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Beyond the Boom: Building Resilience for Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo's Next Chapter

2026 Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce
AGM & Keynote Impact Recap

The Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce's 2026 Annual General Meeting brought together business leaders, elected officials, industry representatives, entrepreneurs, and community partners for an afternoon focused on leadership, resilience, advocacy, and the future of Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo.

Held at SMS Equipment Place, the AGM reflected both the continued momentum of the Chamber and the broader evolution of the region itself. A community shaped by economic cycles, strengthened through adversity, and increasingly focused on long-term opportunity.

The event featured opening remarks from the Honourable Eleanor Olszewski, Minister of Emergency Management and Community Resilience and Minister responsible for Prairies Economic Development Canada, alongside a keynote conversation with incoming Canadian Chamber of Commerce Chair Carmen R. McNary.

Together, the discussions explored Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo's resilience, Canada's changing economic landscape, the future of resource development, and the role business communities will play in shaping what comes next.



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Opening Remarks: Resilience, Recovery, and National Importance

Minister Olszewski opened the AGM by reflecting on the strength and resilience demonstrated by Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo as the region marks the 10th commemoration of the 2016 wildfires. Her remarks acknowledged not only the scale of the disaster, but the extraordinary response and recovery efforts that followed. From first responders and local organizations, to businesses, volunteers, and residents who helped rebuild the region together.

The Minister also highlighted the federal government's support through the Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements (DFAA) program, which provided more than \$385 million to assist Alberta with disaster response and recovery efforts related to the 2016 wildfires. This included immediate emergency response funding as well as long-term recovery support for impacted communities, infrastructure, and essential services.

Importantly, the Minister positioned Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo as a region of national significance. Not only because of its resource sector, but because of the people, innovation, and economic contribution that continue to shape Canada's prosperity.

In discussing today's uncertain global economic environment, she referenced Prime Minister Mark Carney's remarks about focusing on what Canada can control amidst shifting global markets and geopolitical pressures, a theme that carried throughout the afternoon's broader conversations on resilience, competitiveness, and preparedness.



Impact Recap

Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



A Year of Momentum for the Chamber

The AGM also served as an opportunity to reflect on a year of significant growth, advocacy, and organizational impact for the Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce.

During remarks recognizing outgoing Chair Crystal Young, the Chamber highlighted several major accomplishments from the past year, including:

- Advancing policy resolutions at both the Alberta Chambers of Commerce AGM and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce AGM
- Successfully passing two national policy resolutions without amendment at the Canadian Chamber AGM in Mississauga
- Strengthening the Chamber's role in conversations around Canadian energy, trade corridors, and interprovincial trade
- Achieving record engagement through the Chamber's Business Awards program, which saw nearly 200 nominees and more than 4,900 public votes
- Continuing to expand the Chamber's influence provincially and nationally as a leading voice for the Wood Buffalo business community

Throughout the event, a recurring theme emerged: **the Fort McMurray Chamber is increasingly operating not only as a local business organization, but as a strategic voice in provincial and national conversations affecting the future of Canadian business and resource development.**

Impact Recap

Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



Board Leadership and Governance

The AGM also marked the swearing-in of the Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce's 2026-2027 Board of Directors, led by newly appointed Chair Paige Cyr and Vice Chair Vincent Eggleston. Returning to the Executive Committee are Christopher Wruck as Secretary and Denean Robinson as Treasurer. The Chamber also welcomed newly elected Director Jordan Nail and congratulated Alona Cruz-Farthing and Amir Shami on their re-election.

Continuing Directors include Nayef Mahgoub, Blair Drew, and Graham Ure.

The Chamber also recognized outgoing Chair Crystal Young for her leadership and contributions throughout the past year, including strengthening the Chamber's advocacy efforts and expanding its provincial and national engagement.

Impact Recap

Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



Keynote Address: Beyond the Boom

The centrepiece of the afternoon was a keynote conversation with Carmen R. McNary, who reflected on Alberta's economic history, the evolution of the oil sands, and the lessons Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo offers the rest of Canada.

Drawing from decades of experience in law, government, military service, and the Chamber network, McNary described how economic cycles are experienced differently in Fort McMurray than they are elsewhere.

Here, economic cycles are personal.

They shape whether businesses grow or contract, whether families stay or leave, whether young people build futures locally, and whether communities feel confident enough to invest in long-term growth.

His central message was clear:

Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo does not need to learn resilience. It has already demonstrated it repeatedly.

The opportunity now is to prepare intentionally for what comes next.



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Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



Key Highlights

1. The Oil Sands Were Built Through Persistence

McNary emphasized that the oil sands were never a guaranteed success.

Early projects survived through technological innovation, long-term investment, collaboration, and persistence during periods of enormous uncertainty. What exists today was built through decades of problem-solving, adaptation, and confidence in the region's future.

For local businesses, the lesson was significant: Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo was not built by one boom cycle. It was built by people and organizations willing to continue investing through difficult periods.

2. Community-Building Is Economic Strategy

A major theme of the keynote was the importance of building a real community, not simply a workforce hub.

McNary reflected on the decisions made decades ago to prioritize neighbourhoods, schools, families, and community infrastructure during periods of rapid growth. That decision fundamentally shaped Fort McMurray's long-term resilience.

Today, that lesson remains highly relevant.

Economic competitiveness is tied directly to quality of life. Communities that attract and retain people are communities that continue growing.

For businesses, this reinforces the importance of investing not only in operations, but in the broader strength of the community itself.

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Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



3. The Next Cycle Will Be Different

McNary argued that the region may not simply be between economic cycles, but between economic models.

The next decade will likely be shaped by overlapping forces including:

- Environmental performance and emissions management
- Policy certainty and regulatory competitiveness
- Technology and productivity
- Workforce attraction and retention
- Access to capital
- Global energy demand and evolving markets

The discussion acknowledged that while global demand for energy remains strong, the nature of investment and development is changing.

The future may involve:

- Greater focus on efficiency and emissions reduction
- More incremental growth rather than mega-project expansion
- Increased opportunities in petrochemicals, hydrogen, and value-added energy products
- Greater integration of technology and innovation into resource development

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Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



4. Workforce and Talent Will Define Competitiveness

One of the strongest business-focused themes of the afternoon was the growing importance of people.

McNary noted that future growth may be constrained less by capital and more by workforce availability as populations age globally and competition for skilled labour intensifies.

Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo holds significant advantages:

- A highly skilled workforce
- Strong technical expertise
- A younger demographic profile than many regions
- Deep experience in large-scale industrial development

But maintaining those advantages will require continued investment in talent attraction, retention, training, and community development.



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Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



5. Canada Has Major Advantages, If It Chooses to Use Them

During the Q&A discussion, McNary addressed Canada's ability to compete in an increasingly aggressive global investment environment.

While acknowledging the economic strength and competitiveness of the United States, he emphasized that Canada possesses enormous advantages of its own:

- Energy resources
- Critical minerals
- Engineering and technical expertise
- Innovation capacity
- A highly educated workforce
- Global market opportunities

He argued that Canada's challenge is not a lack of opportunity, but the need for greater clarity, confidence, and alignment around national economic priorities.

For Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo, this reinforces the region's importance in conversations around Canadian energy security, economic sovereignty, infrastructure, and global competitiveness.

Impact Recap

Highlights and outcomes from your Chamber events



Looking Ahead

The 2026 AGM reflected a Chamber and a business community increasingly focused not only on responding to change, but on preparing for it.

Throughout the afternoon, a consistent message emerged:

Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo has already demonstrated its resilience through economic downturns, wildfire recovery, global disruption, and changing markets.

The next opportunity is to build on that resilience intentionally, through stronger communities, strategic advocacy, workforce development, innovation, and long-term planning.

As the Chamber looks ahead to the coming year, the conversations at this AGM reinforced both the challenges and opportunities facing the region.

Because the communities that prepare for change do more than survive economic cycles.

They help shape what comes next.

