Local economies wax and wane. Opportunities come and go, but the work of making local communities productive and sustainable remains constant. Players may change and urgency may diminish, but many organizations are staying the course. Dawson County Extension has been one of those organizations that has been instrumental in developing the social, economic, and natural resources of Dawson County and eastern Montana.

Dawson County MSU Extension has a long and successful history of providing ongoing support for the community’s efforts to maintain and grow a sustainable, healthy environment for its diverse population. Dawson County Extension provides support and information for agricultural, horticultural, community development, 4-H, and family and consumer science activities. It is the community’s portal to the multitude of resources available across the state and nation through MSU Extension, Montana State University, and the national land grant university system.

In the months to come, making educated decisions founded on fact-based, non-biased information will become increasingly important for individuals and businesses to sustain and maintain their operations and their way of life.

Dawson County MSU Extension looks forward to a continued positive and constructive relationship to make Glendive, the surrounding county, and the northern Great Plains region the most productive and favorable environment possible for current residents and future generations to come.

Welcome to Dawson County

Dawson County straddles the Yellowstone River in eastern Montana. Interstate 94 runs through the center of the county which is 35 miles from North Dakota and 150 miles south of the Canadian border. The county encompasses 1,523,387 acres with 1.38 million acres in farmland, producing mainly dryland wheat and barley, irrigated corn and sugarbeets, and cattle. With a total population of 9,625, it has a population density of less than four people per square mile. Glendive sits astride the Yellowstone River and is the county seat with the city of Glendive and unincorporated West Glendive making up 7,396 or 77% of the county’s population. The main employers include the Glendive Medical Center, BNSF Railway, and Glendive Public Schools. Dawson County is home to Montana’s largest state park, Makoshika, Dawson Community College, and the Makoshika Dinosaur Museum. The county offers excellent recreational activities and outstanding tourist attractions.
Community Partnerships

Community GATE Partners to Develop Transitional Housing Facility

The recent oil boom and bust has amplified the need for affordable housing for those who are transitioning into or out of higher paying jobs or transitioning out of high-priced housing. Additionally, there is a need in the community for temporary housing for people moving through the area and individuals graduating out of regional addiction treatment facilities. Local churches have been swamped with requests for temporary housing for people who were in need and had little or no money and regional transitional residences have long waiting lists.

Community Giving Assistance Towards Employment (GATE) was established in 1996 to address welfare reform and has a long history of sponsoring local and regional community-based projects such as the Yellowstone Recycling Center, the Glendive Community Garden, the Glendive Food Development Center, the Saturday Farmers Market, and the Farm-to-Table Store, to name a few. For the past 8 years, Community GATE has been redeveloping and upgrading the facilities at the Prairie Development Center (PDC). The PDC currently houses a business incubator, the manufacturing facilities for Western Trails Foods, and the offices of Community GATE.

Bruce Smith, Dawson County MSU Extension Agent, serves as board Treasurer, Farm-to-Table Project Director, and is the board’s longest serving member.

Recognizing the need for transitional housing in the community, a partnership was formed with local service organizations and the PDC was opened to individuals and families who had no place else to go and/or lacked the resources to provide for themselves and their families.

In the recent past, a grant had been secured to redesign 10 offices on the second level of the PDC into dormitory-style lodging and three adjacent offices into men’s and women’s bathrooms for culinary arts students. The architectural renderings that resulted from that project included converting three offices into separate male and female bathrooms with showers, sinks, and restroom stalls. Until funding can be secured, this larger set of bathrooms is on hold. However, to accommodate the current need, a grant was secured from the Montana Community Foundation and the TransCanada Pipeline Company to fund construction of an additional single bathroom with a shower. The new bathroom complements an existing set of bathrooms and adds the benefit of providing a shower and laundry facilities for residents.

A recent article in the local newspaper stated that: “The goal of Community GATE has always been to help people get on their feet again,” board member Bruce Smith explained, so when board members were approached about assisting with the sober living home project, responding with an affirmative answer was easy.

The article goes on to say: “It is important to realize that everyone is touched by addiction at some point, either personally or through the experience of a friend or family member. Addiction is not just the addict’s problem, it is a community problem and the community needs to be part of the remedy. Establishing the home will take a huge commitment from everyone involved and help from (people) willing to be a mentor or willing to help with fund-raising and planning.”

County Extension Expands Regional Radio Coverage

For the past seven years Dawson County MSU Extension has recorded a weekly 3-minute radio spot heard throughout the region on KXGN-AM and KDZN-FM. In September, the program was expanded to include a weekly broadcast on KGLE-FM. KGLE has a devoted and consistent listening audience that seldom listens to other stations, so their listeners are a new audience for the information from Dawson County MSU Extension office.

The weekly radio programs cover topics ranging from home and yard to community and economic development with a major emphasis on timely, ag-related topics. MSU Extension partners with other ag-related government entities in the region to get press releases and news announcements on the air and out to the public.
Conservation and Youth Development

1,500 Bird Houses

Cavity nesting birds such as house wrens, chickadees, tree swallows, and eastern and mountain bluebirds are native bird species in eastern Montana. All are threatened by loss of natural habitat and encroaching invasive species such as house sparrows and starlings that are taking over most cavity nest sites and also aggressively damaging and destroying native bird species in nearby nests.

Manmade birdhouses provide the best alternative to natural nesting locations for native, cavity-nesting bird species.

Over the last 10 years, the Dawson County MSU Extension set a goal of building 1,500 bluebird houses to be distributed throughout eastern Montana, southwestern North Dakota, and northwestern South Dakota. In 2016, the total number of birdhouses constructed hit 1,451, leaving just 49 left to reach the goal.

Building the birdhouses is used as a hands-on, skill-building, educational exercise for local and regional youth groups such as country school students, Boy Scouts, and 4-H’ers. At least every other year at Camp Needmore in Ekalaka, attendees from ages 9 - 11 get hands-on experience turning recycled wood into birdhouses. Three different designs are used and other recycled wood projects are included in the craft projects’ rotation so camp-goers never have to build the same project twice.

In addition to the hands-on carpentry, each participant gains knowledge on what species of birds they can expect to see using their newly constructed bird domicile, the dimensions and styles of other birdhouses they could build, and the proper placement and maintenance of birdhouses.

Each workshop participant is sent home with a birdhouse of their own construction and with the knowledge they need to properly site their dwelling for the benefit of cavity-nesting birds native to this region. MSU Extension office will continue its efforts to build and distribute birdhouses throughout the region beyond the 1,500 birdhouse goal.

Pollinator Workshops

Due to the recent decline in native and non-native insect pollinators, protecting and promoting the health and well-being of pollinators has become a major priority with many private and governmental agencies.

In 2016, two workshops were presented in conjunction with the Dawson County Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Service and the Dawson County Conservation District on preserving and promoting pollinators.

The first workshop in March targeted home gardeners and urban residents with a focus on developing healthy garden soil and planting pollinator-friendly and beneficial insect gardens. Participants were taught how to amend soil to make it most beneficial for feeding plants and producing the best crop possible. They also gathered information on what plants to cultivate, how to lay out a pollinator friendly garden, and how pesticides and fertilizers affect the health and well-being of pollinators and beneficial insects.

At the NRCS Field Day in September, over 50 Dawson County eighth graders rotated through nine learning stations ranging from native plants to regional crops and cropping systems to invasive weed species to pollinator identification and habitat enhancement.

Participants gained knowledge on why pollinators are important to the production of our food supply and the role they play in keeping our ecosystem in balance.
Local Food Systems Still a Hot Topic

From presentations at a district student organization annual meeting to the Back to Basics Cooperative Summit, interest in the development of food systems continues to be a trending topic. People are looking to the development of smaller, integrated, local food systems as a viable solution to the various social and economic food-related issues of obesity, diabetes, food insecurity, economic stability, and risk management.

Dawson County MSU Extension has been leading the charge by facilitating the development of local food systems through the continued support and leadership for the Farm-to-Table Store, the Farm-to-Table Cooperative, the Glendive Food Development Center, the Prairie Development Center business incubator, the Glendive Community Garden, and Western Trails Foods. These projects help ensure that residents of this region have access to the resources they need to sustain themselves and their families.

Eastern Montana has several strategic advantages when it comes to food production in the region, not the least of which is climate. When asked about what types of food crops could be produced in eastern Montana, Dawson County MSU Extension Agent Bruce Smith responded, “Glendive and Miles City are prime areas for commercial vegetable production.”

When it comes to favorable climates and growing conditions for some of the non-traditional, commercial agricultural crops, Smith went on to say, “Miles City leads the state with 2,726 growing degree days while Glendive has 2,670. This compares to other Montana cities such as Missoula with 1,821 and Kalispell with 1,655. Miles City and Glendive also compare favorably with cities in Idaho and Washington where many of these crops are being grown. In Idaho, Caldwell has 2,803 growing days, but Twin Falls has only 2,576 and Idaho Falls only 2,076. In Washington, Quincy has 2,681, Yakima 2,381 and Moses Lake 2,331.”

The development of a more diverse base of agricultural crops within the state has an almost innumerable range of social and economic benefits for the residents of the state. Some of these benefits were further highlighted in a commentary recorded by the Montana Ethics Project featuring Bruce Smith discussing the state’s food economy. The video can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/54118891

Non-traditional crops like onions have a sizeable potential in eastern Montana.