



Bridging Community and Industry

# Rural Innovation Hubs



**JULY-AUGUST 2025 BRIEFING**

**PREPARED BY**

SASKATCHEWAN ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE



SASKATCHEWAN INVESTMENT  
READINESS INITIATIVE

Saskatchewan Economic Development Alliance (SEDA) has been working since 1984 to support communities by enabling them to become investment-ready and by promoting economic, environmental, and social well-being through collaborative development.

Focused on strategic solutions and outcomes, SEDA engages stakeholders to coordinate and innovate. As a systems convener, we drive economic development in Saskatchewan by creating synergies between communities and sectors, promoting transformative change and innovation.



The Saskatchewan Investment Readiness Initiative (SIRI) engages industry and communities to determine investment and growth opportunities, build more capacity through investment readiness initiatives, and identify industrial and commercial sites for business development in Saskatchewan.

Working within designated geographic areas, SEDA assesses economic development and investment attraction opportunities. Financial support for SIRI is provided by PrairiesCan and the Province of Saskatchewan.



With respect and gratitude, we serve Treaty 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10 territories, the ancestral lands of the Cree, Saulteaux, Dene, Dakota, Lakota and Nakoda peoples, and the traditional homeland of the Métis.

# Catalyzing Rural Development.

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**WHEN YOU LOOK AT WHERE THE BIGGEST DISRUPTIONS ARE HAPPENING—ENERGY, FOOD, TRANSPORTATION—RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE RIGHT AT THE CENTRE OF IT...**

Rural communities sit at the heart of Canada's most significant economic shifts in energy, agriculture, and transportation. These regions produce virtually all the energy we use and grow the food we eat, making rural workers essential drivers of economic change. Despite this central role, these communities often lack adequate access to training programs, funding, and institutional resources needed to lead transformation efforts.

Rural innovation addresses this disconnect by combining the practical, location-specific knowledge of farmers and local managers with advanced technology and hands-on learning programs. This partnership creates solutions that benefit both local communities and the broader Canadian economy. By tackling immediate regional challenges, rural innovation simultaneously helps solve national productivity issues, creating targeted solutions that strengthen Canada's competitive position while meeting the specific needs of rural areas.



This approach recognizes that effective innovation emerges when deep local understanding meets modern tools and opportunities. Rather than imposing external solutions, it builds on existing rural expertise to develop approaches that work for specific places while contributing to larger economic goals.

And there's a deeper layer. According to Stats Canada, 60% of rural youth leave to find opportunities in tech. Rural innovation hubs can flip that script. They give young people a reason to stay—or return—by connecting them to tech education, jobs, and real chances to make a difference in their own communities. That helps stabilize rural populations and fills major labour gaps in the industries that matter most.



# Opportunities for Next Generation Growth

Rural innovation hubs are a potentially transformative approach to economic development, leveraging local assets and building community capacity to create sustainable economic growth. These hubs can serve as service centres with expertise in one or more areas to benefit the regional ecosystem.

SEDA has long advocated for the creation of rural and remote hubs to strengthen economic and administrative capacity for trading area communities, and ensure their long term stability. Hubs can address the unique challenges facing rural economies while building an investment attraction value proposition based on lower costs of doing business, shared resources and enhancing quality of life.

**By working to bridge issues and silos and analyze at a systems level, rural innovation hubs can intentionally address gaps in the ecosystem.**

## **CLIMATE CHANGE**

Rural communities are on the frontlines of a changing climate—facing more droughts, floods, fires, and unpredictable growing seasons. That directly affects food security, water access, and the long-term viability of rural life. Rural innovation hubs help by equipping communities with critical thinking tools, evidence-based problem solving, and a language that resonates locally. More importantly, they involve the people most affected—the farmers, land stewards, and local leaders—in designing the solutions.

## **ENERGY TRANSITION**

Rural communities are by nature, essential players in the energy transition. The reality is, almost every electron or molecule of energy we use comes from a rural place. But rural voices are rarely at the decision-making table. Innovation hubs have an opportunity to shift that dynamic. They bridge land-based expertise with new technologies—allowing rural Canada to lead, not follow, in energy innovation.

## **THE PRODUCTIVITY CRISIS**

Productivity is identified as one of Canada's biggest economic risks. By closing the digital divide, we increase rural capacity, upskill the workforce, and create better pathways for education and employment. More productivity will be generated from empowering rural workers and communities with the access to the tools, education, or support needed to lead this much needed shift.

# A Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy.

Rural innovation hubs focus on all the critical ingredients in a region's system that either advance or impede prosperity – the integrated range of social, economic, health and environmental conditions needed for people and places to thrive.

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This comprehensive approach recognizes multiple forms of capital including:

- Social and Cultural Capital: Community relationships, traditions, and cultural assets
- Natural Capital: Environmental resources, land stewardship, and sustainability
- Political Capital: Civic engagement and community governance
- Individual Capital: Personal skills, health, and well-being

By working to bridge issues and silos and analyze at a systems level, hubs can intentionally address gaps in the system. In this context, systems thinking means that even when hubs have business development missions (business start-up or acceleration as an example), they necessarily engage with broader community interests because rural development challenges are inherently interconnected.

A hub focused on business development might also need to address childcare, transportation, housing, healthcare access, or environmental quality to achieve its goals. Notwithstanding their community focus, hubs can often be linked with business-support services to encourage local economic activities and entrepreneurship. Bringing the range of support services together in one place can often be crucial to building the dynamism and energy needed to create new social and economic activities.

By serving broader community interests, rural innovation hubs lay a foundation for sustainability by establishing cross-sector models of service provision and resource sharing.

### **Community Based Innovation and Resilience**

Rural hubs work to increase and improve the assets that are fundamental to current and future prosperity. Saskatchewan communities are at risk of losing hundreds of essential small businesses due to retirement. At the same time, non-profits are experiencing decreases in grant funding and are looking for new sources of income that would allow them to scale their impacts. Municipalities are also facing increasing costs. These challenges present an opportunity for hubs to drive innovation, to develop new community driven models for product and service delivery.

### **Adding Capacity and Stability to the Ecosystem**

A rural innovation hub can expand local and regional capacity by sharing staff and technical expertise. Senior administrators may support training, staff succession, and transitions within their trading area. Sharing skilled professionals—such as economic development staff or community planners—can strengthen communities and encourage adaptability. Hubs should address identified needs and leverage natural strengths by offering relevant services and sector-specific programs, such as tourism, agriculture, and workforce development, to promote sustainability and positive impact.

### **Business Development**

Hubs may deliver business support services such as start-up assistance, networking, and training. With high-speed fibre, rural hubs can foster a strong digital ecosystem for both businesses and communities. Additional offerings may include co-working spaces, administrative support, industry cluster aid, mentoring, planning, and meeting rooms. Services may be provided by public, private, or third sector organisations based on local needs.

### **Environmental and Climate Innovation**

A focus on environmental sustainability, climate adaptation, and natural resource stewardship would leverage rural Saskatchewan's valuable assets, from water and natural resources to its' natural beauty, cultural capital, and deep knowledge of place.

### **Health and Social Services Innovation**

The demand for rural healthcare access will expand through the adoption of telemedicine and remote patient monitoring, reducing barriers due to distance and shortage of medical professionals. Hubs have an opportunity to support healthcare access challenges and develop innovative service delivery models for communities.

### **Cultural and Arts Innovation**

Rural can also serve as innovation spaces for creative industries, arts programming, and cultural preservation initiatives that strengthen community identity and social cohesion.

### **Education and Workforce Development**

As a delivery channel for educational functions, hubs are an ideal conduit for business training, adult education, digital literacy, and community-based learning initiatives.

# Accelerating Rural Business Development.

Rural innovation hubs will benefit the individuals and businesses that use their services. However, more significantly, they can strongly enhance the ability of a local area to realise its latent potential by enabling it to take advantage of emerging opportunities. Here are some examples of business development services that a hub might provide.

## **Physical Infrastructure**

Flexible co-working spaces, meeting rooms, event venues, and often specialized facilities such as maker spaces, laboratories, or production facilities tailored to local industry strengths.

## **Business Support Services**

Mentorship programs, access to business advisors, legal and accounting services, marketing support, and connections to funding sources including angel investors, venture capital, and government programs.

## **Technology and Connectivity**

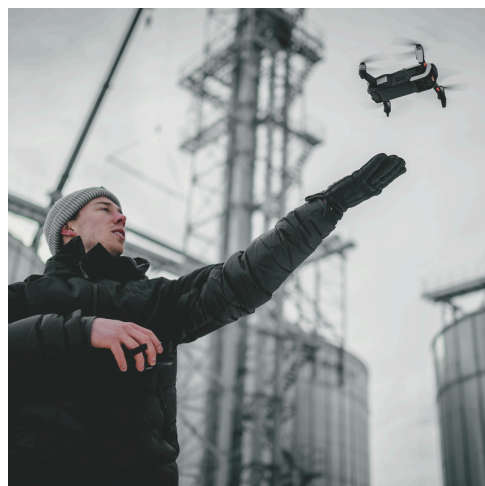
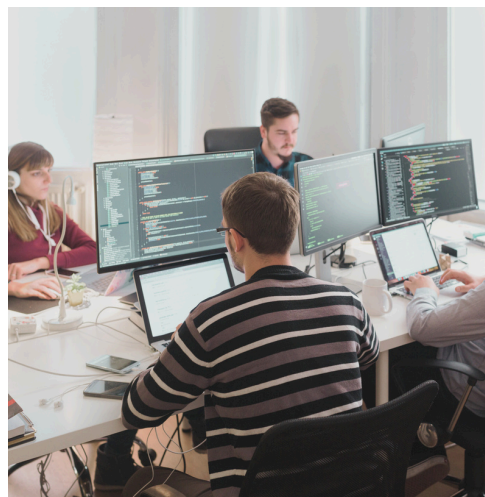
High-speed internet infrastructure, shared technology resources, and digital platforms that connect rural entrepreneurs to broader markets and networks.

## **Community Integration**

Strong ties to local educational institutions, government agencies, established businesses, and community organizations that provide both resources and market opportunities.

## **Sector Focus**

Many hubs develop specializations aligned with regional strengths such as agriculture, technology, renewable energy, outdoor recreation, food processing, or creative industries.



# Technology is the common denominator.

Technology is now a primary driver of rural economic development by enabling improved connectivity, fostering new business models, increasing industry productivity, promoting access to markets and services, and supporting education and health through digital platforms. The impact is both broad and transformative, fundamentally reshaping the rural economic landscape.

Rural innovation hubs can play a pivotal role in closing the rural digital divide and building holistic community capacity by acting as connectors, educators, and engines of local economic growth. Hubs can serve as physical and virtual anchor points for high-speed internet in underserved areas, sometimes leveraging public-private partnerships and innovative solutions like using existing utility infrastructure for broadband delivery. They can provide shared access to digital equipment and resources, directly addressing gaps in both connectivity and devices for community members and businesses.

Providing training and support to target population groups such as seniors (digital literacy training) and skills development (such as robotics) to youth are examples of a comprehensive and future focused approach to rural sustainability. By embedding digital (including AI) literacy programs into the community—sometimes in partnership with educational institutions or local governments—they ensure ongoing skill development and adaptability to new technologies. Encouraging involvement of major employers and building regional workforce pipelines will amplify the intersect of business and community.

Robust digital infrastructure signals market potential and scalability to outside investors. Connected rural communities have demonstrated higher rates of local business growth and are more likely to attract private and public funding





# Keys to Success.

A foundation of leadership and collaboration will set the stage for rural innovation hubs to generate social and economic impacts.



## **Strong Local Leadership**

Effective hubs require committed local champions who can navigate political, economic, and social dynamics while maintaining a long-term vision and commitment. European rural hub experiences emphasize the importance of community engagement through bottom-up, non-hierarchical approaches.



## **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration**

Successful hubs involve partnerships between local government, educational institutions, established businesses, and community organizations, creating broad-based support and resource sharing. Public-private partnerships can assist in driving sustainable rural development.



## **External Connectivity**

While rooted locally, successful hubs maintain strong connections to external networks, markets, and resources, preventing isolation and expanding opportunities.



## **Community-Centred Design and Adaptive Programming**

Understanding specific local needs through direct community engagement is the first step to hub development. Effective hubs continuously evolve their programming and services based on changing local needs and market conditions.



## **Sector-Specific Specialization**

Traditional industries can be transformed through targeted digital innovation support, and working to amplify global competitiveness while maintaining local authenticity. There is potential to develop specialized programs that align with regional economic strengths.



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