

# RURAL RENEWAL SUMMIT 2023

## WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

**AUGUST 2023**



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## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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# INTRODUCTION

The Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA) hosted the *Rural Renewal Summit* in July 2023. Attendees included settlement and integration providing organizations, municipal designates of the *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams, municipalities who are in the process of applying to the streams, as well as those interested in applying in the future. This summit commenced due to interest from rural communities and agencies to connect and collaborate over best practices developed in implementing local *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* processes.

There were 59 participants representing municipalities as small as populations <10,000 and as large as 105,000. This summit connected municipalities from across the province with professionals such as Economic Development Officers, Community Outreach workers, Business Retention specialists, and Rural Small Centres managers. Although there are existing working groups among *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* designates, for many participants, this was the first time they have been convened collectively, met one another, and established relationships.

The *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams are immigration pathways announced in [February 2022](#) by the Government of Alberta. With the intention of increasing immigration in rural regions of Alberta, these streams delegate municipal entities the authority to endorse newcomers for permanent residency.

For more information on the *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams, see [here](#).

# KEY FINDINGS

The summit allowed for the identification of common processes, identified challenges, as well as opportunities for growth in the existing *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams. The key stakeholders engaged during the summit have been municipal representatives who have a comprehensive understanding and continuous communication with employers and prospective newcomers who are interested in partaking in the stream.

When analyzing existing designates processes, there appeared to be a 7-step approach that designates developed independently (Table 1). The 7-steps were reviewed during the summit, where participants attached their individual nuances.

Table 1. Common processes that *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* designates employ to identify employers, hire, and retain newcomers.

Step 1.	An employer who is interested in participating in the <i>Rural Renewal Stream</i> must submit an application for eligibility to the municipality. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some designates have placed restrictions on specific industries who are eligible to apply.</li> </ul>
Step 2.	Job vacancies from approved employers are listed on a community job board for newcomers to identify and apply to. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not all designates have collective job boards. Newcomer candidates may be responsible for identifying employment opportunities independently.</li> </ul>
Step 3.	The approved employer makes an endorsement letter request on behalf of the candidate. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For example, the municipality requests a 2 or 3-year commitment through a <i>memorandum of understanding</i> for the newcomer to stay in the community. There is no legally binding agreement to hold the newcomer to the community, the request</li> </ul>

	from the municipality is to promote retention once the newcomer receives permanent residency.
Step 4.	If approved, the endorsement letter is issued directly to the newcomer candidate by the municipal designate.
Step 5.	The newcomer candidate applies for Provincial Nomination through AAIP (Alberta Advantage Immigration Program).
Step 6.	Local settlement agencies offer support services for newcomers (Examples: Language skills, community programming, after-school care for children and youth).
Step 7.	Follow-up with employer and/or candidate to discuss retention, employment outcomes and community integration.

Following the review of the general 7-step processes the designates utilize, a discussion was held to assess the pros and cons of the existing process (Table 2). These pros and cons act as a foundation to understand the benefits and barriers of the immigration streams.

Table 2. Pros and Cons that municipal designates shared based on their experiences with implementing the *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams.

Pros	Cons
The streams act as a pathway for newcomers who would otherwise leave rural areas. This pathway serves as an incentive for newcomers to migrate to rural centres, where employment and population rates have been declining.	Insufficient funding to support the facilitation of the program: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative costs</li> <li>• Settlement funding</li> <li>• Foreign Qualification Recognition/Licensing</li> </ul>
The streams bring together key community stakeholders, regularly. Key stakeholders include: local employers, economic development officers, municipal leaders, community service workers, etc.	Municipal designates have challenges tracking program success due to the long duration to process applications, and minimal follow-up from the Government of Alberta.
The streams have flexibility designed into the processes, allowing individual municipal designates to make the program fit according to their specific needs and resources.	Municipal designates experience challenges with employers and the risk of placing newcomers in precarious working conditions. Designates express the need for safe reporting mechanisms.
	Labour market needs can become backlogged as newcomer applicants are held to high language and education requirements, as well as prolonged duration of newcomer application processing times.

Newcomer challenges identified at the summit were identified by municipal representatives through the streams (Table 3). Despite being dispersed across diverse and vast areas of Alberta, newcomers from all rural centres face similar challenges.

Table 3. Challenges newcomers face when attempting to settle through the *Rural Renewal* or *Rural Entrepreneur* streams.

Focus area	Description
Housing	Housing is a nationwide challenge across Canada, with rural centres in particular struggling to keep up with demand for migrants. It can be exceptionally challenging for newcomers to find affordable and accessible housing when seeking to relocate to a rural region, as they do not have local connections to assist in navigating the market.
Transportation	Public transportation in rural centres can be highly limited, forcing newcomers to rely on personal vehicles or walking far distances in all weather conditions.
Childcare	Newcomers struggle to find available, affordable, and accessible childcare in their communities.
Medical Access	Across Alberta, physicians are high in demand and newcomers in particular struggle to find family physicians to meet their basic medical needs in rural centres.
Credentials	The AAIP requires specific and high language and educational requirements to receive permanent residency.

The Rural Renewal Summit acted as a platform for municipal representatives to reflect on leverageable opportunities facilitated through *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams (Table 4). The opportunities highlighted below are areas where municipalities can act upon independently, or can be facilitated through AAISA’s engagement initiatives.

Table 4. Areas of opportunity for *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* designates to leverage.

Opportunity	Description
Quarterly meetings	Convening all designates and interested applicants once a quarter to discuss respective progress, on-going sharing of common challenges and best practices development
Community sharing portal	An online portal for designates to post questions, comments, and share resource templates
Summit	Opportunity for AAISA or other entities such as municipalities to host additional summits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presenting case studies of municipal experiences, programs, challenges, and success</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Upcoming conference opportunity: The Brooks Newell Region will be hosting a conference in May 2024 for Rural Renewal Designates<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Please contact Kourtney Hiebert at <a href="mailto:khiebert@brooks.ca">khiebert@brooks.ca</a> for more information</li></ul></li></ul>
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## CONCLUSIONS

The Rural Renewal Summit served as a pivotal event, bringing together a diverse array of stakeholders invested in the success of the *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams. The summit provided a unique platform for municipal representatives, economic development officers, and community service workers to collaborate, exchange insights, and collectively address the challenges and opportunities encountered with these pathways.

The facilitation of knowledge exchange enabled participants to identify commonalities in their respective approaches, share methods that have led to successful outcomes, and delved into challenges faced by both municipalities and newcomers. This summit underscored the need for continual engagement initiatives and attention towards funding for administrative support, foreign qualification recognition, as well as addressing limited housing, transportation, and healthcare access for newcomers. The opportunities for growth were highlighted throughout the summit, with increasing desires to convene regularly, interactive virtual platforms to share resources, as well as the potential to host future summits. The Rural Renewal Summit acted as a catalyst for municipal designates and potential applicants to reflect and cultivate innovative strategies to increase the effectiveness of the *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams.

This summary report will be followed by an in-depth analysis of the Rural Renewal Summit. This upcoming report will detail the strengths and best practices of the municipal designates implementing the *Rural Renewal* and *Rural Entrepreneur* streams, reflecting on the lived experiences of existing program participants to improve program delivery.