



A new mural in Townsend, which received a \$2,000 grant for a beautification project. The mural contest was organized by Tina Homann, owner of The Lodge and a participant in Reimagining Rural.

ReImagining Rural program challenges small towns to shape their future

Sara Adlington writes about an MSU Extension program designed to support rural community vitality.

Twenty-four communities across the state participated last year in Reimagining Rural, a Montana State University Extension program that focuses on providing Montana's small towns with opportunities to shape their future.

The program recognizes that Montana's small towns are facing challenges of shifting demographics and evolving economies, according to Tara Mastel, MSU Extension's community development program leader.

"The Reimagining Rural program features speakers with stories of success in rural communities and the positive trends in rural demographics to help local leaders see a path to a vital future for their community," Mastel said.

The program included talks by rural entrepreneurs, advocates and experts, broadcast across Montana to small groups of local volunteers and leaders who gathered to listen to new ideas and discuss how to implement them locally.

"The sessions helped show the potential of reviving rural Montana," Mastel said. "As a participant

Allison Kostio

commented, rural America is not dying. It is changing, and much of the talk of the decay of our rural areas is simply wrong.”

At the conclusion of the program, the Montana Community Foundation, a program partner, awarded \$32,000 in grants to the communities to support projects that were identified or discussed during the series. The grants will fund a variety of initiatives, including training for local leaders; local arts development; community-sponsored activities for all ages that are designed to provide inclusion for newcomers in small towns – including a permanent, covered location for a farmer’s market; a history trail project; tourism promotion of rural areas; community beautification efforts; interpretive signs; and a community visitor kiosk.

“The partners in Reimagining Rural came together based on common experience for the

need to build capacity among local leaders in rural communities,” Mastel said. “We have great resources in Montana, but if there is not

The sessions helped show the potential of reviving rural Montana

capacity at the local level, communities are not able to take advantage of all the resources that exist. The Reimagining Rural program energized local leaders and helped them rethink what is possible for their communities.”

In addition to MSU Extension and the Montana Community Foundation, partners who contributed to the program included First Interstate Bank Foundation, the Governor’s Office of Economic Development and the Burton K. Wheeler Center at MSU.

Reimagining Rural will offer a series of gatherings in the fall of 2021. Interested communities and community members can apply to be a part of the next program. For application information, dates and locations in 2021, contact your local MSU Extension agent or Tara Mastel at tara.mastel@montana.edu. ■

Sara Adlington is an MSU Extension editor.



MSU Extension works with Powder River Trails, a group created to encourage walking and a healthy community, which benefited from Reimagining Rural. Community members of all ages enjoy the trails and memorial benches.