

CANADIAN



SPRING/SUMMER 2026

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FAIR NEWS

This Issue:

**CAFE's Top 10
Under 40**

**The Annapolis
Valley Exhibition
Turns 100!**

**Have You Heard?
BINGO is Back!**

**IAFE Economic
Impact Report**

And Much More!



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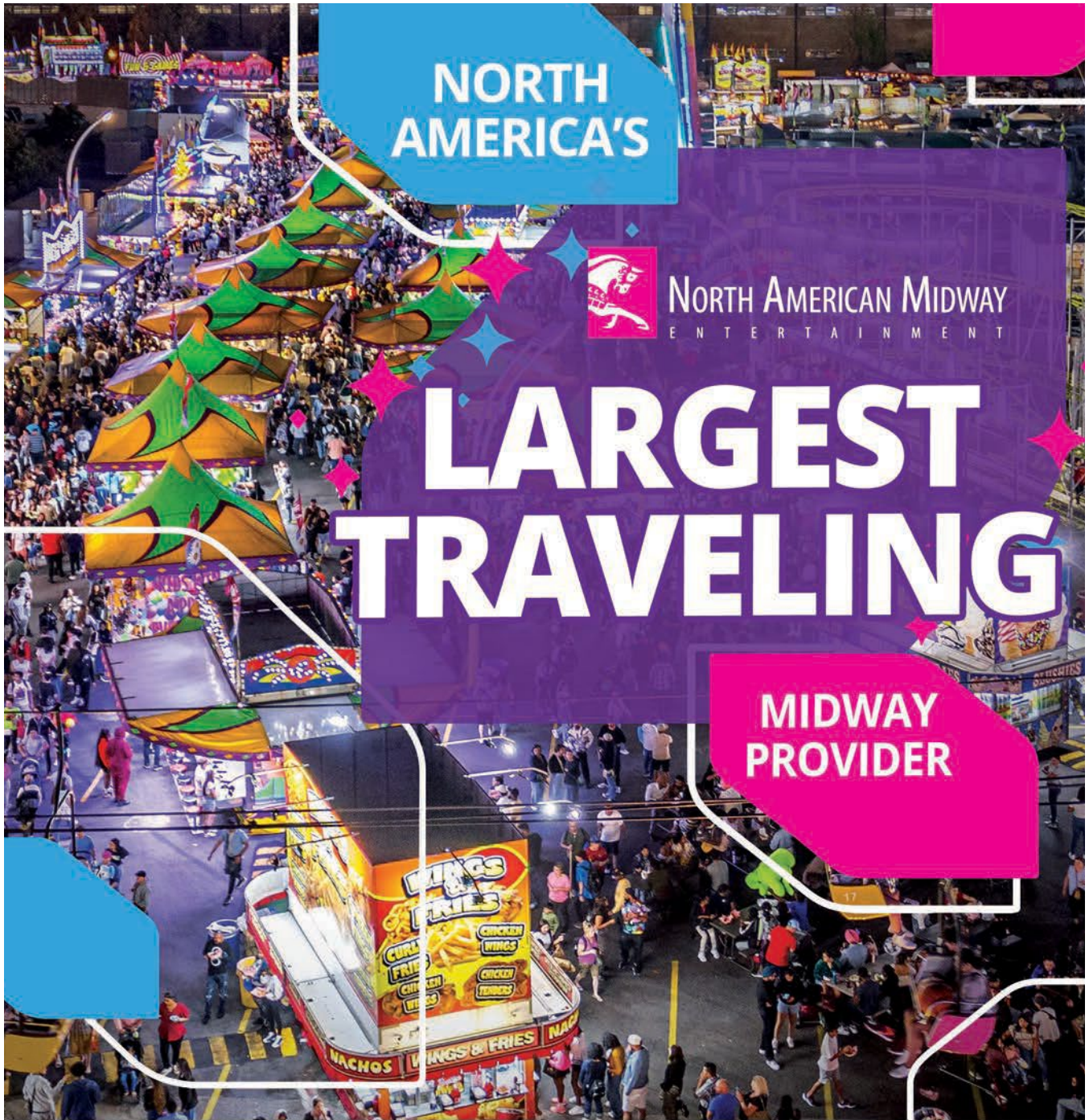
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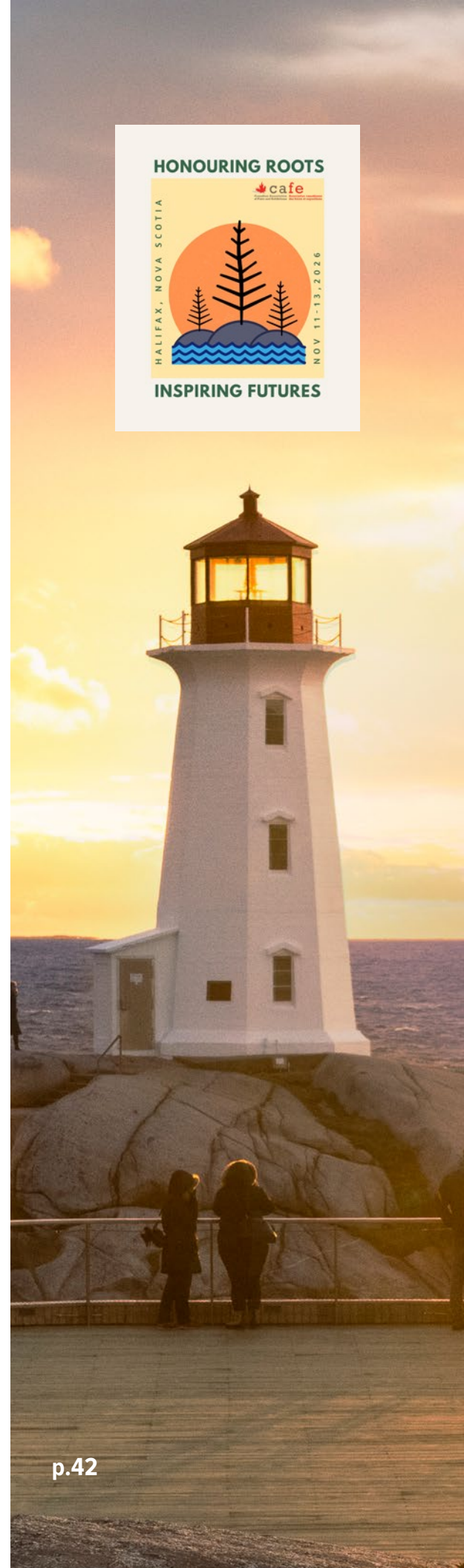
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President's Message

Allison Wright, President
Canadian Association of Fairs & Exhibitions

Community

The ability of fairs and exhibitions to connect communities has been well documented. In the era where virtual and digital have become the prominent communication streams, the ability for face to face interaction has become more valuable than ever.

The measure of Fairs & Exhibitions is most often weighed in attendance, revenue and experience, and it can be argued that experience is the most important of the three. Experiences at fairs are shaped by the collection of contributors from across your community that come together to share, sell, show, display, and celebrate with guests.

Memorable experiences drive attendance, which delivers the potential for more spending at the event. Impactful experiences strengthen participation and reinforce our ability to encourage guests to invite their friends, bring their kids and perhaps others that have not attended a fair before. In essence, we create the opportunity to build new fans. A stronger experience means longer visits, more spending, and guests who return. And, in turn, bring others with them next time!

This interaction and the community impact truly tells the story of fairs. And we each have our own chapter to contribute

The proof shows up in the stories we have shared together over the past year. The Spring/Summer 2025 edition of Canadian Fair News featured the PNE and its focus on community interaction. The Fall issue introduced us to the Western Fair District as the "Heartbeat of the Community," Westerner Days as "a celebration of community," and Whoop-Up Days, where leaning into the community was the backbone of their reinvigoration. The Winter 2026 issue brought us Carp Fair and its powerful connection to history, culture, and the social fabric of its region. Together, these stories demonstrate the impact fairs have in their communities, and the importance of community participation in fairs of every size.

Now it's your turn to tell your story. In this edition, David Grindle, CEO of the IAFE, shares the findings of the recent US economic impact study and I'm pleased to share that CAFE is partnering with IAFE to deliver a Canadian version of that study, which will give us our own contemporary data to take to municipal, provincial, and federal partners. Alongside that, the international Community Impact Survey is now circulating and we encourage you to also participate in that. What we do matters, and together, I believe the results will be astounding!

Wishing you all the best in your operations in the season ahead!

Until next time, Allison Wright

Message de la présidente

Allison Wright, présidente
Canadian Association of Fairs & Exhibitions



Communauté

La capacité des foires et des expositions à rassembler les communautés, a été bien documentée. À une époque où le virtuel et le numérique sont devenus les principaux modes de communication, la possibilité d'interactions en personne est devenue plus précieuse que jamais.

La mesure des foires et des expositions est le plus souvent évaluée en fonction de l'achalandage, des revenus et de l'expérience et l'on peut soutenir que l'expérience est le plus important des trois. Les expériences dans les foires sont formées par l'ensemble des contributeurs de votre communauté qui se réunissent afin de partager, vendre, présenter, exposer et célébrer avec les invités.

Des expériences mémorables stimulent l'achalandage, ce qui augmente le potentiel de dépenses lors de l'événement. Des expériences marquantes renforcent la participation ainsi que notre capacité à encourager les visiteurs à inviter leurs amis, à amener leurs enfants et peut-être d'autres personnes qui n'ont jamais assisté à une foire.

Essentiellement, nous créons une occasion de bâtir de nouveaux adeptes. Une expérience plus riche se traduit par des visites plus longues, des dépenses accrues et des visiteurs qui reviennent et qui, à leur tour, en amènent d'autres avec eux la prochaine fois!

Cette interaction et cet impact sur la communauté racontent véritablement l'histoire des foires et chacun de nous a son propre chapitre à y apporter.

La preuve se trouve dans les histoires que nous avons partagé dans la dernière année. L'édition printemps/été 2025 de *Canadian Fair News* mettait en vedette la Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) et son accent sur l'interaction avec la communauté. Le numéro d'automne nous a présenté le *Western Fair District* comme le « cœur battant de la communauté », les *Westerner Days* comme « une célébration de la communauté », ainsi que les *Whoop-Up Days*, où l'ancrage dans la communauté constituait la pierre angulaire de leur revitalisation. Le numéro d'hiver 2026 nous a fait découvrir la foire de Carp et son lien puissant avec l'histoire, la culture et le tissu social de sa région. Ensemble, ces histoires démontrent l'impact des foires dans leurs communautés, ainsi que l'importance de la participation communautaire dans les foires de toutes tailles.

C'est maintenant à votre tour de raconter votre histoire. Dans cette édition, David Grindle, le PDG de l'Association Internationale des Foires and Expositions (AIFE), présente les résultats d'une étude récente sur les impacts économiques des États-Unis. Je suis également heureuse de vous annoncer que l'Association Canadienne des Foires et Expositions (ACFE) collabore avec l'AIFE afin de réaliser une version canadienne de cette étude, ce qui nous permettra de disposer des données actuelles propres à notre pays que nous pourrions présenter à nos partenaires municipaux, provinciaux et fédéraux. Parallèlement, le sondage sur l'impact communautaire international est actuellement en circulation, et nous vous encourageons également à y participer. Ce que nous faisons est important, et ensemble, je crois que les résultats seront remarquables!

Je vous souhaite le meilleur des succès dans vos activités pour la saison à venir !

A la prochaine, Allison Wright



Executive Director's Message

Linda Sicoli, Executive Director
Canadian Association of Fairs & Exhibitions

As we move through another fair season and look ahead to what promises to be a landmark fall, I find myself reflecting on just how much is happening across the Canadian fairs and exhibitions sector and how much of it speaks to both the resilience and the reinvention that define this community.

This edition of Canadian Fair News arrives at an exciting moment for CAFE. We are deep into planning for our 2026 National Convention, coming to Halifax this November 11–13, 2026 at the Marriott Harbourfront. Halifax is a fitting host - a city that knows something about community, heritage, and the energy that comes when tradition meets new thinking. Our program is taking shape around themes that feel urgent and relevant: how fairs position themselves as agritourism infrastructure, how we connect modern audiences to food and farming, how we future-proof our organizations through governance, technology, and the next generation of leaders. Program and speaker details are now live on the CAFE website so be sure to visit.

The **Top 10 Under 40** recognition program returns in this edition, and I am genuinely moved by the calibre of this year's honorees. From coast to coast, these individuals represent the full breadth of what it takes to run a fair and who is doing that work with excellence and heart. Reading their profiles is a reminder that the future of this sector is in remarkable hands. I encourage you to share these stories widely. These are the faces of our industry, and they deserve to be celebrated.

Across this edition you will also find stories about community building, economic impact, governance, and the enduring power of connecting food to fairs. Whether it is a small fair finding new relevance, a service member business passing on its success stories in adapting to changing circumstances, the thread that runs through all of it is the same: people who care deeply about their communities, and who show up year after year to create something meaningful together.

At CAFE, our work this year has been focused on strengthening the foundation that supports all of you, a refreshed strategic plan, new programs that address your changing needs, advocacy work with the federal government, member outreach, and a convention program designed to send you home with new ideas and renewed energy. You will find more detail on both our strategic direction and our programs elsewhere in this edition. It is work that feels purposeful, and it is work we do in service of a sector that truly matters.

Thank you, as always, for the trust you place in this association. I look forward to seeing many of you in Halifax this November.

Warm regards, Linda Sicoli

Message de la Directrice Exécutive

Linda Sicoli, Directrice Exécutive
Canadian Association of Fairs & Exhibitions



Alors que nous traversons une nouvelle saison des foires et que nous nous tournons vers ce qui promet d'être un automne marquant, je suis portée à réfléchir à tout ce qui se passe dans le secteur des foires et des expositions au Canada, et à quel point cela démontre, à la fois, de la résilience et de la capacité de réinvention qui définissent cette communauté.

Cette édition de Canadian Fair News arrive à un moment passionnant pour l'ACFE. Nous sommes en pleine planification de notre congrès national 2026, qui aura lieu à Halifax du 11 au 13 novembre 2026, au Marriott Harbourfront. Halifax est un hôte tout désigné — une ville qui connaît bien l'importance de la communauté, du patrimoine et de l'énergie qui naît lorsque la tradition rencontre de nouvelles idées.

Notre programme prend forme autour de thèmes à la fois actuels et essentiels : la manière dont les foires se positionnent comme infrastructures d'agrotourisme, la façon dont nous connectons les publics modernes à l'alimentation et à l'agriculture, ainsi que les moyens d'assurer la pérennité de nos organisations grâce à une gouvernance solide, aux technologies et à la relève des leaders. Les détails du programme et des conférenciers sont maintenant en ligne sur le site web de l'ACFE - n'hésitez pas à le consulter.

Le programme de reconnaissance des **Top 10 des moins de 40 ans** est de retour dans cette édition, et je suis sincèrement impressionnée par le calibre des candidats de cette année. D'un océan à l'autre, ces personnes représentent tout ce qu'il faut pour gérer une foire, et accomplissent ce travail avec excellence et passion. La lecture de leurs profils nous rappelle que l'avenir de ce secteur est entre de très bonnes mains. Je vous encourage à partager largement ces histoires. Ce sont les visages de notre industrie, et ils méritent d'être célébrés.

Dans cette édition, vous trouverez également des articles portant sur le développement communautaire, les impacts économiques, la gouvernance et le pouvoir durable de relier l'alimentation aux foires. Qu'il s'agisse d'une petite foire qui retrouve une nouvelle pertinence ou d'un membre d'une entreprise de services qui partage ses réussites en s'adaptant à des circonstances changeantes, le fil conducteur demeure le même : ce sont des personnes profondément engagées envers leur communauté qui se mobilisent d'année en année, pour créer, ensemble, quelque chose de significatif.

Cette année, à l'ACFE, notre travail s'est concentré sur le renforcement des bases qui vous soutiennent tous : un plan stratégique renouvelé, de nouveaux programmes qui répondent à l'évolution de vos besoins, des efforts de représentation auprès du gouvernement fédéral, un engagement accru auprès des membres, ainsi qu'un programme de congrès conçu pour vous permettre de repartir avec de nouvelles idées et une énergie renouvelée. Vous trouverez plus de détails sur notre orientation stratégique et nos programmes dans cette édition. C'est un travail porteur de sens, réalisé au service d'un secteur qui compte véritablement.

Comme toujours, je vous remercie pour la confiance que vous accordez à cette association. Au plaisir de vous voir en grand nombre à Halifax, en novembre prochain.

Chaleureusement, Linda Sicoli

TOP 10 UNDER 40

Across the country, a new generation is stepping up to lead Canadian fairs and exhibitions. From midway operations and broadcast production to ox pulls and rural board rooms, this year's Top 10 Under 40 honourees represent the breadth of talent shaping our sector's next chapter. Their stories remind us that the future of Canadian fairs is being built every day, by people who show up, dig in, and care deeply about the communities they serve.

“Kathleen brings a level of professionalism, creativity, and care that not only enhances the events she leads but also inspires those around her.”



Kathleen Boniol, Age 33

Excite Lethbridge

Kathleen Boniol is the kind of programmer who has artists asking to be on her stage. As Lead, Event Development & Entertainment at Excite Lethbridge, she has spent the past three years quietly building one of the most respected booking platforms in southern Alberta, which is the Original 16 Stage at Whoop-Up Days, and turning what she does there into a model for how community fairs can shape a regional music scene.

Whoop-Up Days has long been a Lethbridge community staple, but the festival’s entertainment programming has taken on a new identity under Kathleen’s leadership. Her bookings have featured a thoughtful mix of established acts like Big Sugar, Trooper, Chad Brownlee, Emerson Drive alongside rising artists like FOXX Worthee, Morgan Klaiber, Nice Horse, and Brayden King. The result is a stage that feels current, dynamic, and unmistakably Albertan, and one that artists now actively seek out as a place to play.

What makes Kathleen distinctive is the deliberate way she balances established and emerging talent. She is deeply passionate about supporting local musicians, and consistently ensures that emerging Alberta artists are given meaningful opportunities to perform and grow alongside national headliners. That commitment to lifting up the local

scene, while still delivering the marquee names festival audiences expect, has helped strengthen both the regional music ecosystem and the festival’s sense of community.

The recognition has followed. Her work contributed to Whoop-Up Days being named a finalist for Country Music Alberta’s Live Event or Presenting Series of the Year (Large Market), an industry acknowledgment of both her strategic approach to programming and her dedication to excellence. For a community-rooted festival to be named in that company speaks to how far the entertainment program has come on her watch.

Driven, collaborative, and solutions-focused, Kathleen brings a level of professionalism, creativity, and care to her work that not only enhances the events she leads but inspires the people around her. She is exactly the kind of emerging leader Canadian fairs need: someone who understands that the festival stage is not just a line on a budget, but a chance to shape the cultural identity of the community the fair serves. As she continues to grow in her career, Kathleen is quickly establishing herself as a respected and influential talent buyer with a bright future ahead in the Canadian music industry.

“Kaira Cale is one of the most passionate people in the events industry. Whoop-Up Days has always been a community staple — but because of Kaira and her leadership, it has become one of the fastest-growing events in Lethbridge.”



Kaira Cale, Age 33

Excite Lethbridge

Kaira Cale is the kind of leader who delivers the moments people remember years later. As Manager of Event Development at Excite Lethbridge (formerly Lethbridge & District Exhibition), she has spent over a decade building a reputation as one of the most passionate people in the events industry in southern Alberta and the events she has helped reshape have the numbers to prove it.

Whoop-Up Days has long been a Lethbridge community staple, but under Kaira’s leadership it has become one of the fastest-growing events in the city. That growth is not accidental. It reflects the way Kaira approaches every event she takes on: with a curator’s eye for experience, an operator’s discipline for execution, and a clear understanding that programming has to grow and evolve year over year to keep pace with rising attendance and changing audiences.

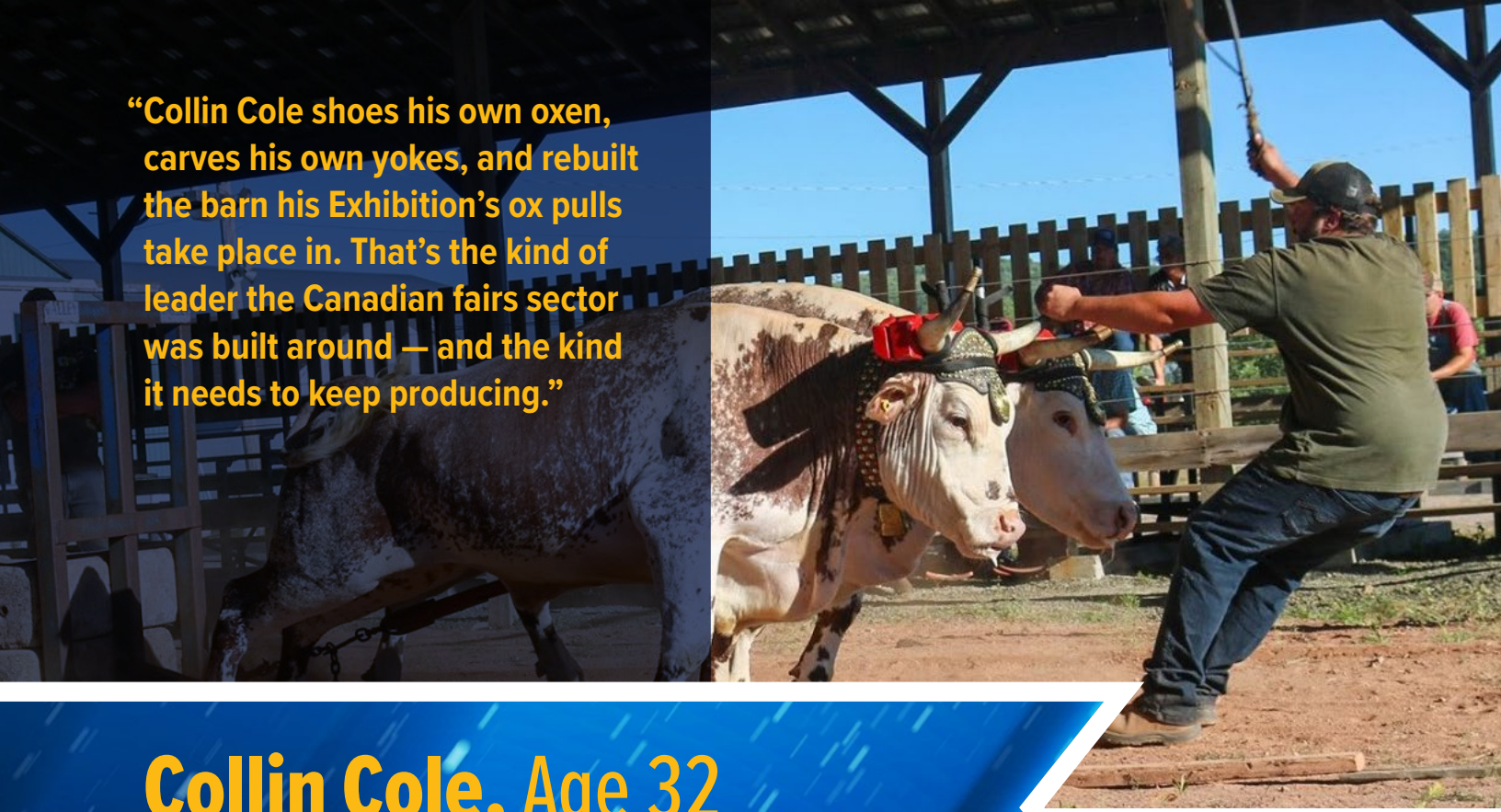
What makes Kaira distinctive is the breadth of her portfolio. Across her career, she has built and delivered events spanning the full spectrum of what a modern fair organization is asked to produce, from the Alberta Approved Farmers’ Market in Lethbridge, to AgExpo, one of western Canada’s largest indoor agricultural trade shows, to the full-scale community fair experience of Whoop-Up Days.

Few event professionals operate with credibility across that range. Kaira does, because she has done the work in each of those formats and knows what each requires.

Her colleagues describe her as an execution-first leader who masters the logistics, vendor communication, and operations that keep large-scale events running smoothly behind the scenes. She works comfortably with multiple stakeholders, scales programming to match growing attendance, and keeps the community at the centre of every planning decision, making sure Excite Lethbridge events remain family-friendly, inclusive, and reflective of the organization’s mission and vision. She leads by example and is consistently described as someone always willing to teach and guide team members along the way.

Kaira Cale is the definition of a multi-sector event manager: someone who blends operational precision with a genuine passion for large-scale public experiences, especially in fairs and festivals. With a decade of work already behind her and a community fair growing year over year on her watch, she is exactly the kind of leader the Canadian fair sector should be celebrating.

“Collin Cole shoes his own oxen, carves his own yokes, and rebuilt the barn his Exhibition’s ox pulls take place in. That’s the kind of leader the Canadian fairs sector was built around — and the kind it needs to keep producing.”



Collin Cole, Age 32

Annapolis Valley Exhibition

Collin Cole’s connection to the Annapolis Valley Exhibition runs through a sport that defines a particular corner of Maritime fair tradition: ox pulling. His interest began at age 9, the year after his family purchased their farm in Nova Scotia in 2003 and his father got him his first team. That team taught him confidence and started a relationship with the Maritime Ox Pulling Association that has continued for more than two decades. Mentored along the way by experienced sportsmen, Collin learned how to shoe his own oxen and carve his own yokes, the kind of hands-on craft that is increasingly rare and that anchors a fair tradition in the people who live it, not just stage it.

Each spring Collin competes at ox pulls across the Maritimes, and through the summer he and his teams can be found at local exhibitions alongside his wife Kandiss and their two sons. Beyond competition, he helps operate his family’s farm, raising beef cattle and making hay. It is the kind of working agricultural life that the fairs sector exists to celebrate and protect and that increasingly fewer young families across Canada are able to maintain. Collin’s presence in the pulling ring at fair after fair is, in itself, a form of contribution to the sector.

What distinguishes Collin within this Top 10 cohort, however, is that he has not been content to just participate. With the help of Kandiss and his father-in-law, he has actively organized the Ox Pulls at the Annapolis Valley Exhibition for several years, building it into one of

the event’s cornerstone draws. Most recently, he reconstructed a once-dim barn into a venue that now fills its stalls with competitors from across the Maritimes and gives Exhibition spectators a real show. He has also stepped up at key moments when the broader Exhibition needed extra hands, keeping the ox barn in good shape over years of use, contributing to extensive upgrades and improved management of the exhibitor campground, and serving on the AVEX board.

Collin’s nominators describe more than 15 years of volunteer service to the Annapolis Valley Exhibition, work that began when he was still a kid showing up to the same grounds where he now organizes one of the marquee events. His dedication to making the Ox Pulls a fun week for every competitor has earned him recognition across the Maritime ox pulling community. The Exhibition’s leadership credits his involvement directly for the event’s growing reputation and its continuing role as a draw for both exhibitors and spectators.

Collin Cole represents a kind of emerging leader the Canadian fairs sector cannot afford to lose: the working farmer and traditional sportsman who chooses to spend his off-hours rebuilding the barn, organizing the event, and serving on the board of the Exhibition that has been part of his life since childhood. His combination of craft, competition, and quiet community leadership embodies the values the fair tradition was built to honour.

“Hannah came home with a graduate business education and got to work — overhauling systems, modernizing the marketing, and putting in the kind of effort that quietly transforms a community fair from the inside out.”



Hannah Feller, Age 27

North Thompson Fall Fair & Rodeo Association

Hannah Feller is a community-rooted leader with a rare ability to combine business discipline with hands-on grit. Born and raised in Barriere, British Columbia, Hannah grew up inside the very community her work now serves. She moved through the 4-H program as a child, taught swimming lessons through her teenage years, and went on to complete an undergraduate degree at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops before pursuing her Master’s in Business Administration at the University of Calgary. The decision to come home and apply that education to the place that raised her speaks to something the Canadian fairs and exhibitions sector needs more of - educated young leaders who choose rural community career paths.

Now a full member of the North Thompson Fall Fair & Rodeo Association, Hannah has taken on three substantive portfolios that touch nearly every operational corner of the fair. She has fully revamped the Association’s facilities rental system, doing the kind of comparative research and pricing analysis that turns a long-standing volunteer pain point into a sustainable revenue stream. She leads the Association’s social media and marketing presence, applying digital fluency the fair has never had at this level before. And she is heading up the 2026 entry catalogue in coordination with the entry secretary. Each of these would be a meaningful contribution on its own. Holding all three at once, while working a full-time job and completing a graduate degree online, speaks to the work ethic her nominators describe.

Hannah’s impact extends well beyond the fairgrounds. She has given blood every year for a decade, mentors young 4-H members, and recently organized a public speech workshop for the local 4-H club, paying forward the program that shaped her. During her undergraduate years she volunteered with the Calgary Stampede, an experience she has explicitly translated into ideas, energy, and standards she now brings home to Barriere. The Calgary-to-Barriere knowledge transfer is exactly the kind of cross-pollination that strengthens the entire Canadian fairs ecosystem, particularly for smaller rural fairs working to modernize without losing their roots.

What makes Hannah distinctive in this cohort is range. She is as comfortable with a graduate-level business framework as she is with plumbing, renovating, hay bale sculpture, and animal husbandry. The combination of the strategic and the practical, the digital and the hands-on, the trained and the inherited, is increasingly rare and very essential to the future of community fairs. Her nominators describe her as a dedicated hard worker making a measurable difference in both the Association and the broader Barriere community. The evidence supports them.

Hannah Feller represents the exact kind of emerging leader Canadian fairs need: educated, hands-on, deeply committed to the community that raised her, and willing to do the unglamorous work that keeps a small rural fair vital and viable for the next generation.

“Jessica Fodor was born into a midway family and built a career bringing Toopy and Binoo, My Little Pony, and Thomas & Friends to fairs from Cloverdale to Charlottetown. Her work quietly defines the family fair experience for a generation of kids.”



Jessica Fodor, Age 38

Kidomo

Jessica Fodor’s connection to Canadian fairs began before her career did. She was raised in a family that travelled across Canada working on midways, immersed in the unique culture and community spirit of fairs from the start. That early exposure instilled in her a deep appreciation for the role these events play in bringing people together and creating lasting memories and it shaped the work she does today as Director of Business Development at Kidomo, where she proudly continues that family legacy through family entertainment and experiential programming delivered to fairs and exhibitions nationwide.

Jessica’s pathway through the industry is nearly as unusual as her origin. She joined Kidomo in 2008 as a children’s entertainer and performer, beginning a career on stage that would eventually see her perform in and manage 14 national tours across Canada. Her live production credits include some of the most beloved family brands in the country: Toopy and Binoo, My Little Pony, Thomas & Friends, and The Big Comfy Couch. Through that work she has collaborated with leading global brands including Universal Pictures, DreamWorks Animation, Nickelodeon, Spin Master, Mattel, and Hasbro. These are the kind of partner relationships that take years to build and that fairs of every size benefit from when professionals like Jessica bring those brands to their gates.

From 2016 to 2023, Jessica expanded her expertise beyond touring, holding senior management roles at leading marketing agencies where she developed and executed large-scale, event-based campaigns across Canada and the United States. That agency experience deepened her understanding of sponsorship integrations, brand activations, and the commercial side of family entertainment, capabilities that she has brought back to Kidomo since stepping into her current Director role in November 2023.

Across both her tenure at Kidomo and her agency work, Jessica has worked with fairs and festivals of all sizes from coast to coast, from the Cloverdale Rodeo in Surrey, BC, to Old Home Week in Charlottetown, PEI, and everywhere in between. She has also collaborated with fellow entertainers on a touring farm safety show, teaching children how to stay safe on farms through fun, interactive experiences in smaller communities throughout northern Alberta and Ontario. It is the kind of work that reflects the breadth of what Canadian fairs do, and the kind of partner Canadian fairs need.

What makes Jessica distinctive within this cohort is the combination of perspectives she brings to her work. She is a former performer who has stood on stages in front of fair audiences, a senior executive who manages partnerships with global brands, and the daughter of a family who lived the midway life. Those three lenses inform her approach, with a focus on accessibility, on quality, and on the specific kinds of joy that fairs create for the families who attend them. As she often puts it, “We’re in the business of facilitating joy”, a philosophy that quietly defines a great deal of what makes Canadian fairs worth attending.

Jessica Fodor represents a kind of emerging leader the Canadian fairs sector relies on but rarely celebrates: the industry partner whose company brings the programming, the brands, and the live entertainment that fair audiences come for. Her trajectory, from children’s entertainer to Director of Business Development, with deep family roots in the sector itself, makes her a clear model for what cross-disciplinary leadership in the fairs industry can look like.

“Will brings the highest professional quality to his work, earning accolades from across the sports broadcast industry and multiple industry awards for feature content.”



◀ Will McLarnon, at far left

Will McLarnon, Age 27

Calgary Exhibition & Stampede

Will McLarnon is a broadcast storyteller with a rare ability to bring the heart of Western events to screens across North America. Born in 1998, Will launched his career in Toronto with CBC Sports as a member of the Olympic Features Unit, an exceptional entry point that placed him at the centre of world-class sports production from the very beginning. His work on the Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 Olympic Games, as well as Spruce Meadows' prestigious 'National', gave him a broadcast foundation that few professionals his age can claim.

Now serving as Broadcast - Production Lead at the Calgary Stampede, Will is the driving creative force behind how one of the world's most iconic events is seen and celebrated beyond the grandstands. Through compelling segments that highlight athletes, community stories, and the defining moments of Stampede week, Will shapes the international reputation of the organization. His work has earned accolades from across the sports broadcast industry and multiple awards for feature content, a testament to the professional standard he brings to everything he touches.

Beyond broadcast week, Will's impact extends year-round. He produces video content for the Stampede's marketing, foundation, and agriculture programs that amplifies the organization's mission and reaches a wide audience. The Born

to Buck series illustrate his ability to translate deeply rooted agricultural traditions into compelling modern storytelling, helping connect new audiences to the values at the heart of the Western events industry.

He also contributes to live production for internal ceremonies, organizational shows, and large-scale presentations throughout the year, ensuring that every event is executed with the same calibre of production that the Calgary Stampede is known for worldwide.

Additionally, Will actively participates in community initiatives including the River Bank Cleanup and Corporate Challenges, reflecting the values that define the Canadian fairs and exhibitions sector. He has been recognized three consecutive years with the internal Rockstar Ranger award at the Stampede, underscoring his professional excellence and the respect and energy he brings to his team.

Will McLarnon represents the exact kind of emerging leader Canadian fairs need: technically elite, deeply community-minded, and genuinely passionate about telling the stories that make these events matter.

“Her growth, reliability, and enthusiasm make her an invaluable contributor and a truly deserving candidate for recognition.”



Samantha Prenger, Age 35

Canadian National Exhibition

Some careers are built in boardrooms. Samantha Prenger built hers on the Midway and nearly two decades of boots-on-the-ground experience have made her one of the most capable and passionate operations leaders in the Canadian fairs industry.

Samantha’s story begins in 2007 at the St. Louis Wings food trailer, where she did far more than serve food. She absorbed the rhythms of concession operations from the ground up, rising through the ranks over a decade to manage nine separate on-site locations. She became a Midway favourite early on for the kind of character that stays open late so the staff, who worked hard all day, could sit down and eat together, a small gesture that amplifies her leadership.


In 2017, Samantha joined the Canadian National Exhibition as a Grounds Supervisor for Concessions and Outdoor Retail. The CNE is no place for the faint of heart operationally, and Samantha thrived. Her deep field knowledge and ability to support vendors while maintaining strong on-site standards quickly set her apart. By 2023, she had advanced to Coordinator of Midway and Concessions, and in 2025 she secured a full-time position in Midway Concessions and

Operations, a well-earned milestone that reflects years of consistent excellence.

What makes Samantha exceptional is the creativity and heart she brings to it. She is constantly thinking about how to draw crowds and create “core memories” for every guest. She understands that the Midway is more than a collection of food trailers and vendor stalls; it is the emotional centre of the fair experience for millions of visitors. Her ability to communicate with warmth and professionalism keeps the experience vibrant, welcoming, and alive.

Outside of fair season, Samantha is most at home in the outdoors, hiking new trails, snowboarding fresh powder, and camping beneath open skies. Her qualities of resilience, adaptability, and a quiet, confident strength are reflected to her colleagues on the grounds of Exhibition Place. She leads with integrity and an unwavering commitment to excellence.

At 35, with nearly twenty years in the industry and a full-time role at one of Canada’s most iconic events, Samantha Prenger is the kind of leader the fair sector embraces with enthusiasm.



“From inheriting a \$3 million mortgage to launching a 50/50 draw uniting seven local fairs, Ian’s work shows what becomes possible when historical reverence meets operational discipline.”

Ian Thompson, Age 32

Caledonia Agricultural Society

Ian Thompson’s relationship with the Caledonia Agricultural Society began at the age of 14, when he approached the Society with an idea for a Caledonia Halloween Festival on the fairgrounds and self-researched Historical Ghost Tours around town with all proceeds donated back to the Society. He soon became a member, assisting the Manager in the office at fair time and earning recognitions including the Lieutenant Governor’s Ontario Heritage Award, Caledonia Junior Citizen of the Year, and Haldimand County Junior Volunteer of the Year. At 21, he became the youngest member of the Board of Directors in the organization’s history. He completed a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in History at McMaster University, gained professional experience in the military aerospace industry, and in 2019 was hired as General Manager of the Caledonia Fair.

Ian stepped into the General Manager role at the end of a major renovation project that had left the Society with a mortgage exceeding \$3 million. Inheriting that financial position would have prompted most leaders to retrench. Ian did the opposite. He has grown the Caledonia Fair to record gate numbers, opened new revenue streams, and strengthened the Society’s long-term sustainability through strategic partnerships, fundraising innovation, and successful grant writing for needed grounds improvements. In 2021, he developed the protocols that made Caledonia one of the only fairs in the country to open fully during a year that grounded most of the sector.

Ian’s operational instincts are as sharp as his strategic ones. He transformed the Society’s traditional concession booth into a full-service Ice Cream Parlour and Diner that brings people and

revenue onto the grounds year-round. He devised innovative fundraisers including “Breakfast with the Paw Patrol,” secured the Society’s first multi-year midway contract following the pandemic, modernized the Fair’s website and online ticketing platform, and redesigned the fairgrounds layout to better showcase agricultural education and improve traffic flow. He also led the digitization of every minute book from the Society’s 154-year history, ensuring that more than a century and a half of institutional memory remains accessible to the generations who will inherit it.

Ian’s influence extends well beyond Caledonia. He is a member of the Ancaster Agricultural Society, has served as Treasurer for District 6 of the Ontario Association of Agricultural Societies and now as its Provincial Director, and is former Treasurer for Festivals and Events Ontario. He convenes annual meetings of District 6 General Managers, fostering the kind of regional knowledge-sharing that strengthens every fair around the table. In 2025, he launched the “Fair Fortune Lottery,” a single, more profitable 50/50 draw uniting seven local fairs that generated nearly \$300,000 in gross sales in its first year and is expanding again in 2026 — a model for how small and mid-size fairs can pool effort to compete at scale.

Ian Thompson is, in his nominator’s words, both a caretaker of his Society’s history and a trailblazer into its future. His blend of historical reverence, operational discipline, and collaborative ambition has made him a respected and influential voice for fairs across Southern Ontario, and a clear model for the next generation of fair professionals across the country.

“From the Innovation Zone at KDays to the Edmonton Urban Farm, Tegan’s work shows how a single event leader can connect entrepreneurs, community partners, and audiences in ways that genuinely move the fair tradition forward.”



Tegan Thompson, Age 36

Explore Edmonton / KDays

Tegan Thompson is what happens when an oil and gas welder decides to pivot into events. Born and raised in rural Alberta, Tegan first encountered the world of fairs and exhibitions through her family’s participation in the Calgary Stampede as livestock exhibitors during her final years of high school, an experience that sparked her interest in the behind-the-scenes planning that makes large events possible. Before formally entering the events industry, however, she built hands-on experience in the oil and gas sector, working as a welder and safety coordinator. That early career taught her operational discipline, a safety-first mindset, and the ability to manage complex, high-risk environments. It is a foundation few event leaders her age can claim, and it continues to shape the way she leads.

Tegan studied at Vancouver Island University before formally launching her event career in 2016 as an Event Operations Coordinator with Northlands. Nearly a decade later, she now serves as Manager, Exhibits and Experience at Explore Edmonton, where she leads exhibit strategy across three of the region’s most significant events: KDays, Farmfair International, and the Canadian Finals Rodeo. Across all three, she has expanded and diversified exhibit programming, broadening participation, elevating local and emerging businesses, and ensuring that exhibit experiences genuinely reflect the communities they serve.

Tegan’s portfolio illustrates the range of her work. At Farmfair International, she has developed new programming including the Country Christmas Marketplace. At the Canadian Finals Rodeo, she oversees the Canadian Country Expo exhibits. At KDays, she leads the commercial vendor and pop-up market portfolio, and

was central to the development of the Innovation Zone which is a flagship element of the Reimagine KDays strategy that connects entrepreneurs, industry leaders, and Edmonton’s innovation ecosystem with the audiences who attend the fair. She also leads the Edmonton Urban Farm, guiding a community program that engages dozens of partners in collaborative growing and learning initiatives.

What unites Tegan’s work is a strategic orientation toward partner-driven models, revenue generation, and long-term sustainability. She is known across her organization for strong cross-functional leadership, bringing together internal teams, contractors, and external partners to deliver cohesive, high-quality experiences. She mentors a large seasonal team, advocates for the system improvements that quietly determine whether events scale well, and continues to take on work with teams across Canada and the United States on event launches and full-scale redesigns. Outside the office, she has visited 35 countries, bringing a global perspective and curiosity that informs how she thinks about audience experience back home in Alberta.

Tegan Thompson represents an emerging leader the Canadian fairs sector is fortunate to have: technically grounded, strategically sharp, and genuinely committed to the entrepreneurs and community partners whose work she puts on stage. Her unusual pathway into the industry — from welding to event leadership, is exactly the kind of cross-sector talent the sector needs more of, and her trajectory offers a clear model for what the next generation of fair professionals can become.

“From a new point-of-sale system to permits for a community hall, Billy’s work is the kind of unglamorous, infrastructure-building leadership that quietly determines whether a community fair thrives for the next generation.”



William “Billy” Woods, Age 38

Metcalfe Agricultural Society

Billy Woods is continuing a family tradition at the Metcalfe Agricultural Society that began long before he joined the Board. His grandfather, Bill Woods, served as Society President in 1981 and 1982, and Billy now serves as 1st Vice President, a path he has earned through several years of steady, hands-on contribution. Born and raised in Metcalfe, Billy holds a Master of Project Management from Carleton University. He brings to the Society the discipline of a career at Stantec, working in fibre, coax, and copper infrastructure design, where his work was centred on managing applications, permits, and the unglamorous behind-the-scenes processes that determine whether a project actually gets built.

That technical and project-management background has shaped Billy’s most visible impact at Metcalfe: the systematic modernization of the Society’s operations. He led the implementation of a new point-of-sale system used year-round at the fair and at the Society’s various events. He introduced an online ticketing platform for fundraising events, improving both efficiency and accessibility for the community the fair serves. He oversaw the installation of Wi-Fi and security cameras across the fairgrounds, strengthening on-site security while giving vendors the reliable internet access modern operations now require. Each of these is the kind of invisible infrastructure work that quietly determines whether a community fair can compete with bigger, better-resourced events.

Billy’s contributions are not limited to systems and back-end work. He has led the Metcalfe Fair’s annual Demolition Derby into a marquee event that draws fairgoers from across the region. As the Society embarks on its most ambitious capital project to date, a new building that will house a community hall and offices, Billy has taken the lead on permits and licensing, serving as the Society’s key resource throughout a complex regulatory process. It is the kind of role where his professional training and his volunteer commitment converge most clearly.

Beyond the fairgrounds, Billy serves as a Director of the Ottawa Valley Curling Association and as an Executive Member of the Metcalfe Curling Association, the same kind of community sport leadership that often signals exactly the temperament a fair board needs. His Society describes him as someone who, while balancing family life, demanding work commitments, and his curling involvement, consistently makes himself available when the fair needs him.

Billy Woods represents a particular kind of emerging leader Canadian fairs depend on: the trained professional who chooses to give that training back to the volunteer organization that raised his family. His combination of project-management discipline, multigenerational commitment, and quiet operational excellence makes him an outstanding model for fair leaders across the country.

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ANNAPOLIS VALLEY EXHIBITION

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YEARS**

**100
YEARS**

Founded in 1927, the Annapolis Valley Exhibition in Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia is approaching a milestone that few community institutions ever reach: its 100th year. Operated by an agricultural society on a 26-acre property leased from the local Federation of Agriculture, the Exhibition draws more than 15,000 ticket holders annually and generates an estimated \$1.7 million in economic activity for the surrounding community each year. As the centenary approaches, the team behind the Exhibition has been reflecting on what has made it last and what will carry it forward. ▶

Honouring What Works

At the heart of the Annapolis Valley Exhibition's success is a simple but deliberate philosophy: honour what has always worked and build thoughtfully on top of it. For generations of Nova Scotians, the Exhibition is a family tradition. It's a fixed point on the calendar tied to horse and ox pulls, light horse barrel racing, sheep rodeo, chuck wagon races, 4-H Day, and the world-famous Fireman's Fish and Chips, served in collaboration with the local fire department.

In recent years, the team has layered new programming on top of that foundation such as ATV races, large outdoor concerts on Friday and Saturday nights, a new food truck alley, and a midway running across most days of the event. The result is an Exhibition that feels familiar to longtime attendees while offering something new to discover.

When the Unexpected Arrives

Like every fair in Canada, the Annapolis Valley Exhibition knows that some challenges simply cannot be planned away. Weather is the perennial wildcard. A heavy rain on a Saturday can reshape the financial reality of an entire year. But 2025 brought something far more dramatic.

In the middle of the Exhibition, the Long Lake Wildfire broke out in Annapolis County. Staff and volunteers found themselves navigating an extraordinary situation: some had to unexpectedly relocate, while the organization worked urgently to communicate clearly with ticket holders about whether the event could safely continue. It was a test no fair manual prepares you for.

The experience reinforced something the Exhibition had already come to value: the ability to reach ticket holders directly, by email or text message, is not a nice-to-have - it is essential. In an era of rapid and unpredictable change, direct communication with your audience is one of the most important operational tools a fair can have. The organization is deeply grateful to the firefighters and first responders who made it possible to carry on.

The Digital First Impression

Running a fair with deep agricultural roots doesn't mean ignoring the digital world. It means understanding where your community first encounters you. For the Annapolis Valley Exhibition, that conversation starts online. Whether it's the organization's website, a Google Maps review, or a post on Facebook or Instagram, the digital impression often comes before the gates even open.

The team has been intentional about recognizing this reality, understanding that the work of building attendance and community connection happens year-round, not just in August.

Thinking Beyond the Week

One of the most honest and forward-looking reflections the Exhibition's team offers is this: their brand is almost entirely associated with one week a year. That's a strength. That week is beloved and well-attended but it also points to an opportunity. With the 26-acre property, the riverside stage, the buildings and facilities, what might they make possible at other times of the year?

The outdoor concert venue is one example worth exploring. The question of year-round relevance is one the team is actively sitting with, not as a source of anxiety, but as an open door. More capacity, spread across more of the year, could strengthen the organization's financial resilience and deepen its community role. Getting there is the challenge but asking the question is the right place to start.

“What keeps our Exhibition going is that we have continued the traditions of the past and paired them well with what is currently popular and in demand.”

The Volunteer Foundation

Ask anyone at the Annapolis Valley Exhibition what makes it possible, and the answer is the same: volunteers. In recent years, the organization has invested real effort into documenting volunteer names, contact information, and the roles they fill, sometimes several roles at once.



Having that full picture gives the Exhibition confidence that critical tasks are covered and creates visible entry points for new volunteers to step in and feel valued.

Recognition matters too. Whether it's a genuine in-person thank you, a formal award, or simply asking a volunteer what would make them feel appreciated, the approach is consistent and the impact is real.

Agriculture at the Core

In 2025, the Exhibition brought back "Ag Alley". The poultry barn was revitalized, and the partnership with the Annapolis County Federation of Agriculture was strengthened to bring in a wider range of local agriculture and ag-adjacent organizations, each hosting booths and delivering hands-on demonstrations throughout the week. A new Youth Passport program added another layer of engagement, giving children and youth a guided route through the fairgrounds that encouraged them to attend demonstrations, take part in activities, and discover agriculture up close. The passport format proved to be a

natural fit for families, turning the educational experience into an adventure rather than a lesson, and keeping young visitors moving, curious, and connected to the land. Looking ahead, the team is prioritizing upgrades to the Farm Museum, new private sector sponsorships and partnerships, and a more stable multi-level government grants base to support sustainable operations.

A Word of Advice

When asked what they would share with other small and medium fairs across Canada, their message is characteristically grounded: figure out what you do well, document it, get it running smoothly, and keep an open mind to new opportunities. The world keeps changing and so will the fair.

And perhaps most importantly, as the Annapolis Valley Exhibition approaches its hundredth year with the same enthusiasm it brought to its first: running a fair should be fun. That spirit, joyful, community-minded, and stubbornly resilient, is what a century of tradition looks like.



BARRIE FAIR

173 Years of Agriculture, Community, and Connection

In 2026, the Barrie Fair will celebrate its 173rd edition, an extraordinary milestone for an event that has been bringing people together since before Confederation.

For the Essa & District Agricultural Society team, carrying that history forward is both an honour and a responsibility. The Barrie Fair was always a must-see event in the region, and it remains a cherished tradition for families, volunteers, agricultural competitors, and the broader community.



That tradition takes significant planning. Work on the fair begins just weeks after the previous year's event ends, as volunteers, staff, committee members, vendors, and partners review what worked, what needs improvement, and how the fair can continue to serve today's community. The result is a four-day celebration that blends agricultural education, family entertainment, volunteerism, and community pride.

The 2026 Barrie Fair will run from August 27 to 30 at the Essa Agriplex, located at the 10th Line and 20th Sideroad of Essa. Formerly known as the Barrie Agricultural Society, the organization became the Essa & District Agricultural Society after moving from the old Essa Road fairgrounds to its current location. The Barrie Fair name was retained in recognition of its long heritage.

The late-August timing captures the final days of summer vacation, welcomes visitors travelling through the region, and allows agricultural competitors to take part before the busy harvest season. It also gives competitors an early opportunity to earn points toward the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto.

At its heart, the Barrie Fair remains deeply rooted in agriculture, serving to remind fairgoers how farming, food, fibre, animals, equipment, and community life are connected. That connection is visible throughout the grounds. In homecrafts, visitors see baking, crops, handmade clothing, quilts, and other domestic arts. In the barns, they meet the animals linked to those everyday products, from sheep that provide wool to cows that contribute milk, meat, leather, and more. The education barn helps tie these lessons together, connecting what people see at the fair to what they use, eat, and wear in daily life.

The pull track tells another part of the agricultural story. Tractor and truck pulls showcase the strength and skill rooted in farming traditions, while the Draft Horse Show honours the original horsepower that helped build rural communities.

The fair has also expanded its agricultural education beyond fair weekend. In May 2026, the Essa Agriplex hosted Agrifest, a farm education program that welcomed more than 500 students from multiple schools and educational communities. Each participating vendor provided an interactive learning opportunity, creating a hands-on experience focused entirely on agriculture.

Community giving is also part of the fair's identity. In 2025, food bank donations were collected at the gate and the fair intends to continue the tradition for 2026.

While agriculture is the foundation, entertainment helps draw families in and keeps them coming back. The demolition derby, truck and tractor pulls, midway, exhibits, and equine programming all contribute to the energy of the event.

The demolition derby and pull track are long-standing crowd favourites and have been part of the Barrie Fair for as long as their oldest volunteers can remember. The track is well known across Ontario's pulling and derby community, including for its "super track," which allows two sleds to run at the same time.

Behind the scenes, nearly 200 people help bring the Barrie Fair to life each year. That includes staff, committee members, board members, long-time volunteers, high school students earning community service hours, maintenance teams, livestock and homecraft volunteers, gate volunteers, and many others. Volunteer engagement is essential and the fair team thanks volunteers with free food and beverages while working as well as through a volunteer appreciation dinner after the fair.





Many volunteers return year after year, while close to 100 high school students also support the event annually.

Barrie has spent the past several years rebuilding and adapting after COVID-19 disruptions and other challenges with attendance steadily increasing. The team's focus is broader than numbers alone. They are working to restore what they call the "old fair feeling" by incorporating smaller events and activities, keeping the experience affordable for families, and strengthening community involvement.

For other fairs, the Barrie team's advice is straightforward: take time to plan, use monthly checklists, stick with what works, and do not be afraid to try something new. Just as importantly, they emphasize the need to thank volunteers at every level.

With roughly 25,000 attendees each year, the Barrie Fair remains a major community gathering, built on agriculture, volunteerism, family tradition, and the simple but powerful act of bringing neighbours together.

As the fair team puts it: "Set down your phones, come to the fair, connect with your neighbours. Focus on the people in your community. See them, hug them, hear them. Come and connect with one another at an event that has been around longer than Canada itself: the agricultural fair."

Planning for the Long Game

Strategic Thinking in Fairground Management

Dan Kemppainen, CEO, Prairieland Park

Fairgrounds operate on long timelines. Facilities, community relationships, and signature events often span generations, not budget cycles. At Prairieland Park, self-produced events are considered signature events, with 16 held annually, alongside more than 400 client events representing over 1,600 event days each year. Long-term planning allows the organization to be intentional about how it invests, evolves, and continues to serve its community in meaningful ways. Without it, fairgrounds risk becoming reactive, focused on the next event rather than the next decade.



Infrastructure investment is one of the clearest signals of long-term intent. Strategic investment in facilities expands what a fairground can host, who it can attract, and how often it can be used. Modern, flexible infrastructure supports everything from agricultural shows to concerts, trade events, conventions, banquets, and community gatherings. At Prairieland, infrastructure is viewed not as a cost, but as an enable that supports diversification, year-round activity, and future growth opportunities that would not otherwise be possible.

Partnerships are essential to sustainability. Fairgrounds sit at the intersection of agriculture, tourism, culture, entertainment, community, and economic development, and no single organization can succeed in isolation. Strong relationships with government, industry, tourism partners, and community organizations allow fairgrounds to share risk, leverage expertise, and stay connected to broader regional priorities. For Prairieland, being an active and trusted partner helps ensure its facilities and programming continue to align with what the community, province, and nation need.

Governance plays a critical role in supporting long-term vision. A strong governance framework provides stability and clarity over time, helping keep the organization focused on purpose and outcomes even as leadership changes. At Prairieland, governance structures are designed to clearly separate strategic direction from operational execution. This allows the board to focus on long-term vision and community impact, while management focuses on delivering results, supporting consistency, accountability, and long-range thinking.

Balancing short-term needs with long-term goals remains an ongoing tension in fairground management. Annual events, maintenance demands, and financial pressures do not pause for long-term plans. The key is ensuring that short-term decisions are aligned with long-term goals. At Prairieland, decisions are regularly evaluated against where the organization aims to be in five, ten, or twenty years. Not every decision advances the long game, but none should undermine it. Ongoing pressures, such as equipment investment and maintenance, are balanced carefully to avoid deficits that could impact growth and customer satisfaction.

Large-scale planning also brings challenges. Funding timelines, regulatory processes, political environments, and market shifts all introduce uncertainty. Site development planning requires patience, persistence, and broad stakeholder support. For community-based fairgrounds, there is also the challenge of balancing expectations with financial realities. Clear communication, strong relationships, and a consistent strategic message are essential in navigating these complexities over time.

Remaining relevant year-round requires diversification.

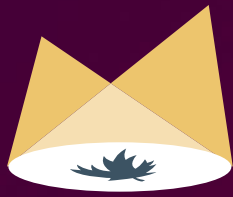
While signature events such as the annual Saskatoon EX remain important, there is significant risk in relying on one or a few annual events for financial success and organizational viability. Fairgrounds must offer value throughout the year by hosting a mix of agricultural, cultural, commercial, sport, and community events. At Prairieland, this means serving as a gathering place, bringing people together in many different ways across all seasons. Being a year-round, multi-purpose organization is fundamental to its identity and purpose.

Over time, Prairieland has learned that adaptability is essential. Honouring agricultural roots while embracing new opportunities has been critical to its longevity. Clear governance and long-term planning have also proven invaluable. When purpose and priorities are well defined, decision-making becomes clearer, partnerships are stronger, and the organization remains focused even as circumstances change.

For leaders planning for the future, the advice is straightforward: think beyond the next event or budget cycle. Focus on the legacy being built for the community. Invest in relationships, governance, and planning early, and be patient with progress.

Fairgrounds play a unique role as places where people gather, celebrate, learn, and connect. Strategic planning is not only about growth; it is about stewardship. Planning for the long game ensures these spaces continue to serve their communities well, not just today, but for generations to come. Fairgrounds need to embrace change and, in fact, be progressive leaders in fostering changing environments. It should be our responsibility to contribute to economic growth and community engagement, demonstrating leadership in the community and acting as contributors to the economy in diverse ways.





SERVICE MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

The Service Member Spotlight celebrates the vendors, concessionaires, and service members who bring the fair experience to life. To nominate someone for a future spotlight, contact communications@canadianfairs.ca.

BINGO NATION BINGO IS BACK!



How one operator reinvented a midway classic and broke records doing it!



here are few sounds more synonymous with the midway than the call of a Bingo number echoing under a striped canvas tent. For decades, that sound was a fixture at some of Canada's biggest fairs - K-Days, the Calgary Stampede, the CNE, and more. Then, slowly, it began to disappear.

Sean Douglas was determined to bring it back.

In 2018, Sean purchased Canada's largest travelling Bingo operation from a pair of retiring operators who had run it for decades out of a massive 75' x 60' stick-joint tent, hauled across the country in a full tractor trailer. With a crew of three, Sean met the former owners in Ottawa to learn the mechanics of the operation and then spent a month in Alberta earning his CDL licence just to be able to move it.

"Needless to say, I had a lot of hurdles to overcome," Sean recalls.

The hurdles were real. The midway landscape had changed. Fairground real estate was shrinking. The giant footprint of a traditional Bingo tent, nearly 6,000 square feet, was increasingly hard to justify in a space-constrained environment. When Sean pitched the idea of bringing Bingo back to the CNE, concession manager Mike Knott's first concern was exactly that: space.

But after many conversations about the legacy and appeal of the game, Knott agreed to give it a try. In 2019, the CNE advertised: Bingo is Back! and it was a hit.

Then COVID hit, and the midways of the world came to a screeching halt.

When the CNE reopened in 2022, Sean brought the tent back for what would prove to be its final run. It was another record-setting year but the exhibition grounds had other plans. Development pressures meant the footprint simply wasn't available anymore. After years of financial investment, passion, and road miles, the era of the big Bingo tent was over.

"I was so upset," Sean says. "But quitting is not in my nature."

For countless late nights, Sean sketched ideas and brainstormed solutions. The core question was deceptively simple: how do you operate the largest group game on the midway on a small footprint?

The answer came in the form of a trailer.

Sean designed and built a custom 24-foot centre trailer capable of accommodating 60 players at a time, with the caller running the game from the same Bingo console that had been in use for years. He salvaged the original seats and cards from the 1970s, stretched classic striped canvas across the awnings, and strung warm white lights to create the nostalgic feel of the original tent. He even designed two 12-foot marquees studded with hundreds of lights, built in the style of old Las Vegas casinos.

Two weeks before the CNE opened, the trailer was ready. Sean rolled into Toronto only to discover his assigned location wasn't the premium spot he'd anticipated. Tight midway conditions had pushed the new Bingo to a back section where very few fairgoers ventured.

"I've been around long enough to know that sometimes them's the breaks," he says. "I decided I would do the best I could with what I had."

They broke every record the location had ever seen.

The new compact Bingo concept won over players immediately, proving once again that while the amusement industry evolves, the love of something classic, simple, and nostalgic remains at the heart of the midway experience.

Building on that success, Sean is now rebuilding a national route for 2026, beginning at Winnipeg's Red River Exhibition and working west across Canada and into the United States by fall.

And every evening, when twilight falls across the midway, he finds a quiet spot to watch, the players leaning over their cards, the young faces of his staff, the Bingo balls tumbling in the machine, the twinkling lights across the awnings.

"Bingo is Back!" he thinks. And this time, it's here to stay.

Sean Douglas operates Bingo Nation, Canada's largest travelling Bingo. For more information, contact: bingo-nation@outlook.com.

“...sometimes them's the breaks, I decided I would do the best I could with what I had.”

Who's Steering the Ship?

Governance Clarity for Canada's Fairs and Exhibitions

Part One of an ongoing series by The Woodlawn Group



There's a moment many fair board members know well. You came to the table because you love your community, you believe in the fair, and someone asked you to help. A few meetings in, you're approving insurance renewals, debating midway layout, and weighing in on whether the gate staff schedule makes sense. Meanwhile, the bigger questions — where is this organization headed? How do we sustain it? What does success look like in ten years? — keep getting pushed to the next agenda.

Sound familiar?

If so, you're not alone. Across Canada, agricultural societies and fair associations are led by passionate, community-minded volunteers doing their absolute best with the tools they have. But passion alone doesn't resolve one of the most persistent challenges in the sector: the blurry, often contentious line between governance and operations.

The Unique Challenge of Fair Governance

Fairs and exhibitions occupy a distinct space in the organizational landscape. Most are deeply rooted in agricultural heritage, driven by volunteers, and operate on a seasonal rhythm that compresses enormous activity into a very short window. Board members are often long-time community members who have done every job on the grounds at some point. That institutional knowledge is invaluable — but it can also make it harder to step back into a governance role when the instinct is to step in and help.

Add to that the reality that many fair organizations have small or part-time staff teams, limited budgets for professional development, and boards that turn over regularly, and you have a recipe for role confusion, reactive decision-making, and strategic drift.

These aren't failures of character. They're structural challenges — and they're solvable.

Governance vs. Operations: A Critical Distinction

At its core, **governance is about direction**, accountability, and stewardship. The board's job is to answer questions like: What is our mission? Are we financially sustainable? Are we managing risk appropriately? Is our Executive Director or Manager set up to succeed?

Operations is about execution — the how, the who, and the when of getting things done. That's the domain of staff and volunteers working under the direction of management.

When these two worlds blur, problems follow. Boards get pulled into operational weeds, staff feel second-guessed, and the strategic work — the work only a board can do — gets neglected.

A simple test we use with boards: *"Is this a decision about what we do and why — or about how we do it?"* If it's the latter, it likely belongs with your management, not your board table.

Starting the Conversation

Clarifying roles doesn't require a governance overhaul. It starts with honest conversation — often the first conversation many boards have never quite had. What do we expect of each other? What decisions belong here, and what should we be delegating? Where are we getting in our own way?

In our work with boards across sectors, including agricultural and community organizations, we've seen the difference that a single well-facilitated governance session can make. Not because it solves everything, but because it names the dynamic — and naming it is the first step to changing it.

Fair boards carry real responsibility. The organizations they lead are community anchors, economic contributors, and living pieces of local heritage. The people around those tables deserve clarity, not just commitment.

Looking Ahead

This article is the first in a series developed specifically for fair and exhibition operators across Canada. In the issues ahead, we'll dig deeper into more board related issues to help you build the kind of team culture that sustains your organization between the gates opening and closing each year.

The goal isn't perfection — it's progress. And it starts with knowing who's steering the ship.



Brad Adams, CSP, Pro.Dir, is CEO of The Woodlawn Group, the parent company of Board Foundations.

Board Foundations works with boards, leadership teams, and organizations across Canada on governance, strategic planning, and team development.

Learn more at woodlawngroup.ca and boardfoundations.com

IAFE Economic Impact Report

David Grindle, CEO, IAFE





Fairs and fairgrounds are seen by many as quaint traditions within a community. People view the fair as something nostalgic and part of their annual community cycle. Yet they are far more than that. They are a vital part of the economic cycle of their community as well, but this impact is often ignored or vastly underestimated. This is equally true across Canada, where fairs and exhibitions contribute significantly to local economies, particularly in rural and mid-sized communities.

In 2025 the International Association of Fairs and Expositions (IAFE) engaged Johnson Consulting to attempt to quantify the economic impact of fairs in the United States. For people who see us as an activity for “others” because they don’t attend the fair, this data is key to showing them value for a resource they don’t use. It also shows value to people who consistently undervalue their own impact on the community in a variety of ways. This work provides important insight, and, in Canada, it has been over a decade since a national-level study was conducted, and statistics frequently cited may be significantly different, presenting a gap in our ability to quantify and communicate our sector’s impact.

Methodology

This type of study had not been done previously, so a test study was conducted in 5 US States to test the data collection process and the methodology. Using a model that calculated economic impact from attendance and revenue, we were successful in developing a conservative economic impact that focused on a high level.

The nature of US tax law is such that tax rates are highly variable. There are no federal sales taxes collected in the US. But, there are multiple taxes that vary not just from state to state, but within each county and municipality within each county. Given that complexity, we opted to calculate only the tax impact at the state level.

State sales and lodging tax generation is a common measure of return on impact of governmental funding in the United

States. As such we asked how much revenue fairs received from local and state governments.

In Canada, while tax structures are more standardized through GST/HST and provincial sales taxes, there remains an opportunity to capture and report the economic contributions of fairs at all levels.

Data was collected directly from fairs as well as from state entities. Reporting requirements vary from state to state in the US. Some states require detailed economic reporting from every fair, so we were able to file information requests of the appropriate entity in each state to get complete sets of data. Other states require no reporting, leaving us at the mercy of individual reporting.

Through the assistance of our state associations and members, we were able to collect enough data in each of our IAFE geographic regions to establish viable regional reporting. Reporting was high enough in most states that we could produce state level data as well as regional.

Key Findings

The major finding was that fairs alone have a national economic impact of 30 Billion USD annually and that fairgrounds as a whole generate 52 Billion USD in impact nationally. This is a greater economic impact than 2 of our US States individually.

While these numbers are impressive there were additional findings that opened eyes.

“ The major finding was that fairs alone have a national economic impact of 30 Billion USD annually and that fairgrounds as a whole generate 52 Billion USD in impact nationally. ”



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Source: Fairs Economic Impact National Report Summary



The annual fair attendance in the United States is greater than the attendance of Major League Baseball and the National Football League combined. This number has generated a great deal of attention, especially among people who feel like “no one” goes to fairs anymore.

The data was parsed in a variety of ways including by fair size. This led to some great data that showed the importance of fairs with attendance under 25,000. Most surprising was that the average fair in this category had an economic impact of \$2,641,052 USD. For the smaller communities where these are held that is a number that has a noticeable impact in those locales.

Additionally, we were able to look at the sales tax generated by these events. For example, in the state of Iowa, where the vast majority of fairs are smaller, each fair generates an average of \$50,000 USD in state tax. This is over an average of five days. That type of impact is noticeable and shows that small fairs have impact.

How to Use the Data

IAFE and the US fairs have used the data gathered in this study to show the number of jobs supported and sales tax created.

Your fair can share with your municipal leaders the amount of GST or provincial tax generated by your events. This shows return on investment of local or provincial investment in your fair and fairground.

To help provide deeper data, IAFE and CAFE are partnering to fund and execute a similar study in Canada to give you information at the federal and provincial level. With contemporary numbers you can share your impact and show the importance of what you provide your community from a financial perspective. We look forward to the result of this partnership.

There is More

Economic impact is but one way we show how our communities are impacted by the work of the fair. We are currently collecting data on the Community Impact of our fairs and fairgrounds. How many other groups raise money at the fair? How is your fairground used in training first responders? Many of your fairgrounds include ice arenas, that is a community asset that brings people to the fair ground.

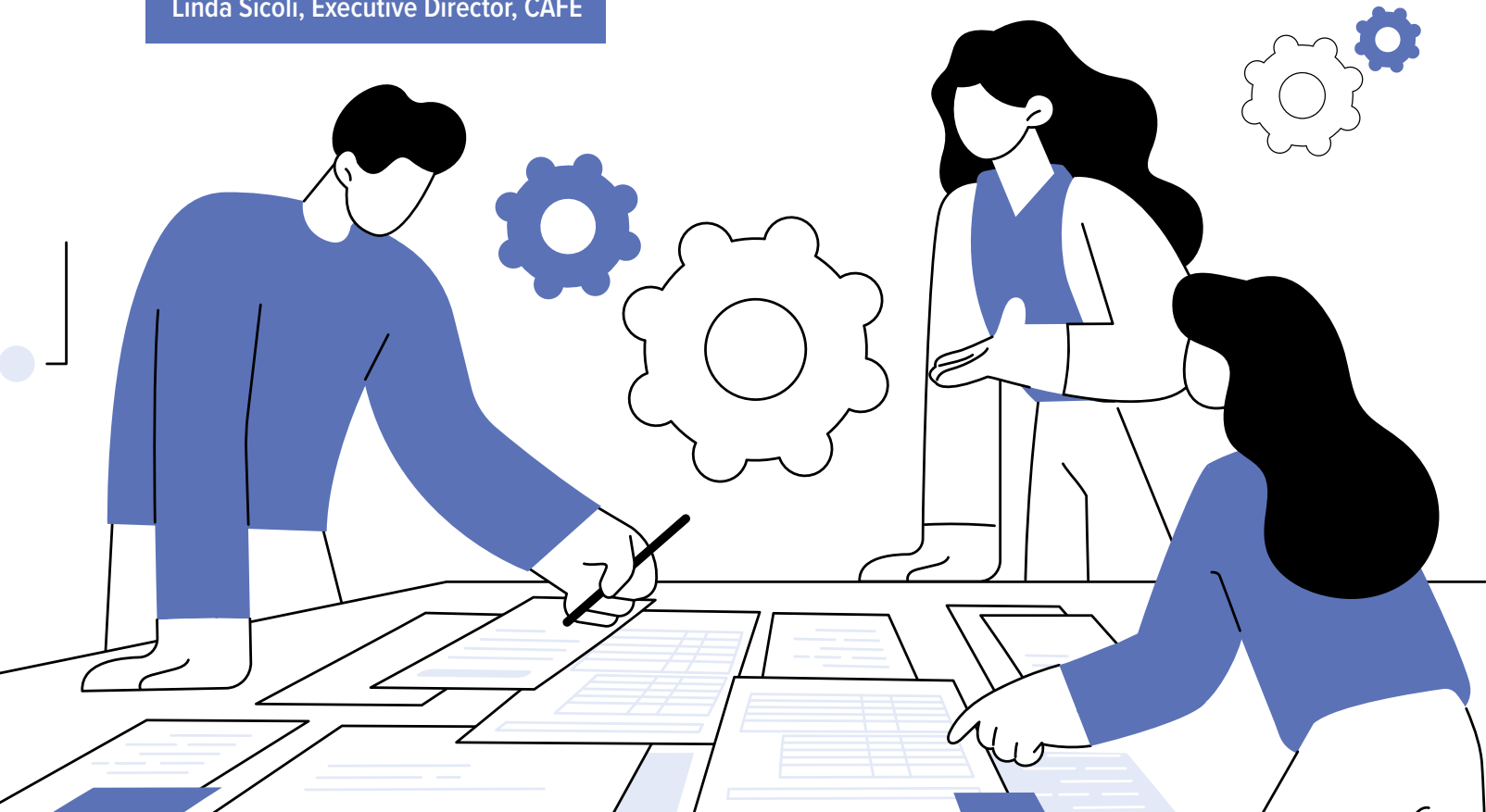
Documenting these items gives us a more complete story of our importance in our communities. The economic and community impact will help get the attention of people who may not understand why what we do is relevant today. As our communities continue to be less agriculture focused, our importance does diminish. I believe we become more important as people must be made aware of their connection to the source of their food.

CAFE is partnering with IAFE on a joint Canadian Economic Impact Study, with proposals due July 15 and the study targeted for completion in August 2027.

Meet You There: The Next Chapter

CAFE's 2026–2030 Strategic Plan and the Journey that Shaped it

Linda Sicoli, Executive Director, CAFE



Every few years, an organization has the opportunity to stop, look up from the daily work, and ask: where are we going, and does the path still make sense? In 2025, that is exactly what CAFE did. The result is the 2026–2030 Strategic Plan, titled *Meet You There: The Next Chapter*, and it is a plan that belongs as much to you, our members, as it does to the Board and staff who helped put it on paper.

This article is about two things: what the plan says, and how we got there. Because the process matters just as much as the product.

A Process Built on Listening

Strategic planning can sometimes feel like something that happens at the Board level and lands in members' inboxes as a finished document. We wanted this process to be different. It began in earnest in May 2025 with a Board leadership session that took an honest look at what had worked under the previous 2022–2026 framework and where gaps remained. The conversations were candid: there was broad recognition that CAFE needed a more proactive approach to advocacy, stronger financial foundations, and a clearer, more consistent value proposition for members of all sizes.

A deeper planning session followed in October 2025, where the Board reviewed updated priorities, worked through the realities of our operating environment, and confirmed the need for a renewed framework with measurable outcomes. Throughout the process, member and leadership input was gathered through polls and open feedback, and those voices shaped the plan in concrete ways.

What did members tell us? The themes were consistent and clear. You want CAFE to be a stronger national voice for the sector. You want the association to be stable and well-resourced enough to deliver. You want practical, tangible value from membership that works whether you run a small rural fair or a large urban exhibition. And you want to see the story of Canadian fairs told more powerfully and more broadly.

“The process matters just as much as the product. This plan belongs as much to our members as it does to the Board and staff who helped write it.”

What the Plan Says

The 2026–2030 Strategic Plan is organized around three outcomes that guide everything CAFE does over the next four years: Capacity, Membership Value, and Awareness. These are not silos; they are interconnected. A well-resourced CAFE delivers better programs. Better programs create more engaged members. Engaged members help amplify the sector's story. The plan is designed to build that virtuous cycle deliberately and sustainably.

Three strategic pillars define how CAFE delivers against those outcomes.

The first pillar, Be the Voice, is about championing fairs and exhibitions nationally through evidence-based advocacy, compelling sector storytelling, and coordinated government and stakeholder engagement. The sector's economic, cultural, and community contributions are too often invisible at the policy table. This pillar is about changing that, and the joint economic

impact study being developed with IAFE is one of the most important tools we will use to do it.

The second pillar, Services That Drive Value, is a direct response to what members asked for: practical support, professional learning, and connections that are relevant to the realities you face. This includes the relaunch and strengthening of core programs like the Designation Program and Youth Exchange, new virtual and accessible learning offerings, and a clearer commitment to ensuring that smaller fairs can participate fully rather than feeling that CAFE is built for the big players.

The third pillar, Fostering Productive Collaboration, reflects the reality that CAFE's impact is amplified when the sector moves together. This means deeper engagement with provincial associations, stronger member relationships, and a Convention that functions as the primary national gathering point for learning, connection, and collective action.

“Smaller fairs told us clearly: we want to participate fully, not feel like CAFE is built for someone else. That shaped this plan directly.”

What This Means for You

If you are a fair manager, a board member, a volunteer leader, or a service provider, the 2026–2030 plan has something in it for you. In the near term, 2026 is about laying the foundation: clarifying CAFE's advocacy voice, relaunching core programs, and positioning the Halifax Convention as a genuine national anchor for the sector. In the years that follow, the plan expands into activation, evidence-based advocacy, and the kind of sustained, visible impact that makes the case for fairs at every level.

Progress will be measured and reported, through indicators like membership health and engagement, participation in learning activities, advocacy outcomes, and sector visibility. This is not a plan that will sit on a shelf.

A Word of Gratitude

The 2026–2030 Strategic Plan was built through genuine collective effort. The Board members who brought their experience and candour to the planning sessions, the members who responded to surveys and shared their priorities, and the support in translating it all into something coherent and actionable: this is your plan. We are proud of it, and we are committed to delivering on it.

The full strategic plan is available at canadianfairs.ca. We welcome your questions, your ideas, and your continued engagement as we move forward together.

Meet you there.

[To see the full strategic plan, click here.](#)

Programs Update:

Building Skills, Strengthening the Sector

Tara Hillyer, Programs Coordinator, CAFE

2026 is shaping up to be a year of renewal and momentum for CAFE programming. Established past initiatives, such as The Designation Program and The Youth Exchange Program are being refreshed and relaunched, with a renewed focus on practical learning, stronger connections and building capacity across the industry. This is possible with the support of program partners and funding from the RBC foundation. We are excited to invite members of the fair and exhibition community to participate in both professional development programs and youth programs.

Professional Development

Earlier this year, members were invited to share feedback on program direction and preferred learning styles. That input helped to inform a review of the Designation Program and has guided the next phase of its redevelopment. CAFE is now moving forward with a webinar-first approach, to create a foundation of accessible, timely learning opportunities that can also serve as a natural pathway toward more structured course offerings later in 2026.

The CAFE webinar series is already underway, having begun in May with Removing Barriers & Improving Guest Experience. As the season continues, keep an eye on our website for the dates of the upcoming sessions that will focus on:

June: “Building Community Partner Relationships”

July: “Volunteer Management”

August: “Recruiting Youth”

September: “Social Media 101”

October: “Grant Writing”

Youth Programs

CAFE is also relaunching the Youth Exchange Program this fair season. Young professionals aged 18-29 are provided mentorship, training, and applied learning in event coordination, project management, public speaking and nonprofit leadership.

Members are encouraged to get involved as program partners, connectors, home fairs, or host fairs. Did you miss the Program Partner Info-sessions in April? The full program presentation, materials, FAQ's and registration links remain available online at www.canadianfairs.ca/youthprograms.

Community Building

The fairs and exhibitions sector is built on people, relationships and shared experiences. To help strengthen those connections across membership, CAFE has introduced a Community Building Initiative aimed at collecting and sharing insights and practical lessons from across the network. This is designed to highlight collective wisdom and create more opportunities for peer learning. By sharing what has worked, what has been learned and where new ideas are emerging, members can strengthen not only their own organizations, but the broader community as well.

CAFE is inviting contributions on questions such as:

What was your biggest learning insight from 2025? How have you implemented these insights in 2026?

What makes a positive relationship between service providers and fairs?

What was your biggest success in 2025/2026?

What has been your top fundraising solution?

At a time when many organizations are navigating pressure and change, knowledge sharing is one of the simplest and most valuable ways to support each other. The initiative will be the strongest when we all participate and CAFE encourages everyone to contribute and amplify the conversation across your own social platforms.

Need more information?

Click here for [Youth Programs/Program Partners](#)

Click here for [Webinars](#)

* Please note registration opens the month prior to the webinar. If you have experience or knowledge you would like to share, please reach out to programs@canadianfairs.ca.

Click here to send your responses to the [Community Building Initiative Questions](#)

Feedback is important to us, please reach out with your questions and comments to help us serve you better.

Agriculture Reimagined

From Spectacle to Connection

Dr. Sylvain Charlebois





Walk through any fairground in Canada and you'll see a familiar formula: livestock rings, midway rides, food trucks, and a nostalgic sense of rural heritage. For generations, fairs have been where urban and rural Canada meet.

But today, that meeting point is under pressure. Not because agriculture is losing relevance, but because audiences are changing faster than the way we present it.

If fairs want to remain meaningful, agriculture can no longer be a backdrop. It needs to become the main story again, told differently.

We are living through a paradox. Canadians have never been more interested in food, yet they've never been further removed from how it's produced. Grocery prices, sustainability, animal welfare, food fraud, these issues dominate headlines and dinner table conversations. And yet, ask the average visitor at a fair how food actually moves from farm to plate, and the answers are often superficial at best.

That's the opportunity.

Fairs are uniquely positioned to bridge this growing knowledge gap. But doing so requires a shift—from showcasing agriculture as a static display to presenting it as a dynamic, living system that affects every Canadian, every day.

The first step is to meet audiences where they are. Today's consumers are values-driven, but also cost-conscious. For many households, especially in the current economic climate, affordability trumps everything else. Sustainability matters, but only when survival is not in question. That tension is real, and fairs shouldn't ignore it. Instead, they should lean into it.

Imagine exhibits that don't just celebrate farming, but explain food prices. Why is beef more expensive this year? What role do energy costs play in what we pay at the grocery store? How do global conflicts ripple into local food systems? These are not abstract questions—they are lived realities for millions of Canadians.

Fairs can make these connections tangible.

Second, we need to move beyond nostalgia. Tradition has its place, but it cannot be the sole narrative. Agriculture today is driven by data, technology, and innovation. Precision farming, AI-driven crop management, supply chain traceability, these are not futuristic concepts; they are already shaping the industry.

Yet, too often, these advancements are invisible at fairs.

Younger audiences, in particular, are drawn to innovation. They want to understand how technology intersects with food, climate, and health. Bringing these elements to

life—through interactive displays, live demonstrations, or even partnerships with agri-tech companies—can transform how agriculture is perceived. It shifts the image from “old-fashioned” to “cutting-edge.”

Third, authenticity matters more than ever. Canadians are increasingly skeptical of institutions, including the food system. Trust is fragile. When it comes to agriculture, people want transparency, not polished messaging.

This is where farmers themselves become the most powerful ambassadors.

Nothing replaces a real conversation with someone who lives the reality of food production every day. Fairs should create more spaces for these interactions—informal, unscripted, and honest. Let farmers talk about challenges, not just successes. Weather volatility, labour shortages, rising input costs, these are part of the story too. And they resonate.

Finally, we need to rethink engagement. Passive observation is no longer enough. Today's audiences expect to participate, not just watch.

Hands-on experiences, whether it's planting, harvesting simulations, or even navigating a mock supply chain, can turn curiosity into understanding. Food tastings tied to origin stories, cooking demonstrations that highlight Canadian ingredients, or digital tools that trace a product's journey from farm to shelf can all deepen the connection.

The goal is simple: make agriculture personal.

Because at its core, food is the most universal connector we have. Every visitor who walks through a fairground has a relationship with food. The challenge, and the opportunity, is to help them see that relationship more clearly.

Reimagining agriculture at fairs isn't about abandoning tradition. It's about evolving it. It's about recognizing that the story of agriculture is not just about the past—it's about the present and the future.

If we get this right, fairs won't just entertain. They will educate, inspire, and rebuild something we urgently need in Canada today: trust in our food system.

And that's a story worth telling.

REGISTRATION IS NOW OPEN!

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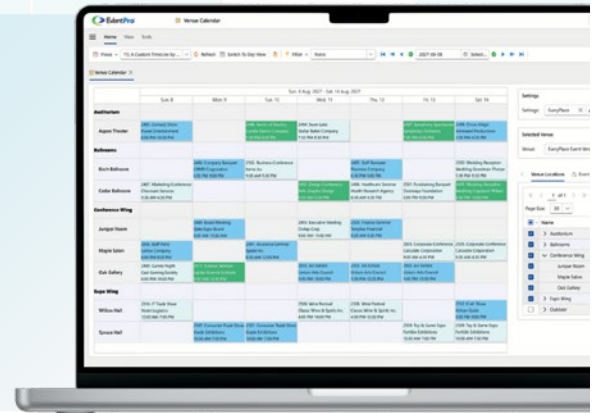




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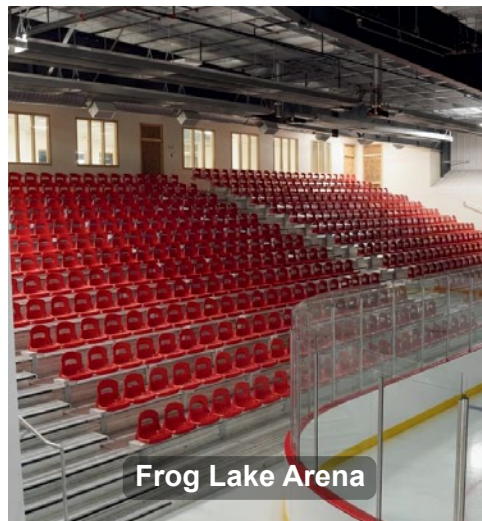
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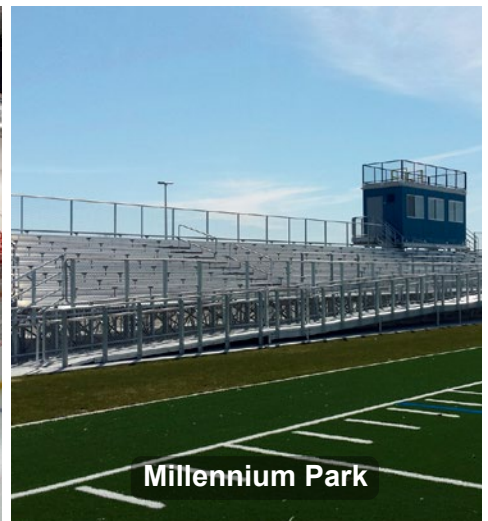
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