



Community Development

Photo by Clark Fork Valley Press/Mineral Independent

M SU Extension's Community Development program supports rural and urban communities through building partnerships and offering workshops and training for local leaders, food safety, emergency response, tourism and business development, and serving varied community needs.

Reimagining Rural Virtual Gathering

Twenty-four communities participated in the Reimagining Rural Virtual Gathering program that energized local leaders and helps guide possibilities for their communities.

The virtual program brought a rural community vitality conference to small groups of local leaders who facilitated idea discussions with an eye toward action.

Program speakers emphasized positive aspects of living in a rural community through data and success stories. At the conclusion, the Montana Community Foundation, a program partner, awarded \$32,000 in grants to communities to support 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.

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

Community-Based Leadership

MSU Extension offers leadership development programs in three counties to build capacity of local residents to better work together for a higher quality of life in local communities.

The initiative began with the Leadership 49 program in Park

QUICK FACTS

24 communities with Reimagining Rural leadership development and community planning.

MSU Extension agents administer two revolving loan funds for small businesses, offering local management of \$1.1 million.

Local government center offers training to local officials who manage nearly \$2 billion and 11,000 employees.

County, led by Community Development Agent Katie Weaver, who has more than 100 alumni from seven years of her program. Program evaluations show gains in participant skills and increased involvement in local organizations.

Wheatland County and Rosebud-Treasure Counties participants compliment the leadership program experience which helps them better understand their own potential and how they can get involved in their community.

Extension Field Faculty who currently manage local leadership development programs are training 15 MSU Extension agents about essential leadership topics and facilitator teaching skills. Expanded training and programs will help fill a statewide shortage of leaders (for boards, volunteer groups, etc.) in local communities. The program for Extension agents began in December of 2020 and will conclude in June 2021.

MSU Extension Support in Boulder

In Madison-Jefferson counties, the 2017 closure of the Boulder Montana Developmental Center (MDC), resulted in the loss of the largest community employer. MSU Extension partners with the Jefferson Local Development Council to help the community in considering alternative uses for the facility. They also assisted with the implementation of a Downtown Master Plan, updated Growth Policy, River Trails Master Plan with trail design, Recreation Park Master Plan, establishing a \$100,000 business revolving Loan Fund (RLF), accomplishing downtown business building façade improvements, development of a Boulder brand and logo, erecting gateway signs, development of a Boulder website, constructing outdoor restrooms supporting increased park activities, installation of fiber high-speed internet lines, and several other projects contributing to community vitality.

Assisting Business to Expand and Meet Local Food Demand

Superior Meats has been growing at a fast annual clip of 10 to 15%, and gross sales have tripled in recent years. Jerry Stroot, its entrepreneurial owner, knew he had a great operating and sales team, but without a bigger and better location, Superior Meats growth would end, as they were out of space.

Stroot found business partners in the Mineral County Economic Development Corporation, which includes MSU Extension, and Lake County Community Development Corporation, which supported the work of finding financing for expansion, while local contractor MIH Construction did building work. Additional slaughter capacity, processing equipment, increased days of operation, and increased retail space for new products will keep Superior meats on a path of growth and contribute to community growth.

MSU Extension Agent Manages Revolving Loan Fund

In 2019, Park County MSU Extension took on management of a nearly \$1 million small business revolving loan fund (RLF) on behalf of the City of Livingston and Park County. Shortly thereafter, Park Local Development Corporation was formed as a 501(c)(3) to oversee the RLF and expand business assistance resources in Park County. Park County Economic & Community Development Extension Agent Katie Weaver serves as the organization's executive director.

In March 2020, Park County MSU Extension and Park Local Development Corporation mobilized a group of community business and financial leaders to explore how the RLF could help struggling small businesses. In May 2020, the Emergency Microloan Program online application went live for businesses adversely impacted by COVID-19. Over 20 small businesses applied for \$10,000 loans and by July, nine loans totaling \$85,000 were approved and funds

dispersed to businesses in Cooke City, Emigrant, Gardiner, and Livingston. The emergency microloan program assisted businesses that were unable to access other financing.

Over the summer, to support businesses in adapting and planning for the future, nearly \$70,000 was raised in charitable donations and grants. In December 2020, a new grant program designed to meet the ever-evolving needs of Park County's small business community will implement business training and technical assistance to ensure viability of small businesses and their future resilience.

Servsafe Proves Vital During COVID-19

For over 20 years, local restaurants, schools, daycares, and stores have relied on MSU Extension to provide food safety education through the ServSafe program. It's a training resource that has proven to be vital to the local community's health, safety and economic security.

Rosebud County Public Health Director Shelly Schnitzmeier describes the importance of the training, "The ServSafe trainings have had a huge impact in our county, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Individuals who have taken the training gained knowledge that is imperative in keeping people safe, very beneficial during this outbreak. The education that Public Health is currently doing to minimize disease transmission, hand washing, having good hygiene and staying home when ill are vital lessons that MSU Extension Agents have been teaching through ServSafe for years. ServSafe is an essential program."

The knowledge and practical skills gained through ServSafe have enabled restaurants and other businesses to stay open and to minimize risks to the general public. The ServSafe training program is offered by MSU Extension in multiple counties in Montana and helps local businesses meet state requirements for food safety training.

You-Pick Pumpkin Patch

The Community Garden in Shelby hosted their annual You-Pick Pumpkin Patch in October. This agri-tourism garden and event reaches and supports the entire community, from planting through harvest.

The pumpkin patch is advertised in local and online media, so families drive from neighboring towns to pick pumpkins with their children. After pumpkins are picked, families often shop and eat lunch in Shelby. Pumpkin sales go back into the community to improve the community garden and plant pumpkins and gourds the next year. After pumpkins are picked, some remaining pumpkins are donated to the local elder care facility, where residents paint the pumpkins.

MSU Extension provides support for multiple community gardens in the state, where we give planting demonstrations, teach about pest identification and management, teach about harvesting and food preservation, and contribute to local food programs with harvested crops.