its roots date back to 1991), Fraser quickly realized the company’s need to expand and diversify its service offering.

“We had to make some changes to stay relevant,” says Fraser. “While Evergreen had a really strong following in the school community, in the arts community we did not. We had focused so much on schools over the years, so outside of that scope there was very little awareness of us.”

Although this challenge seemed daunting enough at first, there would soon be larger bumps in the road. In 2008, declining grant resources from the Province of Alberta meant that the theatre saw decreased funding from all sides. Suddenly, the need to diversify was eclipsed by the need to make ends meet.

“We were in a very tough position. We had money coming in other programming, grants we were waiting for — we just had no cash. I didn’t want to go to the landlords and say we couldn’t pay... I wanted to keep that card in my back pocket just in case,” he says. “So I needed another option.”

When the Alberta Foundation for the Arts mentioned looking to alternative sources, such as SEF, to fill the short-term gap, Fraser immediately picked up the phone. The call made all the difference.

Within the hour, Fraser was beginning to compile the information needed by SEF to consider offering financial support.

“SEF literally saved us. If I hadn’t caught SEF staff that day, Evergreen would’ve been done,” says Fraser.

As the previously confirmed grant funding began coming in, Evergreen made short work of paying the loan back. Within six months, they joined SEF’s “Paid in Full” club.

But the greater problems of succession planning and organizational diversification remained. Luckily, Fraser had some ideas.



Evergreen had been operating out of the basement of the Currie Barracks, which at the time was home to a number of other arts organizations. When an opportunity came up to begin managing the space as a studio that could be rented out to other dance or artistic groups, Fraser jumped at it. He had previous experience working as a property manager outside of his work with Evergreen and thought this would be an ideal way to sustain funding for Evergreen’s programming.

“I thought, ‘this could help us start building relationships with community and other arts organizations in a new way,’” he says. “We decided we would go into the business of space as another division of our operations.”

The company now had two sides: the programming side, which offered educational opportunities for schools and young audiences, and the facilities side, which served the arts and greater city communities. Separate in scope, but similar in offering, the long-term vision for the divisions was to support one another.

“The idea was if we could use the resources of Evergreen’s long history to help SPACES and our facilities side get up and on its feet, eventually the SPACES side will be able to back-support our programming for years to come,” he says.

So Evergreen Community Studios was born. From 2007-15, the Studios served Calgarians out of the Currie Barracks. But as the end of their lease in that property approached, Evergreen began looking for greener pastures. They wanted to continue with property management, but felt it was time to move from leasing a space to owning a building. They enlisted the help of a realtor to find the perfect property — a space they could finally call their own. ►

“We wanted to stay true to Evergreen’s environmental connection — we didn’t want to build new. We wanted to repurpose,” he says.

Weeks later, the realtor called with a promising property. A gym in the Mayland Heights neighbourhood was about to go up for sale as the owner entered retirement. A short drive later, Fraser was convinced. The space required some work — the interior was in need of updates, while shower and sauna rooms would likely need to be gutted — but it had character, and Fraser saw the potential.

“We looked around and said ‘Oh my God, this is exactly what could work for us. It’s exactly what we want,’” he says.

But a property like this wouldn’t last long on the market. So, just as he’d done in 2008, he picked up the phone. “I called Jane immediately and said, ‘the good news is, we found a place. The bad news is, we have to do it now.’”

He compiled information on the project, the property and the impact this new centre could have on the community and submitted it to SEF. When he heard the financing had been improved, he was thrilled not only for Evergreen Theatre, but for the arts and cultural scene as a whole.

“What’s great about SEF being involved, is that this project allows us to build equity in the long term. But then we also serve other non-profits, so the value for every dollar from Social Enterprise touches all of these people, and then



circles back around because it goes back into their programming and into the community,” he says. “It brings so much value to so many people.”

In November 2015, the 24,000-square-foot Evergreen Community SPACES officially opened, offering short- and long-term rentals. There’s space for virtually everyone at the new facility, from cultural groups to churches, dance classes and massage therapists. One of the studios even features a green screen wall, making it in high demand for film and TV auditions.

“The whole idea around this facility was to be as open-minded and wide as we possibly could with the net so we could be



as much as we could be to as many people as possible,” he says.

It seems this philosophy is working. In the years since opening, Evergreen Community SPACES sees well over 100,000 clients every year. With that level of activity, Evergreen and Evergreen Community SPACES will likely be around for the long run. □

Partnerships make impact investing possible

Social enterprises, like any small businesses, require access to capital to grow. Given their sometimes unusual structure or business sphere, social enterprises often face challenges finding the financing they need through traditional sources. SEF acts as a patient lender, working with these enterprises to meet their financing needs, whether through a big or small loan. Loans are repayable with interest — and in this way, the funds can go on to assist other social entrepreneurs.

SEF was established in 2008 through a unique collaboration between the Edmonton Community Foundation and the City of Edmonton. Other contributors to the fund have included the United Way, the Alberta Real Estate Foundation and several private contributors. So far, the fund has invested over \$85 million in more than 90 projects. More than \$20 million has been paid back, ready to do more good in the community as new loans.

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