

# Best Practice

## South Saskatchewan Ready

### CONTACT

Sean Wallace, South Saskatchewan Ready  
Town of Coronach  
306-852-8400

Box 90  
Coronach, SK S0H 0Z0

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Project video: <https://youtu.be/50UbEXKqaLI>

### THE PRACTICE

#### ***What was the issue?***

The Town of Coronach had an in-depth economic impact analysis completed by MDB Insight Inc. that showed that Coronach would lose 70% of its population and GDP with the Poplar River Power Station and connected Westmoreland Poplar River Mine scheduled to close in 2030. Town Council worked with the Saskatchewan Economic Development Agency to formulate a plan towards the best ways to mitigate the pending 300 job losses.

#### ***What was the project?***

It was agreed that working together as a region to present a united front for economic policy change and industry attraction would improve potential opportunities. In November 2019, The Town of Coronach invited 8 communities in the surrounding area to join a "Deep South Economic Transition Action Team". In 2020 this was formalized and called "South Saskatchewan Ready" (SSR) <https://southsaskready.ca/>

SSR includes voting members appointed to represent the following communities:

- Town of Rockglen
- RM of Poplar Valley
- RM of Hart Butte
- Town of Willow Bunch
- RM of Willow Bunch
- Town of Bengough
- RM of Bengough
- RM of Happy Valley
- Town of Coronach.

The vision for this team was to develop a strategy to address the areas identified in the MDB Insight study as a collective and mitigate the impacts of the transition away from coal fired power dependence. The collective goals

were to work together to find funding, diversify economies, and provide employment opportunities for families living in the region.

## THE PROCESS

The Town of Coronach initiated this regional economic partnership, but the members of council that are directors on this board are engaged and enthusiastic about the opportunities listed in the initial study and in the feasibility study. As a board, they have developed governance policies, code of conduct and procedural policies and an application process and policies to disburse this funding for companies creating new year-round full-time jobs, retention of skilled labor and sustaining or expanding the tax bases in the 9 participating communities.

Verona Thibault with the Saskatchewan Economic Development Alliance (SEDA) played a key role in building the partnership with the federal partners that supported the Town of Coronach with funding to engage the 8 other communities in the partnership. The initial stages of the partnership included voting members and appointees from the following communities:

Voting members:

- Town of Bengough
- Town of Coronach
- Rural Municipality of Bengough
- Rural Municipality of Happy Valley
- Rural Municipality of Hart Butte
- Town of Rockglen
- Rural Municipality of Poplar Valley
- Rural Municipality of Willow Bunch
- Town of Willow Bunch
- Coronach - Local School/Youth Member

Non-voting members:

- Poplar River Power Station Director
- Poplar River Mine Manager
- Community Futures South Central
- Western Diversification
- Province of Saskatchewan

This group collaborated to develop the terms of reference for the first stages of the groups' work, then with the development of in-depth policies and board review, this led to the non-profit incorporation of the board. This work was primarily done by Sean Wallace, Managing Director for SSR. The board relied heavily on his expertise and experience for policy development, inter-municipal co-operation, and rural economic development.

<https://southsaskready.ca/press/south-saskatchewan-is-ready-to-tell-the-world-its-open-for-business/>

Applications were made to multiple funders to work on specific projects, and to be investment ready using the initial economic impact study results. Funding was successfully secured for improving land use policies, and localized programs and planning. Funds were also available to the communities and region for asset management.

This project has also attracted the Province of Saskatchewan's interest and support through the Coal Transition Funding of \$2 Million dollars. The group secured funding for Zoning and Official Community plan review for all 9 communities to support those communities to be investment ready for new industries to moving into the region. The SSR developed a thorough application process to disburse the provincial funding to companies creating new year-round full-time jobs, retaining skilled labor, and sustaining or expanding the tax bases in the 9 involved communities.

SSR reports to the Province of Saskatchewan on any fund disbursement and shares the managing director's report with each council.

The Town of Coronach and the SSR has support from federal partners that have enabled the Board to engage consultants and experts, completion of an in-depth feasibility study with an economic development road map that has identified over 40 opportunities for the region. With the evidence of the economic analysis and an in-depth feasibility study, the Regional Director has been able to secure further funding for the information needed to be investment ready to thrive in a post-coal economy.

One of the keys to success was applying for and receiving the funding to have the economic analysis study work completed. This provided back-up documentation from a third party demonstrating the immediate need for an action plan, expert leadership, and financial assistance to get the impacted communities the economic development that would be desperately needed in the near future. With the first study's results, SSR was able to apply for Federal funding for an experienced and skilled Managing Director. The Managing Director, Sean Wallace, has developed the SSR incorporation, governance, branding, and website which have further strengthened applications made for further funding. Sean has worked tirelessly to implement the project road map and to engage and attract new industries in Agri-Value, Green Energy, Mining and Regional Tourism. The Town of Coronach has taken the lead role of grant applicant. As the SSR board is now incorporated, they will be able to apply for future funding with a unified vision and strategic plan.

## THE RESULTS

This project is ongoing, and there are several projects approved for funding under the Provincial funding program. SSR has seen solid progress on the Managing Director's work plan towards the SOFI program, industry attraction and opportunities within the involved communities.

There have been challenges with individuals from the member communities and inappropriate behavior towards the managing director. The behaviour was reported to the board, as well as the members communities, and the representative was replaced. There are applications and projects from companies that require non-disclosure agreements and, while bound by their Councillor oath, there are high level concerns surrounding the risk of confidentiality, and members understanding what 'In Camera' means for discussed information. To address these concerns SSR incorporated and created its own code of conduct to maintain integrity and a clear vision for the work of the group. There have been some challenging conversations to work through to produce the governance policy that gives SSR structure and a tool to handle any situation that may arise.

The impact of this group has been substantial. For the involved communities, the project has highlighted the value of working together for the greater good, the need for a sustainable way to support future generations in the communities following the coal transition, and for residents to have security as they transition from their current jobs into new opportunities. This work is ongoing, and SSR plans to continue this work beyond the 2030 Power Station closure date. <https://globalnews.ca/news/8271893/south-saskatchewan-montana-tours/>

## LESSONS LEARNED

Inter-municipal collaboration was a key to success for every town and R.M. involved. When working together, you share resources that support your administrative staff and reduce duplication of work - even in day-to-day operations. Partnering with other Towns and Rural Municipalities does not mean amalgamation or annexing is on the horizon, it means you respect one another's strengths and are empowered to apply for funding and support one another's projects as a joined force, creating a greater potential for success. Even when neighboring towns have a history of discord, they likely have the similar goals and challenges. Since the regional group formed, the communities have

seen more inter municipal travel and tourism. There are also unmeasured ripple effects of this regional collaboration that has generated support from groups, organizations, and small businesses. Co-operation brings more benefits to the ratepayers than any competitive spirit or protectionism.

A productive and effective board of directors, along with good policy and governance were important to this project. Streamlining governance to the standard of councils alleviates any confusion, conflict of interest and improves function and success of organizations. We encourage our partners at SUMA and SARM to support and offer training on governance for committees of council and inter-municipal boards.