

Gemma Mendez-Smith

Executive Director, Four County Labour Market Planning Board



Gemma Mendez-Smith is the Executive Director of the Four County Labour Market Planning Board (Planning Board), serving Bruce, Grey, Huron and Perth counties. She has been working in the area of labour market development for over 17 years. Joining the Planning Board in 2001 opened her eyes to the subtleties of the changing labour market needs. She also learned the importance of labour market planning for communities that expect to participate in the global economy is key to our success.

The organization regularly publishes research that sheds light on sectors, industries, occupations and the skills needs of our labour pool. These all have very dynamic ecosystems and understanding how and where they intersect is key to developing labour market strategies that work.

Gemma arrived in Canada in 1987 and, after learning how different things are here from her island of Trinidad and Tobago, she focused on being successful in her new home. Married with four children her goal is to share the idea that Workforce Planning is a 'thing' and doing it well will help businesses and people realize the success they envision.

Pat Jilesen

Director, Ontario Federation of Agriculture



Pat is a public affairs and strategy expert with over 10 yrs of experience working with local, provincial and federal government. His passion for agriculture has led him to the position of Director with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, representing 38,000 farms and farm families across Ontario. Pat has recently began working with Michael Keegan & Associates, a government and business consulting firm based in Guelph

Ashleigh Weeden

PhD Student & Research Assistant, University of Guelph



Ashleigh Weeden is an award-winning rural innovator who currently splits her time between Ontario's Bruce and Wellington Counties. Her work leading Grey County's Connected County Initiative directly contributed to the County receiving recognition as one of the Top7 Intelligent Communities of 2017 and the top achiever in its population category. Ashleigh also provided strategic communications and community engagement support for the largest publicly funded regional broadband project in Canada to date, the

Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) Initiative, for several years, including supporting First Nations engagement in the project.

A proud graduate of both the University of Guelph (B.A. Honours in International Development) and the University of Victoria (MPA), Ashleigh is currently a PhD student in Rural Studies in the [School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph](#), where she is focused on researching place-based rural innovation systems, future-oriented community capacity building, knowledge mobilization and public policy renewal. Her work advocating for people-centred public service and connectivity-driven innovation in rural communities can be read in publications like [The Torontoist](#), Canadian Government Executive, and Municipal World. Learn more about Ashleigh's doctoral research by visiting www.ruraldev.ca/ashleigh-weeden

Dr. Ryan Gibson

Libro Professor in Regional Economic Development,
University of Guelph



Originally from rural Manitoba, Ryan Gibson has a deep intrigue and respect for rural communities, rural people, and the events that shape their futures. Over the past ten years, Dr. Gibson has been engaged in research projects and community development processes focused on new forms of governance, regional collaboration, cooperatives, rural philanthropy, rural revitalization, and immigration and migration.

Dr. Gibson is the Libro Professor in Regional Economic Development at the [School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph](#). This chair position was created through an endowment by [Libro Credit Union](#) and two University of Guelph donors.

Ryan has also served as the President of the [Canadian Community Economic Development Network](#) and a board member of the [Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation](#). He holds appointments with the [Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Saint Mary's University](#), [International Centre for Northern Governance and Development](#) at the University of Saskatchewan, the [Rural Development Institute](#) at Brandon University, the [Institute of Island Studies](#) at the University of Prince Edward Island, and [Assiniboine Community College](#).

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