

# Comox Valley targets agri-food cluster for development

## AGM features tips from ag marketing expert

by PETER VAN DONGEN

COMOX – The Comox Valley Economic Development Society (CVEDS) has a new five-year economic development plan and a thriving food and beverage sector is at the top of its priority list.

“The board has identified agriculture as the prime sector to be targeted,” outgoing CVEDS president Darryl Pippin reported to a packed audience at the organization’s annual general meeting in Comox, May 4.

“Opportunities exist for new and expanded operations on our farmable lands, assuring not only a more viable local food source, but protecting agricultural lands and maintaining the rural feel of the Comox Valley.”

The decision to pursue a food and beverage cluster in the region follows an extensive strategic planning process involving the three neighbouring communities of Comox, Courtenay and Cumberland. The process began in 2004 and wrapped up with a final report in August 2005.

“We’re at a turning point in

the Comox Valley,” adds economic development officer John Watson. “From an economic development perspective, we’ve done a significant amount of work identifying what we want to do, where we want to go and who we want to be. And we know we can’t be everybody.”

Thus, Watson and his team recently rolled out a marketing campaign that boldly declares the Comox Valley as “The New Provence.” Likening the local area to the well-known agricultural region in southeastern France, the campaign emphasizes the Comox Valley’s abundance of fertile land, strong transportation links and desirable quality of life.

So far, the campaign includes a comprehensive investment profile featuring local agri-food success stories such as Natural Pastures Cheese, Fanny Bay Oysters and Eatmore Sprouts. A matching trade show display was also unveiled, while an agricultural website will be launched later this year.

“You have something really precious here, really precious,”

noted keynote speaker Kim McConnell. “Let’s make sure we keep it, let’s make sure we enhance it, let’s make sure we protect it, because it’s something really special.”

With McConnell’s background, you might also add to that list: ‘Let’s make sure we market it.’

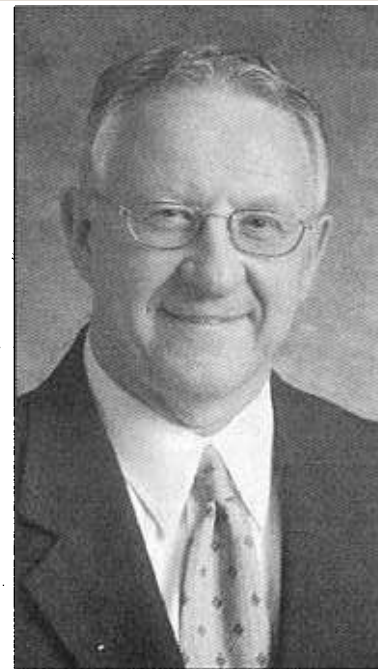
As president and CEO of AdFarm, a Calgary-based advertising and public relations firm dedicated solely to the agriculture industry, you might say McConnell knows a thing or two about getting the message out. In addition, the company was recently named one of Canada’s 50 Best Managed Companies and was ranked as the third-best place to work in the country by *Canadian Business* magazine.

McConnell offered these five tips on how to market your business or region:

- First, be known for something. Position your farm, business or region in a way that distinguishes you from your competition. “It’s easier to score a goal when you stand in front of the net than it is when you stand in the corner,” McConnell explained. “That’s much the

same in marketing and business. If you want to succeed at something, put yourself in the place where you can put the puck in the net. That’s positioning.”

- Second, promote your position. Make sure people know what you have to offer and where you’re going. You might make great bean sprouts. You might make great cheese. But if no one knows about it, they aren’t going to buy it.
- Third, be recognized as a winner. People like to be associated with winners. “In what region does somebody want to put their new plant or new business?” he questioned. “In a region that’s a winner.”
- Fourth, McConnell shifted gears slightly and stressed the importance of leadership. “I honestly think the biggest crisis in agriculture today is not financial – it’s a leadership crisis,” he noted. “Are you showing the leadership in your organization? And as an organization, are you doing things to get the best leaders, support the best leaders? Because leadership counts.”
- Fifth, take time to have some fun. “It’s sad that we don’t have enough fun; we’re work-



AdFarm CEO Kim McConnell

ing so darn hard,” he said. “When you have some fun, then the creative juices flow a little bit, and it’s more fun to be able to be involved.”

“I encourage you to form a picture,” McConnell concluded. “What is the picture that you’re wanting to create? Communicate that picture. Get people behind it. And every once in a while, pause and celebrate.”

## Ag impact on Sumas aquifer questioned