



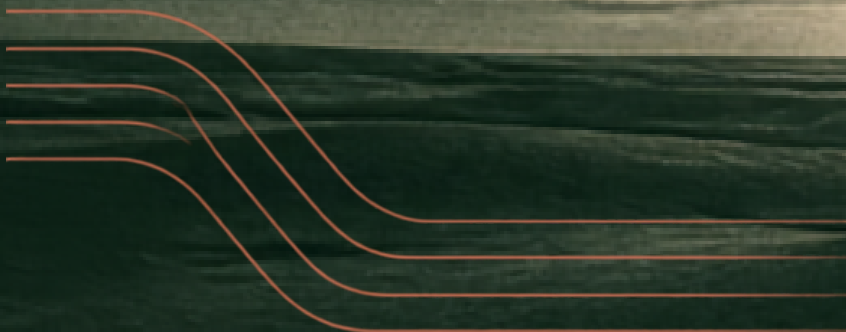
From Local Assets to Lasting Impact

**Social enterprise and rural
economic development in Saskatchewan.**

 **Social Enterprise Impact Report**

Saskatchewan Economic Development Alliance

August 2026





Copyright SEDA

Research by: Tyler Jonah Pearce, PhD, Sixteenth Letter Collaborative

Funding support provided by Quint Saskatoon



This report is available for download at www.sehub.ca



TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	04
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	05
WHY SOCIAL ENTERPRISE, WHY NOW?	07
CONTEXT OF CASE STUDIES	08
METHODOLOGY	11
CASE STUDIES	12
ABC CENTRE	12
SOUTHERN PRAIRIE RAILWAY	15
NWC WILD RICE COMPANY	18
SYNTHESIS OF CASE STUDIES	22
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, FUNDING, AND CAPACITY BUILDING	26
CALL TO ACTION	27
REFERENCES	28

FOREWARD

VERONA THIBAUT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, SEDA

Across rural and northern Saskatchewan, communities are being asked to do more with less while continuing to imagine, build, and sustain the conditions for long-term prosperity. They are responding to changing demographics, service loss, infrastructure pressures, labour force challenges, and the ongoing need to keep young people, families, entrepreneurs, and local wealth connected to 'place'.

This report is about one of the most practical and under-recognized tools available to communities facing those realities: social enterprise.

Social enterprise is not new to Saskatchewan. Our province has a long history of co-operation, mutual aid, local ownership, and community economic development. What is changing is the urgency of the moment. In many rural and northern places, the traditional boundaries between business, non-profit work, public service, and community development no longer reflect how local solutions actually emerge. Communities are repurposing buildings, rebuilding local economies around heritage and tourism, strengthening Indigenous and Métis ownership in value chains, and creating business models that serve both market needs and community priorities.

The case studies in this report demonstrate that social enterprise is not a single model. It can look like a former school transformed into a multi-generational community hub. It can look like a heritage railway that anchors a visitor economy and strengthens local pride. It can look like an Indigenous and Métis-owned company working to keep more value in the hands of harvesters, families, and communities. What unites these examples is not their structure, but their purpose: each uses business activity to meet community-defined needs and keep value circulating locally.

For SEDA, these stories matter because they speak directly to the future of community economic development in Saskatchewan. Rural resilience will not be achieved through outside investment alone. It will also depend on the ability of communities to recognize their own assets, organize around shared priorities, build partnerships, and create revenue-generating models that can sustain local services, livelihoods, and identity over time.

The three organizations featured here also show that social enterprise should not be treated as a marginal or charitable activity. It is a practical development strategy. It can help replace lost infrastructure, create employment, support tourism, strengthen local supply chains, advance Indigenous economic self-determination, and build the confidence communities need to shape their own future.

At the same time, these case studies remind us that community-driven enterprise cannot be expected to carry everything alone. Social enterprises need flexible funding, patient capital, business planning support, operational resources, and policies that recognize the realities of small, rural, northern, and Indigenous-led organizations. If we want communities to innovate, we must also create the conditions that allow that innovation to last.

This report is offered as both evidence and invitation. It provides evidence that Saskatchewan communities are already using social enterprise to respond to disruption with creativity and determination. It also invites funders, economic development practitioners, governments, municipalities, Indigenous governments, and community leaders to consider how social enterprise can be more intentionally supported as part of Saskatchewan's future economic ecosystem.

The stories that follow are local, but their implications are provincial. They show what becomes possible when communities are trusted to build from what they have, for the people and places they know best.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social enterprise is increasingly emerging as an essential tool for rural and northern community development in Saskatchewan. As communities navigate demographic change, service loss, economic restructuring, labour shortages, infrastructure challenges, and the need for greater local resilience, social enterprises are creating practical solutions that combine business activity with community benefit. Across Canada, rural communities face challenges related to population shifts, service gaps, capacity constraints, and economic transition, while community-led and Indigenous-led innovations are increasingly recognized as important drivers of local resilience and sustainable development.

This report examines three Saskatchewan social enterprises: the ABC Centre in Abbey, Southern Prairie Railway in Ogema, and NWC Wild Rice Company in northwest Saskatchewan. While each organization operates in a different sector and serves a distinct community purpose, they share a common characteristic: each was created in response to a local challenge that threatened the social, economic, or cultural vitality of its community. Together, these case studies demonstrate how social enterprise can transform local assets into long-term community benefits, generate employment and economic activity, strengthen community identity, and keep wealth circulating closer to home.

The findings reveal that social enterprise is not a single business model but rather a flexible, place-based approach to development. The ABC Centre transformed a closed school into a vibrant community hub that now functions as replacement infrastructure for a village facing depopulation and service loss. Southern Prairie Railway converted heritage assets into a tourism ecosystem that supports local businesses, attracts visitors, and strengthens regional identity. NWC Wild Rice Company was established to improve market conditions for Indigenous and Métis harvesters, creating a pathway toward greater local control, fairer returns, and long-term economic self-determination.

Across all three cases, five common themes were evident.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES ARISE WHERE TRADITIONAL SYSTEMS LEAVE GAPS

Each organization emerged because existing public, private, or market-based systems were no longer adequately meeting community needs. Whether responding to a school closure, the decline of transportation infrastructure, or inequities in a resource-based industry, social enterprise provided a mechanism for communities to create their own solutions.



SOCIAL ENTERPRISES HELP KEEP VALUE LOCAL

The case studies demonstrate that social enterprises can strengthen local economies by retaining wealth, employment opportunities, and decision-making capacity within communities. Rather than allowing economic value to flow elsewhere, these organizations create mechanisms for local ownership, local reinvestment, and community benefit.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES SUPPORT RURAL AND INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE

The organizations profiled show how social enterprise can contribute to population retention, service continuity, cultural preservation, community pride, and Indigenous economic self-determination. Their work extends beyond economic outcomes to include social and cultural impacts that are essential to long-term community sustainability.

GROWTH REQUIRES NEW FORMS OF SUPPORT

While each social enterprise has achieved notable success, all face constraints related to staffing, capital investment, business planning, infrastructure renewal, and access to financing. Their future growth will require more than project-based grants. Flexible operational funding, patient capital, technical assistance, and supportive policy frameworks will be critical if these organizations are to continue expanding their impact.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES FUNCTION AS COMMUNITY ANCHORS

Beyond their direct services or products, each organization acts as an anchor institution that supports broader community development. They create spillover benefits that extend to local businesses, volunteer networks, cultural activities, tourism, workforce development, and social cohesion. In communities where institutions are disappearing or consolidating, social enterprises often become critical centres of community life.

The case studies also demonstrate strong alignment with Saskatchewan's broader economic and community development priorities. Through local job creation, tourism development, value-added production, infrastructure revitalization, Indigenous participation, and community capacity building, these organizations contribute directly to many of the objectives outlined in provincial and federal rural development strategies. The challenges identified by rural municipalities across Saskatchewan, including labour shortages, service gaps, infrastructure pressures, and the need for more flexible funding models, further reinforce the relevance of social enterprise as a development tool.

The central conclusion of this report is clear: social enterprise should not be viewed as a marginal activity or charitable supplement to economic development. Rather, it should be recognized as an integral component of Saskatchewan's rural development ecosystem. Social enterprises are helping communities replace lost infrastructure, strengthen local economies, support Indigenous-led development, preserve cultural assets, and create new opportunities where traditional approaches may no longer be sufficient.

As Saskatchewan communities continue to adapt to changing economic and demographic realities, social enterprise represents a practical and proven mechanism for turning local assets, leadership, and ingenuity into long-term resilience. The experiences of the ABC Centre, Southern Prairie Railway, and NWC Wild Rice Company demonstrate that when communities are empowered to develop solutions rooted in local priorities, social enterprise can become a powerful driver of sustainable rural and northern prosperity.



WHY SOCIAL ENTERPRISE WHY NOW

Rural and northern Saskatchewan communities are navigating a period of significant transition. Population change, service loss, infrastructure pressures, labour shortages, rising costs, and the need for local economic diversification are reshaping what communities require from economic development. These pressures are not abstract. They influence whether families can stay, whether young people see a future in their home communities, whether local services remain viable, and whether community assets are used or left to decline.

Recent rural data reinforces the urgency of this discussion. Statistics Canada reported that Saskatchewan's rural and small town population increased modestly from 396,526 in 2021 to 400,221 in 2024, a 0.9% increase, while also noting that only two in five rural and small town households in Canada had access to basic services such as employment, grocery stores, and health care facilities within 15 kilometres of home. The Rural and Small Town Canada, 2023 to 2024 report also noted that, in December 2024, more than 98% of businesses in rural and small towns were small businesses. These conditions point to a central reality: rural development depends heavily on local institutions, small enterprises, community assets, and the ability to create services and opportunities at a scale that fits place.

Social enterprise is important because it sits at the intersection of these needs. It allows communities to use business tools without abandoning community purpose. It can generate revenue while addressing local priorities such as service access, employment, tourism, cultural continuity, food systems, youth engagement, and local ownership. In smaller communities, where neither the public sector nor the private market can meet every need on its own, social enterprise offers a practical way to organise capacity around shared priorities.

The need is especially timely because rural challenges are increasingly interconnected. The State of Rural Canada 2024: Inclusive and Sustainable Futures for Rural and Northern Communities report identifies demographic shifts, economic transition, climate impacts, infrastructure and service gaps, Indigenous reconciliation, community-led innovation, and governance capacity as major themes across rural Canada. It also points to opportunities in localized ownership, governance, and employment, as well as rural innovation ecosystems and Indigenous-led economic development. These themes closely reflect the Saskatchewan examples in this report.



In Saskatchewan, rural municipalities are calling attention to the pressures affecting local development. Opportunities for Rural Growth & Development pillars, advocated by the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities notes that rural municipalities are facing inflationary pressures, supply chain disruptions, labour market challenges, policy uncertainty, and the need for funding frameworks that better reflect rural realities, including operational funding. Social enterprise cannot solve all of these challenges, but it can help communities respond with locally owned, flexible, and revenue-informed solutions.

The case studies that follow demonstrate that social enterprise is not a theoretical concept imported into rural Saskatchewan. It is already happening. Communities are repurposing assets, creating employment, supporting volunteers, strengthening local identity, building tourism ecosystems, and redesigning value chains so more wealth remains closer to home.

Social enterprise matters in rural Saskatchewan because it helps communities:

Keep value local by turning local assets, labour, culture, and knowledge into community benefit.

Replace or sustain services where traditional public or private models are no longer sufficient.

Create flexible revenue that can supplement grants, fundraising, donations, and municipal support.

Build community confidence by turning closed, underused, or threatened assets into visible signs of renewal.

Support Indigenous and Métis economic self-determination through ownership models that connect livelihood, culture, land, and market opportunity.

Strengthen resilience by combining business discipline with community purpose.

CONTEXT OF CASE STUDIES

A social enterprise “is a business that sells goods or services, embeds a social, cultural, or environmental purpose into the business, and reinvests the majority of profits or surplus into its purpose” (Buy Social Canada, 2024). Social enterprise in Saskatchewan is part of a long tradition of co-operatives, community economic development and nonprofit revenue generation, which expanded in the 1990s and 2000s as policy, financing, and support organizations emerged in each province (Elson et al, 2015). In Saskatchewan, that history is tied to co-operative law and the province’s long institutional commitment to the co-operative sector (Mullord et al, 1988) and has a long-standing role in small rural communities in the province (Simbandumwe et al, nd). While Saskatchewan’s co-operative history is rooted in member-owned democratic institutions, social enterprise is a more recent and broader category of purpose-driven commercial activity that may or may not use the co-operative form (McMurtry, 2015).

Few studies on social enterprises have focused specifically on Saskatchewan examples, their context, goals or how they contribute to the wider Saskatchewan social and economic life. This report presents three case studies of social enterprises based in Saskatchewan that have emerged in the past two decades, each of which was initiated in response to their unique context.

Each social enterprise featured has created, to varying degrees, local social transformation and supported regional financial self-sufficiency, through recognized contributions of social enterprise (Madill et al, 2010). Rather than positioning social enterprises in Saskatchewan on the margins of economic life, the case studies consider how each organization fulfills key components of the Government of Saskatchewan’s policy, as represented in the province’s Growth Plan. Lastly, each social enterprise could be strengthened through policy, grant or financing support.

The three social enterprises profiled in this report are the ABC Centre in Abbey, Southern Prairie Railway in Ogema, and NWC Wild Rice Company in northwest Saskatchewan.

Across the three case studies presented, the organizations share a common starting point: each was created in response to economic and social stress in a rural or northern Saskatchewan community. These social enterprises emerged as practical, local responses to depopulation, service loss, and long-standing economic inequities. They work to create stability, employment, volunteer engagement, and community pride by leveraging unique local assets (namely: a closed school, a heritage rail line, and a traditional land-based industry). The cases show how varied social enterprise can be in practice—ranging from volunteer-led hubs, to heritage tourism platforms, to Indigenous producer-led firms.

Three shared elements stand out in their context and trajectory:

**Each responds directly to stress or limited opportunities;
Each contributes to local economic development and employment; and
Each supports some form of community or social revival, often acting as a replacement or anchor for services that might otherwise disappear (Canada 2020, 2022; ISEDC, 2022).**

Together, they share a key feature of social enterprise development found elsewhere: it is less a fixed template than a flexible approach that communities adapt to their own circumstances (Quarter et al, 2017).

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

RESPONSE TO STRESS OR LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES

All three organizations were formed in direct response to closure, decline, or long-standing limitations in local industries and institutions. In two of the three cases, depopulation and service withdrawal were immediate threats. The Abbey Business and Community Centre (aka ABC Centre) emerged after the closure of Abbey's K-12 school in 2012, an event that dampened community pride and volunteerism and signaled a broader pattern of rural decline seen elsewhere in Canada when key institutions are lost (Corbett, 2014; Halsey, 2011). Southern Prairie Railway took shape against the backdrop of population decline, grain elevator closures, and the near-loss of the local rail line.

NWC Wild Rice Company, the lone Indigenous-led enterprise in the set, was incorporated for a different but related reason: the wild rice industry, while historically lucrative, was failing to benefit Indigenous and Métis harvesters because outside buyers controlled pricing and processing. The company formed to address this market imbalance by offering fairer prices and working toward community control over processing and distribution, echoing broader calls for Indigenous-led economic development and fairer participation in natural-resource value chains (OECD, 2020). In each case, social enterprise was a tool for reworking existing assets and relationships.

FOCUS ON LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

Each social enterprise also seeks, in its own way, to create or retain local jobs and support regional business activity. NWC Wild Rice Company pays better gate prices to approximately 40 harvesters, supports technical upgrades to harvesting equipment, and is planning processing and boat-assembly facilities that would expand local employment and keep more economic value in the region. Southern Prairie Railway has catalyzed new tourist-facing businesses and attractions within and around Ogema, including museums, food services, and retail, increasing revenues for local enterprises and demonstrating how heritage tourism can contribute to local development when it is community-led (Hampton, 2005).

ABC Centre, meanwhile, offers several part-time and seasonal positions, including summer student roles, and houses a daycare and other activities that employ local workers and engages a large number of volunteers. Its thrift store, fitness room, and rental spaces generate revenue while meeting everyday needs.

These organizations show that social enterprise can function as a form of place-based economic development in rural and northern communities, where private investment may be limited and service loss is a constant concern (Canada 2020, 2022; ISEDC, 2022).



COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL REVIVAL

Beyond dollars and jobs, all three organizations act as catalysts for community identity, pride, and population stabilization. The ABC Centre has transformed a closed school—a symbol of loss—into the “heart” and focal point of the community, restoring pride and helping attract or retain young families through its services and social spaces. Southern Prairie Railway has used heritage conservation and themed tourism to stabilize local population trends, integrate newcomers, and promote sociability.

DIVERSE FORMS OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Looking across the three cases, it is clear that “social enterprise” is not a single organizational form. ABC Centre is a municipally linked, volunteer-heavy hub that bundles multiple small revenue streams around a large shared facility. Southern Prairie Railway is a charitable nonprofit built around a high-visibility attraction that acts as an anchor for a wider visitor economy. NWC Wild Rice Company is a for-profit, Indigenous-owned enterprise embedded in an export-oriented food chain.

NWC Wild Rice Company supports the cultural identity and self-determination of Indigenous harvesters by enabling families to remain connected to land and water, and by offering an alternative to employment options that require leaving the community or working in extractive industries. This reflects broader findings that community-based and Indigenous social enterprises can support both economic participation and cultural continuity, especially in rural and northern regions (OECD, 2020). In different ways, each case illustrates how social enterprise can help re-knit social ties and rebuild a sense of shared future.

INVESTMENT NEEDS AND POLICY FIT

To sustain and deepen their work, each organization now faces the need for additional and ongoing investment. ABC Centre has reached a point where a more formal community economic development or social enterprise role could help move from project-by-project survival to strategic planning and support for new initiatives. Southern Prairie Railway must plan for major capital investments as its equipment ages and as it seeks to develop more immersive visitor experiences. NWC Wild Rice Company needs access to financing for processing and value-added production, so that its harvester-first model can extend further along the wild rice value chain.

These differences matter. They show that social enterprise can be about replacing lost public services, about leveraging heritage into tourism, or about rebalancing producer-buyer relationships in a primary industry. What unites them is not their model, but their orientation: each uses business tools to pursue community-defined goals, and each keeps value circulating locally rather than allowing it to flow entirely outward (Quarter et al., 2017; Buy Social Canada, 2024). This diversity underscores a key policy implication: support for social enterprise needs to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of business models and sectors rather than assuming there is a single “ideal type.”

Importantly, none of these trajectories sit outside provincial policy. On the contrary, all three organizations align strongly with the overarching mandate of Saskatchewan’s Growth Plan: The Next Decade of Growth, 2020–2030, which aims to build a strong economy, strong communities, and strong families (Government of Saskatchewan, 2019). The case studies show local, community-led ways of contributing to key Growth Plan goals, including increasing employment, supporting Indigenous participation, growing tourism, and investing in community quality of life. They demonstrate that when rural and northern communities are given room to adapt social enterprise to their own assets and challenges, their efforts can complement—and in some cases, advance—the province’s stated development objectives.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a case study methodology, drawing on interviews and secondary source material provided directly from the social enterprises or available online, to create a short description of each social enterprise. Case study research is widely used in policy and community economic development research because of its focus on complex social and institutional processes (Soviana, 2013). Case studies are primarily interested in the context and the role that local relationships play in existing social, political and economic life. Case studies are also often used when the existing literature is thin, as they can help generate grounded explanations where broad comparative data is limited (Court and Young, 2023), as is the case of social enterprises in Saskatchewan.

For rural social enterprises and community economic development, the literature shows that case-based work is valuable for identifying local capacity, partnerships, governance arrangements, and spillover benefits such as employment and community investment (Morgan and Lambe, 2009). In Saskatchewan, the University of Saskatchewan's Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy has published community case studies showing how local economic development, co-operatives, and blended approaches operate in northern and rural settings (Johnson Shoyama, nd). This study adds to that case research.

Lastly, for policy and government audiences, case studies have practical value: they can show what works, for whom, and help identify what is needed. This approach can help government design programs that are place sensitive and operationally realistic (Widner et al, 2022).

To undertake the study, the lead proponent (SEDA) contacted prospective organizations about participating in a study. To develop the scope and research questions, each participating organization's executive director and/or leader participated in a wide-ranging interview with the researcher. Questions asked participants about the "before" and "after" of their social enterprise: Why was their organization needed? What was the impact? Leaders were also asked about barriers and needs for further growth or stabilization.

In addition, each organization was also asked about the time they could commit to participating in the research, and queried about what internal documentation they had that could be shared. The researcher then developed a proposed methodology that described the research design, the time commitment participating organizations would need, research steps as well as the interview questions for other informants. The resulting document provided an overview of the research process and commitment. Each organization asked to review the document before deciding whether to proceed.



The organizations that wished to join the study were then asked to provide the names of participants who had been impacted by the social enterprise, whether they be community members, volunteers or employees.

Eighteen people were approached by email and phone with a request to participate in a short interview about the social enterprise. In total, ten participants across the three organizations agreed to participate. Interviews, including those with leadership, are presented anonymously.

A follow up survey was completed by each organization, and each provided copies of their financials and annual reports. Follow up questions and clarifications were conducted by email, and other organizational information was pulled from their respective websites.

In conducting this research, the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS2: CORE) was followed. The policy outlines ethical guidelines to assure that all participants are informed about the purpose of the study, agree to participate using an informed consent process, and with appropriate anonymity, protection of sensitive data, and clear withdrawal procedures explained prior to the commencement of research. A consent form was shared with participants prior to meeting the researcher. All participants' names have been anonymized in this report. Although the TCPS2 was followed, the research was not formally reviewed by a Research Ethics Board.



CASE STUDIES



CASE STUDY 1:

THE ABC CENTRE

Creating a rural hub in a shrinking town.

“

ABC Centre now acts as a magnet in the regional area.

In 2012, the Village of Abbey was experiencing rural decline; population loss, shrinking services, and finally the closure of its K-12 school, which many residents saw as “the end of us” and “the final nail in the coffin” (Interview, March 24, 2026). School closures in small communities often function as both a practical loss and a symbolic marker of decline, weakening local identity and reducing civic engagement (Halsey, 2011; Corbett, 2014). Instead of demolishing the building, however, local leaders and residents chose to repurpose it into the Abbey Business and Community Centre (henceforth: ABC Centre), turning it into a multi-generational hub.

The school division, facing demolition costs, transferred the building to the village and provided \$50,000 to facilitate the handover (Interview, March 24, 2026). From there, the Centre grew (although without a master plan). Initially, “we were just using the gym as our hall,” a staff member recalled, and new uses were added gradually as needs emerged and resources allowed (Interview, March 24, 2026). Over roughly a decade, the building was reshaped into a hub that now includes a fitness room, library, snooker/games room, a thrift store (“The Attic”), a youth room, a daycare, and an honour system coffee shop.

ABC Centre now acts as a magnet in the regional area. Volunteers noted that as seniors and young families look to move back from Alberta or BC for affordability, the Centre helps position Abbey as an attractive option (Interview, April 9, 2026). People from nearby communities also come in because “it’s kind of a cool place—there’s something happening,” suggesting the Centre has altered how the wider region perceives Abbey (Interview, April 9, 2026).

A VOLUNTEER-LED SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Operating as a subsidiary of the village, the ABC Centre manages its finances under a single umbrella while tracking specific revenue streams for its social enterprise activities, particularly the thrift store (Interview, March 24, 2026). Revenue comes from commercial rentals (such as the library and daycare), user fees (for example, gym memberships), and fundraising events. The small thrift store generates roughly \$10,000–\$20,000 annually despite limited hours (Interviews). This diversified mix reflects common patterns among small social enterprises in rural Canada, which often blend earned income, donations, and in-kind contributions to sustain local services (ISED, 2022).

Largely, the Centre’s social enterprise model has operated on a “break-even” basis, with low fixed costs because so much labour is voluntary (Interview, March 24, 2026). This fits with broader descriptions of social economy organizations, which combine economic activity with social goals and rely heavily on community participation rather than purely market-driven models (Buy Social Canada, 2024). The thrift store, as a social enterprise within a social enterprise, is a good example of how the Centre maximizes limited assets, turning donated clothing and household goods into affordable items for local residents, while generating flexible revenue to support the broader hub (Interviews).

Research on rural and smaller Canadian communities emphasizes the importance of local services, community capacity, and place-based development in sustaining rural places (Canada 2020, 2022; ISEDC, 2022). The ABC Centre fulfills all this and more as a multi-generational hub: youth summer programs, senior card games, and adult fitness sessions take place in the same building, helping to bridge age and social divides (Interviews). For residents, having a shared space where “the men go for coffee in the morning” and “the ladies...have their socials” has renewed everyday social connections and reduced isolation (Interview, March 17, 2026). A volunteer observed that through working together, “you get to know everybody on a different level,” indicating that the Centre is not just a venue but a site where relationships and mutual support are built (Interview, March 17, 2026). The Centre supports the broader social and cultural life of the town by providing space for other organizations, such as the daycare, to run events and fundraisers (Interviews). Users describe the Centre as “more than just a building...it has a heartbeat,” capturing its role as a focal point for local identity and pride (Interview, April 9, 2026).

VOLUNTEERISM AND THE SHIFT TOWARD PROFESSIONAL ROLES

Rural initiatives and nonprofit organizations often depend on a small group of volunteers, creating risks of burnout and organizational fragility (Arai, 2000; Hustedde, 2015). Despite its successes, the ABC Centre’s main operational risk revolves around volunteer capacity. Staff described how “it’s always the same people who are going to step up,” and many of those core volunteers are older adults who increasingly feel the limits of their energy (Interview, March 24, 2026). Some have begun asking, “When are the young people going to take over?” while younger volunteers, already juggling work and family, note that “we are the young people, sometimes” (Interview, March 24, 2026).

At the same time, the Centre is beginning to navigate a common stage in the life cycle of community organizations: the shift from purely volunteer-run operations toward more professional roles. In many nonprofits and social enterprises, this transition brings tensions but is also a normal and often necessary step as activities expand and expectations grow. Some of Abbey’s board members have preferred to keep tasks volunteer-driven, while other members argue for paying staff to handle ongoing responsibilities like maintenance, noting that they “don’t have time...to come change light bulbs” (Interview, March 24, 2026). The Centre’s recent decision to pay someone for maintenance work signals a gradual move toward a mixed model, where volunteers still play a central role but certain functions are recognized as jobs that require stable time and accountability (Interview, March 24, 2026).

Research on volunteering and professionalization suggests that this kind of “both-and” approach—valuing volunteers while formalizing some roles—can reduce burnout and improve reliability without undermining community ownership, especially when changes are openly discussed and aligned with the organization’s mission (McAllum, 2018). For the ABC Centre, this shift also opens space for more entrepreneurial thinking: if some roles are paid, the organization must consider how pricing, new services, or more deliberate social enterprise business development can cover costs while keeping access equitable.

Research on rural and smaller Canadian communities emphasizes the importance of local services, community capacity, and place-based development in sustaining rural places (Canada 2020, 2022; ISEDC, 2022). The ABC Centre fulfills all this and more as a multi-generational hub.

DEPOPULATION, SERVICE LOSS, AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE AS REPLACEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

The ABC Centre’s origin story—repurposing a closed school—speaks directly to rural concerns about depopulation and loss of key services. When schools, banks, or health facilities close, small communities often see a sharp drop in both practical service access and morale (Corbett, 2014; Halsey, 2011). In Abbey, turning the former school into a community hub has allowed the village to maintain some of the functions that schools often perform, such as providing a gathering place, recreational space, and a site for youth activities (Interviews). In this sense, the Centre operates as a form of replacement infrastructure, filling gaps left by state or market withdrawal.

Social enterprise and social economy organizations are increasingly recognized in policy and academic literature as mechanisms for delivering such replacement infrastructure, especially in rural and remote communities where private investment is limited (ISED 2022; OECD, 2020). In Abbey, the Centre’s thrift store, fitness facilities, youth spaces, and daycare all address service gaps that might otherwise force residents to travel or move away, while keeping spending and social ties anchored locally (Interviews).

FUTURE OUTLOOK: PLANNING, CAPITAL, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Looking ahead, the ABC Centre appears to be at a turning point. After a first decade defined by reactive survival and incremental growth, its leadership recognizes the need for more deliberate social enterprise planning and capital planning (Interview, March 24, 2026). On the planning side, developing a focused business or community plan for the Centre could help move from project-by-project decisions—such as installing a golf simulator if interest in snooker wanes—to a clearer, long-term strategy for which services to expand, what prices the community can sustain, and how to balance volunteer and paid roles (Interview, March 24, 2026). Community economic development practice emphasizes the value of planning in aligning revenue-generating activities with local needs and long-term goals (Buy Social Canada, 2024)

On the capital side, the Centre is beginning to build a reserve fund or “nest egg” to buffer against the unpredictable costs of maintaining an aging 1960s-era facility (Interview, March 24, 2026). By prioritizing financial self-sufficiency and carefully managing this reserve, the Centre aims to move away from project-based grants and emergency fundraising for critical repairs. This approach is consistent with policy recommendations that encourage community organizations to build local capital pools and reserves to support infrastructure over time, especially where public funding is cyclical (ISED, 2018).

There is also room for the Centre to become more entrepreneurial. Leadership has already experimented with fee-for-service offerings such as gym memberships and events; future options could include expanded rentals, small-scale catering linked to events, or new paid programming that meets emerging needs (Interviews). Social enterprise literature suggests that carefully designed revenue-generating activities can strengthen sustainability without compromising accessibility, if pricing and mission are kept at the forefront (ISED, 2022; Buy Social Canada, 2024). For Abbey, this might mean modest increases in some fees, or the introduction of new services that visitors and regional users are willing to pay for.

Ultimately, the ABC Centre’s long-term goal is to function as a hub that keeps residents connected to the region, with a particular focus on re-engaging youth (Interviews). Seasonal positions for summer students, youth programming, and dedicated spaces for younger generations are all seen as investments in encouraging young people to stay or return as adults, helping to break the cycle of rural depopulation. In doing so, the Centre offers a practical example of how a repurposed public building, run as a volunteer-led social enterprise, can shift a community narrative from “we’re done” to one of cautious but real renewal.



In Abbey, the Centre’s thrift store, fitness facilities, youth spaces, and daycare all address service gaps that might otherwise force residents to travel or move away, while keeping spending and social ties anchored locally.

CASE STUDY 2:

SOUTHERN PRAIRIE RAILWAY



“All aboard” heritage as economic incubator

“

It keeps money circulating locally while strengthening social life.

The Southern Prairie Railroad emerged in response to a period of serious decline in rural Saskatchewan. By the 1990s, Ogema was facing population loss, school enrolment pressure, and the loss of rail infrastructure, leaving local leaders searching for a new economic path (Interview, January 21, 2026). As one leader recalled, the community recognized that it could not simply wait for outside investment to arrive; it had to create something that would give people a reason to come back and stay (Interview, January 21, 2026).

An early development strategy focused on attracting hog farming, spawning an immigration strategy to expand the local workforce. Today, forty immigrants remain employed at the hog barns as the industry remains an active player in the regional economy.

At the same time, a different segment of community leaders were contemplating a unique place-based strategy: creating Saskatchewan’s first full-sized tourist railway as a nonprofit, community-led enterprise that could draw visitors, support local businesses, and help rebuild civic life (Southern Prairie Railroad, 2025).

From the start, the railway’s success depended on more than the train itself. Community leaders quickly realized that they needed a destination, not just a ride out and back, because tourism works best when visitors have a reason to stay, spend money, and explore (Interview, January 21, 2026). That meant rethinking the project as part of a wider visitor experience rather than as a standalone transit service.

The process was demanding and highly improved. One of the first major tasks was moving a historic CPR station from Simpson to Ogema in pieces, then renovating it for reuse; the work involved community volunteers and became a symbolic act of rebuilding (Interview, January 21, 2026). The project also required sourcing a locomotive from New Hampshire and a passenger car from Gettysburg, showing how far the community was willing to go to make the vision real (Interview, January 21, 2026). What began as a difficult heritage restoration eventually evolved into a working attraction, with the railway’s official opening in 2012 marking the start of a longer period of growth (Southern Prairie Railroad, 2024).

LOCAL LINKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

The railway's strength lies in the way it connects different local assets rather than standing apart from them. The nearby town of Pangman developed its own visitor offerings, including a museum, an ice cream shop, mini-golf, and a thrift store, creating a small but active tourism circuit that benefits multiple communities at once (Interview, January 21, 2026). In that sense, the railway helped create a regional pattern of mutual support, where one attraction helps draw people to others.

This pattern continues through formal partnerships. Ticketholders receive admission to the Deep South Pioneer Museum, and the railway pays the museum a share of ticket revenue, while local food services such as Bud's Barbecue provide themed catering for visitors (Interview, May 20, 2026). The railway also offers special rides such as the Train Robbery event, Grandparents Day Train, and Thanksgiving Dinner Train, which keep the experience fresh and encourage repeat visits (Southern Prairie Railway, 2025). These events create opportunities for student jobs, volunteer involvement, and repeat local spending, making the railway more than a tourist stop—it becomes a community platform.

SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY EFFECTS

The railway's impact has been cultural as well as economic. A student tour operator described how the train changed the mood of the town, bringing energy, pride, and a stronger sense of belonging to Ogema:

Everyone...is waving at you [from the train] and everyone is so happy to have people there. Honestly, it brings a lot of money into our community, which is helpful to keep schools open. It's helpful to ensure that we can keep the community beautiful... [the town of Ogema is] close knit, and everyone is...welcoming. You see that in small towns, but [Ogema] is a community. (Interview, May 14, 2026)

The influx of visitors has helped support local businesses and contributed to the broader feeling that the town is no longer simply in decline.

The project has also helped strengthen community identity across a changing population. Ogema's large Filipino population, along with long-time residents and newcomers, now share a stronger attachment to the town through the railway and related events (Interview, May 20, 2026). Even some of the railway's early critics became enthusiastic supporters once they saw it working, a shift that speaks to the project's ability to change local attitudes over time (Interview, January 21, 2026).

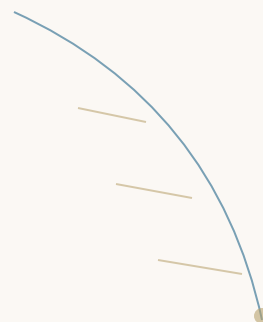


A regional economic engine

As a charitable nonprofit, the Southern Prairie Railway functions as a social enterprise that generates revenue while advancing a broader public purpose (ISED, 2022). Its value does not lie only in ticket sales, but in the way it stimulates spending across a network of small businesses, museums, restaurants, and community services. This is what makes it an economic incubator: the railway acts as the anchor attraction, while other local organizations benefit from the foot traffic it creates.

The railway's visitors do not simply pass through Ogema; they also create "secondary traffic" for other businesses and organizations, including museums and retailers that might otherwise see little activity (Interview, April 9, 2026). Local volunteers have also found new roles in helping deliver events and fundraisers, giving seniors and other residents more ways to participate in community life. As one museum volunteer noted, the presence of the train helps the entire area, and even encourages locals to show up too: "it's been a good stimulus for [all of] us" (Interview, April 9, 2026).

In this way, the railway has helped generate a small but durable local tourism ecosystem, with benefits spreading beyond the organization itself.



GROWTH AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

The railway has achieved notable success, but it now faces the practical challenge of aging infrastructure (Interview, January 21, 2026). Old locomotives and rolling stock require ongoing maintenance, and replacement parts will become harder to find over time. The organization is already planning for future replacement needs, which will require capital and careful long-term planning.

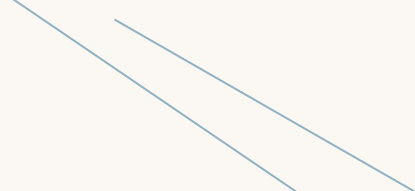
The railway is also looking to deepen the visitor experience. One current initiative is to convert the upper level of the train station into a “Day in the Life of a Station Master” an extended experience, which would help turn Ogema from a quick stop into a multi-day destination (Interview, January 21, 2026). That shift would build on the infrastructure and reputation the railway has already created, while giving local businesses more chances to benefit from tourism. To make that possible, the organization will likely need business planning support, capital grants, and financing for both its own operations and the surrounding businesses that help make the visitor experience work (Hampton, 2005).



COMMUNITY-OWNED TOURISM

Southern Prairie Railway shows how a community-owned asset can do more than preserve heritage. It can help reverse decline, bring people together, and create a local economy that benefits from shared ownership and shared purpose (Government of Canada, 2018; OECD, 2020). With thousands of riders each year and substantial local revenue and wage generation, the railway has already proved that a small rural town can build an economy around place, history, and experience rather than waiting for outside industry to arrive.

Its deeper significance is that it keeps money circulating locally while also strengthening social life. By linking the train to museums, food services, volunteer networks, and other attractions, the railway has created a broader system in which one organization helps support many others. That is what makes the Southern Prairie Railway such a strong example of community economic development: it turns heritage into infrastructure for local resilience.



Case Study 2:

NWC WILD RICE COMPANY

Indigenous economic self-determination

The NWC Wild Rice Company emerged in 2019 as a strategic response to decades of economic disenfranchisement experienced by Indigenous communities in northwest Saskatchewan, particularly in relation to resource-based industries.

Northern Saskatchewan is home to roughly 3% of the province's population and is predominantly Indigenous in identity (approximately 85%), reflecting a demographic profile in which First Nations and Métis peoples constitute the clear majority (Neuls, 2024).

Despite the region's long-standing orientation toward resource extraction—forestry, mining, and related sectors—local indigenous and Métis residents have not shared proportionally in the economic benefits, facing persistently higher unemployment, lower incomes, and fewer stable employment options than the provincial average. These iniquities are compounded by growing climate-related impacts on northern ecosystems and livelihoods, which further restrain local labour markets and exacerbate social and economic vulnerability.

“

THE HARVESTERS WERE GETTING QUITE FRUSTRATED BECAUSE...THE COSTS OF RUNNING THEIR HARVEST...WERE INCREASING STEADILY AND THE PRICE THAT THEY WERE GETTING AT THE GATE WASN'T SHOWING THAT.

— INTERVIEW, FEBRUARY 13, 2026

Wild rice has historically been one of the few regionally rooted industries that offered cash income opportunities for northern families, especially Indigenous harvesters who relied on small-scale, seasonal production. However, local families were consistently underpaid for their harvest relative to downstream market prices, as buyers and producers captured most of the value through price-setting and control over grading, transport, and market access. When the real value of fuel, equipment, and supplies was considered, wild rice harvesting was incredibly new, offering more than many food vendors households, transforming what had been a viable livelihood strategy into a precarious and often loss-making activity (Interview, February 13, 2026).

The formation of the NWC Wild Rice Company can be understood against this backdrop as an attempt to reassert community control over pricing, processing, and distribution, and to redesign the industry so that value accrues more directly to Indigenous harvesters and their communities:

- The harvesters were getting quite frustrated because...the costs of running their harvest...were increasing steadily and the price that they were getting at the gate wasn't showing that (Interview, February 13, 2026).
- The frustration of the harvesters felt a pattern common in northern resource economies, where indigenous producers often sit at the lowest paid end of the production chain and have little say over prices or access to markets (Slowey, 2008). As a result, wild rice harvesting, which had once been a solid seasonal livelihood, was becoming barely economical for many Métis and Indigenous families, even as demand for natural and 'wild' foods stayed strong.

NWC Wild Rice incorporated in 2019 as a for-profit company owned by Métis municipalities, with the clear goal of changing this situation. Its purpose is to keep more of the wealth generated from wild rice in the bands of the communities that steward the lakes and do the harvesting, instead of letting most of the value leak out to distant buyers and processors (Interview, February 13, 2026). In their longer-term vision, NWC Wild Rice will aim to bring more of the steps from harvest to final product (aka a value chain) home—so that local families and communities benefit at each step rather than only at the beginning.



SOCIAL ENTERPRISE: INDEPENDENT HARVESTERS, COLLECTIVE STRENGTH

NWC Wild Rice is organized as a social enterprise. A social enterprise is a business that earns revenue but is guided by a social or community purpose—here, fair incomes for harvesters, keeping value in the region, and caring for the land—rather than by profit alone (Quarter et al, 2017; Buy Social Canada, 2024). NWC Wild Rice is incorporated as a for-profit business and owned by Métis municipalities. As such, it operates in regular markets but remains anchored by community priorities and local governance. Its structure also allows individual harvesters to remain independent: they own their boats and gear, make their own harvesting decisions, and keep their identity as small producers (Interview, February 13, 2026). At the same time, via their relationship to NWC Wild Rice, they are connected to a community-owned buyer that is committed to fair pricing, technical support, and land stewardship.

In the Indigenous economic development field, this kind of model is one way of doing “development on our own terms,” using business tools to support collective benefit, cultural continuity, and environmental care rather than undermining them (OCED, 2020). For NWC Wild Rice, social enterprise is a practical way to balance independence for harvesters with the strength that comes from acting together.

FAIR PRICES AND ACTIVE TECHNICAL SUPPORT

NWC Wild Rice does not behave like a typical commodity buyer. Before the company formed, buyers often dictated prices with little transparency, leaving harvesters to absorb rising costs and market risk (Interview, February 13, 2026). NWC Wild Rice’s management and harvester partners described how the company offer a better gate price so that families can cover their real costs—fuel, maintenance, gear—and still earn enough to make the harvest worthwhile (Interview, May 22, 2026). One harvester put it plainly:

“You get the best price from them...when you allow buyers to dictate the actual price range, you suffer”
(Interview, May 22, 2026).

By paying a fairer price, NWC Wild Rice has helped lift prices on the West Side (referring to the northwest area of the province adjacent to the Alberta border and part of the Northern Administration District), more broadly, influencing other buyers in the region (Interview, February 13, 2026).

NWC Wild Rice also invests directly in harvesting equipment. Through partnerships with Sask Polytech and PrairiesCan, the company has supported upgrades such as GPS units and custom-engineered headers, allowing harvesters to “collect more in one pass” and reduce time and fuel use on the lake (Interview, May 22, 2026). These actions improve the way people do the work so they can earn more from the same amount of activity. For harvesters, this technical support makes the harvest more economical while keeping it grounded in a traditional, land-based lifestyle and relationship to the lakes.

OPERATIONS, FOOTPRINT, AND MARKETS

On the western side of northern Saskatchewan, NWC Wild Rice has quickly built a noticeable operational footprint. The company currently works with about 40 harvesters and, over roughly six years, has paid around \$2.5 million to harvester families, putting significant cash into local households far from urban labour markets (Communication with NWC Wild Rice). Seasonal staff at distribution centres and buying stations add short-term local jobs during harvest and processing, stabilizing incomes at key points in the year. NWC Wild Rice’s presence and pricing approach have contributed to the West Side out-producing other wild rice regions in the province, suggesting that when producers are properly supported, they respond with higher and more consistent output (Communication with NWC Wild Rice).

On the market side, NWC Wild Rice sells through both direct and wholesale channels. Direct-to-consumer online sales reach just under a thousand customers across Canada, connecting small northern lakes to households nationwide. A dedicated wholesale website allows the company to serve independent retailers efficiently while keeping control over branding and story. Warehousing facilities in Saskatoon act as a central hub for storage and distribution, supported by a fleet of harvester boats, which forms the material backbone of the wild rice economy. Taken together, these elements show how a relatively small Indigenous social enterprise can link local production to national markets without giving up community ownership or its focus on fair treatment of harvesters.

CULTURE, LAND, AND AN ALTERNATIVE TO EXTRACTION

For harvesters, NWC Wild Rice is as much about culture and land as it is about income. Said one second-generation rice harvester:

To be a harvester is to go back.... You become one with nature. You are out on your lake—it's quiet. A traditional user—it means you live sustainably off the land—then it's the best of three worlds: ...You get a bit of an income from it. You get to take your family out there. It's quiet. You see nature at its finest because you are not hurting the lake. You are not polluting the lake. You are out there, with the lake, with nature, looking after your investment (Interview, May 22, 2026).

According to the harvester, wild rice harvesting is a stark alternative to the destructive industries of forestry and mining that often prioritize short-term profit over environmental health. Being a harvester is fundamental to Indigenous self-determination and land stewardship:

"Wild rice has a connection between people and the land. People that go out and harvest....Its traditional lifestyle and recognition. This is why I go back to the traditional part...of what we have here to enjoy—our land, our resources, our waters.... We should be more in-tune to protecting what we have, traditionally (Interview, May 22, 2026).

NWC Wild Rice's social enterprise model supports a land-based vision by combining producer independence with community-level control. Decisions are made through Métis municipal ownership, rather than by distant shareholders, and the company's mission is aligned with the long-term presence of "three, four generation wild rice harvesting families" in the region (Interview, May 22, 2026). This reflects recommendations coming out of social enterprise policy literature on place-based Indigenous economic development: supporting entrepreneurship and community enterprises that are built around land and water rights, local governance, and cultural continuity (OECD, 2020).



NWC Wild Rice's social enterprise model supports a land-based vision by combining producer independence with community-level control.

PROCESSING BOTTLENECKS AND BRINGING MORE STEPS "HOME"

Despite these strengths, NWC Wild Rice faces major barriers around processing. At present, the company relies on a single, aging processing plant that mixes rice from different lakes and grades, preventing NWC Wild Rice from offering small-batch products tied to specific harvesters or places (Interview, February 13, 2026). As volumes have grown, the plant's limited capacity has forced NWC Wild Rice to send rice out of province for processing, which adds costs, delays, and carries the risk that the rice is downgraded for sitting too long before being processed. This is a core growth barrier and a missed opportunity for local control (Interview, February 13, 2026).

NWC Wild Rice's response is to dream big: they want to build a regional processing facility. The aim is to move beyond simply buying raw rice and to take on more of the steps that turn the raw product into a finished, branded product. The processing plant could do the cleaning, grading, small-batch processing, packaging, and eventually, develop more specialized products. A harvester described having a local plant nearby as a "win-win": lakes close by, shorter travel, faster processing, better product grade, and a way to "put your community on the map for being a producer" (Interview, May 22, 2026). This would keep more of the benefits of wild rice at home.

FINANCING CONSTRAINTS AND VALUE-ADDED POTENTIAL

Building a processing plant and expanding into value-added products requires capital, and this is where NWC Wild Rice faces some of its biggest constraints. Research on Indigenous access to finance in Canada points to gaps in tailored instruments for rural, community-owned enterprises and to rules that do not always fit Indigenous governance structures or land arrangements (FNFMB, 2023). Because NWC Wild Rice is owned by Métis municipalities, it does not neatly qualify for programs designed only for First Nations businesses, leaving it in a policy and financing “grey zone” (Interview, February 13, 2026). Management described needing to “plug away until the break comes,” but what’s needed is a reliable pathway to patient, values-based capital.

Wild rice itself has strong potential. It appeals to health-conscious and environmentally conscious consumers, and its story—organic production, connection to land and water, multi-generational Indigenous harvesting—fits well with growing interest in food with a clear origin and ethical background. NWC Wild Rice’s leadership sees branding the rice as a premium, ecologically sound product, and developing value-added goods, as a way to deepen the company’s impact, create more steady local jobs, and further tie economic growth to protection of the land (Interview, February 13, 2026). Policy work on Indigenous regional development suggests that, when financing tools are adapted to support such community-led enterprises, they can become anchors of local economies that combine entrepreneurship, stewardship, and self-determination (OECD, 2020).

In the words of the social enterprise’s leader: wild rice is “near and dear” to Indigenous families and has long been a “heartfelt industry” on Saskatchewan’s West Side, with three or four generations of harvesters involved (Interview, May 22, 2026). The challenge now is building the infrastructure and securing the capital to match that vision.





SYNTHESIS OF CASE STUDIES

Across the three case studies, a central finding is that social enterprise in rural Saskatchewan is not a single model or a fixed organizational type. Rather, it is a flexible approach that communities adapt to their own histories, assets, and pressures. In each case, the enterprise grows out of local conditions and is shaped by what the community is trying to protect, replace, or build. That diversity matters: social enterprise is less a template than a way of organizing local action around community priorities, whether those priorities are economic survival, service replacement, or cultural continuity (Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy, 2022; Olmedo et al, 2023).

From crisis to community action

One of the strongest common threads is that all three cases begin with disruption. The ABC Centre emerged after school closure in a village facing depopulation and service loss. Southern Prairie Railway developed after the loss of rail infrastructure and the broader decline of a rural town. NWC Wild Rice formed in response to long-standing economic exclusion and unfair value capture in a traditional harvesting economy. In each case, the initial crisis did not simply weaken the community; it also created the conditions for innovation. The organizations were created to respond to practical needs that preserved local capacity and identity.

This suggests that in rural Saskatchewan, social enterprise often functions as a form of 'reactive resilience'. Communities do not always begin with a polished business model. Instead, they repurpose what is already there: a closed school, a heritage rail line, or a traditional land-based industry. The common pattern is not starting from nothing, but turning a threatened or underused local asset into something that can support ongoing community life. In this way, social enterprise development is a local response to structural decline.

Social enterprise as customized practice

A second major theme is that what a social enterprise looks like is very much related to its community context. ABC Centre is a volunteer-heavy hub that mixes rentals, a thrift store, childcare, and social programming under one village-supported umbrella. Southern Prairie Railway is a charitable nonprofit that uses heritage tourism to draw visitors and create spillover benefits for restaurants, museums, and retailers. NWC Wild Rice is a community-owned, for-profit enterprise that aims to strengthen the position of Indigenous harvesters within a commodity chain with dreams of expanding into processing and value-added production. These are all social enterprises, but they are not the same kind of enterprise—and that's okay.

It may be that this diversity is the strength of social enterprise. In the rural literature, community-based social enterprises are often described as organizations that do more than sell goods or services; they support local markets, coordinate reciprocity, and help keep resources circulating locally (Olmedo et al, 2023). That description fits all three cases, but in different ways. At ABC Centre, the social enterprise is about replacement services and civic space. At Southern Prairie Railway, it is about anchoring a visitor economy. And, at NWC Wild Rice, it is about fairer market relations and bringing more of the value chain at home. The lesson is that social enterprise works best when it is tailored to the opportunities and constraints of a specific place.

The common thread across all three cases is that communities are not simply trying to "save" what they had before: They are adapting, reworking, and in some cases reinventing local institutions so that they can continue to matter. Social enterprise is powerful in these settings because it allows communities to be practical without being purely market-driven, and collective without being fully dependent on the state. Its strength lies in its flexibility. Social enterprises can look like a community hub, a heritage railway, or a value-added production company. In each case the shape of the social enterprise fits the community that needs it.

Anchor institutions and spillover effects

A third theme is the “anchor” role each organization plays. ABC Centre anchors social life in Abbey by offering a place to meet, exercise, shop, and gather across generations. Southern Prairie Railway anchors a tourism ecosystem by pulling visitors toward other local businesses and attractions. NWC Wild Rice anchors a land-based economy by giving harvesters a stable buyer and, potentially, a future processor that keeps value in the region. In each case, the enterprise does not just serve its own clients or members; it creates spillover effects that support wider community life.

This is especially important in rural places where services have been withdrawn or where local economies are too small to sustain a wide range of institutions on their own. Social enterprise can partially fill those gaps by operating as a replacement service, a connector, or an economic incubator. But the cases also show that the anchor role is never purely economic. It is also social and cultural. People come to see the organization as evidence that the community still has a future, which matters in places where depopulation has made decline feel inevitable.

Volunteerism, professionalism, and growth

The three cases show that social enterprise often begins with volunteer energy, but cannot rely on volunteerism alone forever. ABC Centre is the clearest example: the organization has depended heavily on volunteers, but as its activities have expanded, it has begun to recognize the need for paid roles, more formal planning, and stronger capital reserves. This is not a sign of failure. It is a normal organizational transition. As social enterprises grow, they often move from informal commitment and improvisation toward a more professional structure that can carry responsibility more reliably (Ganesh and McAllum, 2012).

That same broader pattern appears, in different forms, in the other cases. Southern Prairie Railway has moved from building a basic tourist ride to planning more complex visitor experiences such as overnight stays and expanded programming. NWC Wild Rice has moved from simple buying toward processing, packaging, and market development. In all three cases, success creates new organizational demands: maintenance, staffing, infrastructure, logistics, governance, and finance become more complicated. The key issue is not whether organizations should professionalize, but how they can do so without losing the community purpose that gave them legitimacy in the first place.

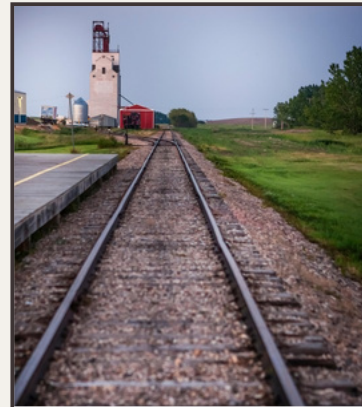


WHAT THE CASES SUGGEST

Social enterprises in rural and northern Saskatchewan is developing to meet the needs of its communities. What unites the cases is the effort to keep value local, strengthen community life, and create a more durable future in places shaped by depopulation, service loss, and structural economic change. Taken together, these case studies suggest that social enterprise can be an effective rural and northern development strategy when it is rooted in local assets, community control, and practical problem-solving. But the cases also show that social enterprise is not a substitute for public policy or stable funding. It works best when it can supplement, replace, or connect services and economic activity that would otherwise be weak or absent, and when communities have room to adapt the model to their own realities (Canada 2020, 2022).

These cases also point to a practical policy lesson: social enterprise approaches need both project-based funding and operational funding. They need support for new initiatives, but they also need the day-to-day resources that keep buildings open, people paid, and services running. In addition, they need better access to financing and business planning tools, especially when they are trying to grow beyond an early, volunteer-heavy phase.

The common thread across all three cases is that communities are not simply trying to “save” what they had before. They are adapting, reworking, and in some cases reinventing local institutions so that they can continue to matter. Social enterprise is powerful in these settings because it allows communities to be practical without being purely market-driven, and collective without being fully dependent on the state. Its strength lies in its flexibility: it can look like a community hub, a heritage railway, or a value-added production company, but in each case it is being shaped to fit the community that uses it.



FIT WITH PROVINCIAL POLICY

The three case studies show that community economic development and social enterprise closely align with the Government of Saskatchewan's Growth Plan: The Next Decade of Growth, 2020-2030. The plan's central message is that growth should improve quality of life, strengthen communities and families, and support a stronger province overall (Government of Saskatchewan, nd). What the cases show is that local organizations are doing this work in practical, place-based ways—through infrastructure renewal, tourism, value-added production, local hiring, and community service provision.

ABC Centre fits the Growth Plan's emphasis on strong communities, infrastructure, population retention, and labour-force development. By repurposing a former school into a community hub, the Centre preserves an important public asset, supports social life across generations, and helps make the village more attractive to young families and returning residents. Its thrift store, rentals, daycare, and seasonal jobs also show how small-scale social enterprise can strengthen local capacity while keeping money circulating within the community.

Southern Prairie Railway aligns most clearly with the plan's tourism and small-business goals. The railway has turned heritage into an economic asset, drawing visitors, supporting local restaurants and attractions, and creating seasonal employment. In policy terms, this is a strong example of a rural organization helping to increase tourist spending, grow small businesses, and support community vitality at the same time. Just as importantly, it demonstrates that heritage conservation can be an economic strategy rather than a purely cultural one.

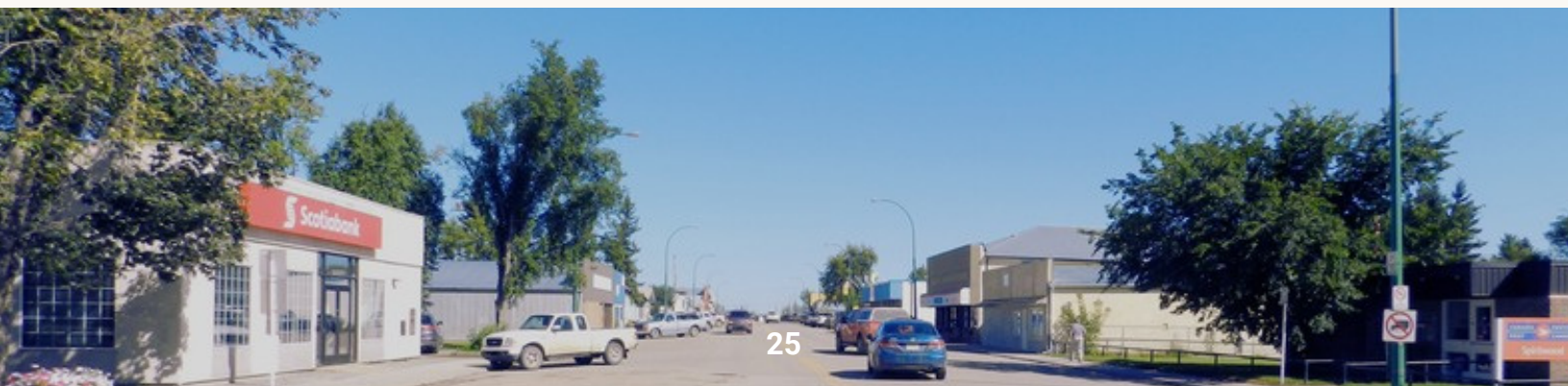
NWC Wild Rice Company fits the Growth Plan's goals around Indigenous participation, value-added processing, exports, and labour-force development. The company is working to keep more of the processing and value creation in Saskatchewan, while also supporting harvesters who want to remain connected to land-based livelihoods. Its expansion into new markets and potential processing infrastructure mirrors the plan's emphasis on growing exports and adding value to Saskatchewan-based production. The organization shows how Indigenous-led economic activity can advance provincial goals while also meeting community priorities.

Each of the organizations profiled in the case studies are not “outside” provincial economic policy; they are deeply compatible with it. Each shows how rural and northern communities can use social enterprise, heritage, and local ownership to create the kind of growth the province says it wants: growth that strengthens families, communities, and long-term resilience.

Southern Prairie Railway aligns most clearly with the plan's tourism and small-business goals. The railway has turned heritage into an economic asset, drawing visitors, supporting local restaurants and attractions, and creating seasonal employment. In policy terms, this is a strong example of a rural organization helping to increase tourist spending, grow small businesses, and support community vitality at the same time. Just as importantly, it demonstrates that heritage conservation can be an economic strategy rather than a purely cultural one.

NWC Wild Rice Company fits the Growth Plan's goals around Indigenous participation, value-added processing, exports, and labour-force development. The company is working to keep more of the processing and value creation in Saskatchewan, while also supporting harvesters who want to remain connected to land-based livelihoods. Its expansion into new markets and potential processing infrastructure mirrors the plan's emphasis on growing exports and adding value to Saskatchewan-based production. The organization shows how Indigenous-led economic activity can advance provincial goals while also meeting community priorities.

Each of the organizations profiled in the case studies are not “outside” provincial economic policy; they are deeply compatible with it. Each shows how rural and northern communities can use social enterprise, heritage, and local ownership to create the kind of growth the province says it wants: growth that strengthens families, communities, and long-term resilience.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, FUNDING, AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Flexible funding is essential

The report already notes that social enterprises need both project-based and operational funding, as well as better access to financing and business planning tools. This section should make that point more explicit and policy-ready.

Support should match the life cycle of the enterprise

Early-stage social enterprises may need feasibility work, governance support, volunteer mobilization, or business planning. Mature social enterprises may need capital, staffing, succession planning, marketing, procurement access, or investment readiness support.

Rural and northern models need patient capital

Capital needs differ across the case studies: the ABC Centre needs planning and building reserves, Southern Prairie Railway needs capital for aging infrastructure and expanded visitor experiences, and NWC Wild Rice needs financing for processing and value-added production.

Social enterprise should be recognised as economic infrastructure

This would be a key reframing. These organizations are not merely “nice community projects.” They create platforms for employment, tourism, service delivery, local procurement, cultural continuity, and confidence.

Case	Community Context	Social enterprise role	Broader economic development contribution	Main support needed
ABC Centre	School closure, depopulation, service loss	Repurposed community hub	Service replacement, volunteer engagement, local gathering space, youth and family retention	Planning, staffing, maintenance reserves, enterprise development
Southern Prairie Railway	Population decline and loss of rail infrastructure	Heritage tourism anchor	Visitor economy, local business spillover, community pride, seasonal jobs	Capital renewal, experience development, business planning
NWC Wild Rice Company	Indigenous and Métis harvesters receiving limited value from traditional harvesting economy	Community-owned buyer and value-chain builder	Fairer prices, local income, market access, land-based livelihoods, future processing	Patient capital, processing infrastructure, value-added market development

FROM RECOGNITION TO ACTION

The stories in this report demonstrate that social enterprise is not a future possibility for rural Saskatchewan. It is already happening. Communities are repurposing facilities, building visitor economies, creating new markets, supporting Indigenous economic self-determination, and developing innovative solutions to challenges that neither governments nor markets can solve on their own. These organizations are proving that when communities are empowered to lead, they can transform local assets into lasting social and economic value.

The question is no longer whether social enterprise works in rural Saskatchewan. The question is whether we are prepared to invest in its potential.

If Saskatchewan is serious about strengthening rural resilience, retaining population, supporting Indigenous prosperity, revitalizing local economies, and sustaining community services, then social enterprise must be recognized as an essential component of the province's economic development ecosystem. Social enterprises are not merely charitable initiatives or community projects. They are builders of local capacity, creators of employment, catalysts for investment, and anchors of community well-being.

This requires action from all partners.

- Governments must develop policies and funding programs that recognize the unique realities of community-based enterprises, including the need for operational support, patient capital, and flexible financing.
- Funders and financial institutions must create pathways that allow social enterprises to move beyond pilot projects and reach long-term sustainability.
- Municipalities, Indigenous governments, and regional development organizations must view social enterprise as a legitimate tool for addressing local priorities, creating services, and generating economic opportunity.
- Community leaders and entrepreneurs must continue to explore innovative ways to combine business success with community impact, building on Saskatchewan's long tradition of cooperation, local ownership, and collective action.

Most importantly, we must shift our thinking. Rural communities should not be measured solely by the industries they attract or the services they retain. They should also be recognized for their ability to create new solutions from within. The examples in this report show that some of the province's most innovative economic development practices are emerging from small communities, northern regions, and Indigenous-led initiatives that are finding new ways to strengthen local economies while improving quality of life.

The future of rural Saskatchewan will depend on more than growth. It will depend on resilience, adaptability, local leadership, and the ability to keep value rooted in the places where it is created.

Social enterprise offers one pathway toward that future.

The challenge before us is clear: move beyond recognizing the value of social enterprise and begin intentionally supporting it as a cornerstone of community and economic development. By investing in local solutions, building stronger support systems, and empowering communities to lead, Saskatchewan can create a future where rural and northern communities are not simply surviving change, but shaping it.

The organizations featured in this report have shown what is possible. Now it is up to all of us to ensure that more communities have the opportunity to do the same.

REFERENCES

Arai, S. (2000) Typology of volunteers for a changing sociopolitical context: The impact on social policy, *Society and Leisure*, 23(2), pp. 327–352.

Buy Social Canada. (2024) Guide to social enterprise: Plan, sustain and grow your impact with a social enterprise business plan. Available at https://www.buysocialcanada.com/wp-content/uploads/BSC_GuidetoSocialEnterprise_2024.pdf

Canada 2020 (2022) A post-pandemic policy agenda for rural and smaller Canadian communities. Canada 2020. Available at <https://canada2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Canada-2020-Report-Rural-and-Smaller-Communities-December-2022-1.pdf>

Corbett, M. (2014) Dead man walking: School closure and the contested politics of place and neoliberalism in rural Nova Scotia, *Antipode*, 46(1), pp. 59–79.

Court, J., and Young, J. (2003) Bridging research and policy: Insights from 50 case studies. Overseas Development Institute, London.

Elson, P.R., Hall, P., Leeson-Klym, S., Penner, D., and Angres, J. (2015) Social enterprises in the Canadian West. *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*, 6(1), pp. 83–103.

ESDC [Employment and Social Development Canada] (2018) Inclusive innovation: New ideas and new partnerships for more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable communities. Government of Canada. Available at https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/documents/programs/social-innovation-social-finance/reports/1549-SISF_Strategy-Report-EN.pdf

FNFMFB (2023) Addressing gaps in Indigenous access to finance. First Nations Financial Management Board. Available at https://fnfmb.com/sites/default/files/2024-01/2023-10-16_idb_pre-scoping_study_final_report.pdf

Ganesh, S., and McAllum, K. (2012) Volunteering and professionalization: Trends in tension? *Management Communication Quarterly* 26(1), pp. 152–158.

Government of Canada (2018) Inclusive innovation: New ideas and new partnerships for more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable communities. Government of Canada. Available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/social-innovation-social-finance/reports/recommendations-what-we.html>

Government of Saskatchewan (nd). Growth plan: The next decade of growth, 2020–2030. Available at: <https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/api/v1/products/103260/formats/114516/download>

Halsey, J. (2011) Small schools, big future, *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), pp. 5–13.
ctures for a plural economy in rural areas? Analysing the role of community-based social enterprises. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 64, pp. 82–103.

Hampton, M.P. (2005) Heritage, local communities and economic development. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32(3), 735–759.

Hustedde, R. (2015) Seven theories for seven community developers, in Phillips, R. and Pittman, R. (eds) *An introduction to community development*. New York: Routledge.

ISED [Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada] (2022) Rural opportunity, national prosperity: The Government of Canada's Rural Economic Development Strategy. Government of Canada. Available at <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/rural/sites/default/files/documents/red-strategy-e.pdf>

ISED [Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada] (2022) SME profile: social enterprises in Canada. Government of Canada. Available at <https://publications.aws.tpsgc-pwgsc.cloud-nuage.canada.ca/site/eng/9.903344/publication.html>

Jonson Shoyama. (nd) Case studies [webpage]. Available at <https://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/research-ideas/publications-and-policy-insight/case-studies.php>

Krusenvik, L. (2016) Using case studies as a scientific method: Advantages and disadvantages. Available at <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1054643/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

McAllum, K. (2018) Volunteers as boundary workers: Negotiating tensions between volunteerism and professionalism in nonprofit organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 32(4), pp. 534–564.

McMurtry, J. J., Brouard, F., Elson, P., Hall, P., Lionais, D. & Vieta, M. (2015) Social enterprise in Canada: Context, models and institutions, ICSEM Working Papers, No. 04, Liege: The International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) Project.

Madill, J., Brouard, F. And Hebb, T. (2010) Canadian social enterprises: An empirical exploration of social transformation, financial self-sufficiency, and Innovation. *Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing*, 22(2), pp. 135–51.

Neuls, E.S. (2024) Saskatchewan: Building capacity in northern Saskatchewan through Global partnerships and relevant graduate programming, in Vandermale, Leader, and Brouder (Eds.), *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, State of Rural Canada 2024: Inclusive and Sustainable Futures for Rural and Northern Communities*, pp. 76–87. Available at https://sorc.crrf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/SORC_2024_V8.pdf

OECD (2020) Linking Indigenous Communities with Regional Development in Canada, OECD Rural Policy Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/fa0f60c6-en>.

Olmedo, L. and O'Shaughnessy, M. (2022) Community-based social enterprises as actors for neo-endogenous rural development: A multi-stakeholder approach. *Rural Sociology*, 87: 1191–1218.

Olmedo, L., Rinne-Koski, K.M., O'shaughnessy, M., et al. (2023) Support structures for a plural economy in rural areas? Analysing the role of community-based social enterprises. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 64, pp. 82–103.

Simbandumwe, L., Fulton, M., and Ketilson, L.H. (nd) The co-operative sector in Saskatchewan: A statistical overview. Occasional Paper Series #91-01. Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan.

Slowey, G (2008). *Navigating neoliberalism: Self-determination and the Mikisew Cree First Nation*. UBC Press. Southern Prairie Railway (2024) History. Southern Prairie Railway. Available at <https://southernprairierailway.ca/history/>

Southern Prairie Railway (2025) Train rides & tours in Ogema, Saskatchewan. Southern Prairie Railway. Available at <https://southernprairierailway.ca/>

Soviana. (2013) Case survey for assessing community-based enterprise: A research design. Justus-Liebig-Universität, Giessen. Available at <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/84707/1/Case%20survey%20for%20assessing%20ce%20-%20a%20research%20design.pdf>

Stanford, J. (2020) The staple theory @ 50: Reflections on the lasting significance of Mel Watkin's 'A staple theory of economic growth'. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Available at <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2020/04/Staple%20Theory%20at%2050%20-%202020%20version.pdf>

Quarter, J., Mook, L. and Armstrong, A. (2017) *Understanding the social economy: A Canadian perspective*. University of Toronto Press.



From Local Assets to Lasting Impact

Social enterprise and rural
economic development in Saskatchewan.

Local assets. Lasting impact.