

BEARTOOTH FRONT COMMUNITY FORUM (BFCF)

Red Lodge, Montana

Red Lodge, Montana, has many assets, both tangible and intangible, that make it an excellent place to live. It has a high quality of life, clean air and water, mountain views and good recreational facilities, a healthy economy, and a neighborly citizenry who value and participate fully in the life of the community.

In recent years, however, like many small towns located near the entrances to national parks, Red Lodge has been experiencing an annual influx of thousands of tourists. Known as a “gateway community” located 70 miles north of Yellowstone National Park on the Beartooth highway, it faces the potential challenges of growth from an increase in its population.

Residents engage in anticipatory planning

In 1992 residents concerned about the possibilities of a changed character of the town as well as concurrent impacts of development needed a forum in which to discuss alternative futures in order to channel change. They invited Luther Propst, the Executive Director of the Sonoran Institute in Tucson, Arizona, to facilitate a forum to help residents develop a vision for the future. The Sonoran Institute has conducted a number of two-day Successful Communities workshops in many towns in the West facing comparable land use and growth issues.

The workshop was attended by roughly 160 participants, a significant attendance in this town of 2000. Key to its success was the representation of a broad cross-section of the population: ranchers, developers, business people, educators, and senior citizens. In this community planning session, participants were invited to identify what they value, what they wanted to protect, and how they wanted to do it. In the course of the workshop a shared vision was

developed of what the community might become.

They defined what they liked best about the community, identified potential threats, and then formed committees to further explore what needed to be done. Among those areas identified as needing to be preserved were the water supply and the small town atmosphere. Town needs included more recreational choices for boys and girls, comprehensive planning and a protected greenway. This exercise helped to focus the needs and to provide the energy for local problem-solving and planning.

This workshop led to the development of the Beartooth Front Community Forum,



a locally-based citizens organization that is inclusive, multi-faceted, and non-partisan. Its guiding philosophy has been to bring people together and find common ground. With a current membership of around 300 volunteers, it seeks to preserve and enhance Red Lodge’s quality of life.

Early successes and a long range vision

As a direct result of the workshop, several projects were defined, both short-term and long-term. Among the early undertakings and successes were the creation of a youth center, a water quality monitoring program, a master land use plan, and a new post office in the heart of town.

■ *Boys and Girls Club*

The prompt establishment of a Boys and Girls Club to serve the younger children of the area had general support from the community and was a significant milestone. It demonstrated precisely and visibly what citizens could do for themselves. Now as many as 250 children benefit from this center which offers after-school programs and summer-long recreational activities which encourage kids to explore their own talents and interests. It is staffed by an Executive Director and housed in facilities donated by St. Agnes Church.

■ *Post Office*

One of the most galvanizing efforts for the BFCF centered around the proposed relocation of the post office. In Montana, there is no postal delivery for towns with a population under 2500. In Red Lodge, the post office serves as a social gathering center especially for senior citizens who make up 25 percent of the population.

When the government proposed moving the post office outside of town, many were concerned about the social changes that would result as well as the possible loss of downtown businesses. The possible gutting of the downtown area prompted a full-fledged resistance by BFCF and other civic groups which resulted in keeping the post office downtown.

■ *Land Use Master Plan*

The success of the post office proved to be just the right stimulus for other local initiatives. During the twelve months following the 1992 Forum, the BFCF land use committee talked with many individuals around the country — planners, elected officials, and others in small communities who had undertaken similar planning exercises. The BFCF presented the findings to residents in a public forum and helped to raise part of the funds necessary to hire a planner. Once hired, the planner helped to guide the process.

In the fall of 1994 the BFCF brought townspeople together to help establish priorities in the plan. In April 1995 the first draft of the Red Lodge Master Plan was presented to the public. A series of “listening posts” were planned to solicit input in May and then the second draft, which included the central business district, the entrances to the community, residential neighborhoods, open spaces, growth areas and infrastructure, was presented and adopted in June. A more expanded plan to encompass areas as a special planning district just outside the county will be discussed over the coming months.

■ *Water Quality Monitoring*

The BFCF committee, concerned with water quality in two local creeks, the Rock Creek and West Fork, was instrumental in starting a water monitoring project under the direction of A-CRIC (the Absaroka Creeks and Rivers Information Council). Initially funded by the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, this ongoing project serves to

provide a baseline of information about the health of these waters. Volunteers of all ages, trained in proper testing techniques by the Canyon Ferry Limnological Institute, collect the water samples. This work is now expanding to other areas along the Beartooth Front.

In recent months there has been a growing interest in developing an assisted care living facility for senior residents and the possibility of linking with Habitat for Humanity to increase the availability of affordable housing.

Building a support network

Ongoing assistance from the Sonoran Institute has proved very helpful in guiding this planning process. The Institute helped sponsor a workshop on sustainable jobs and has been instrumental in linking this effort with that of the newly-formed Corporation for the Northern Rockies. The goal of the Corporation is to help bring people together to work towards collaborative problem-solving and to search for ways to meet economic needs while sustaining their environment. It has been working with BFCF on sustainable economic issues. One of the ongoing challenges the town faces is to define exactly what kind of local enterprises are in fact sustainable.

During the past few years the local media has covered the issues, not simply the controversies, but much of the consensus and successes and has been quite supportive of the work of BFCF. Other support within the town has come from local elected officials, some of whom serve on the steering committee of the Forum.

Challenges ahead

One of the most challenging aspects of guiding change has been to keep all interested parties engaged in and directing the process. It is important that land use decisions, for example, reflect the ideas and interests of the ranchers in the nearby outlying areas who tend not to participate in the town-oriented forums and are wary of changes they consider being generated outside the community. So the organizers and volunteers are taking a measured, inclusive approach to make certain that all voices are heard and information shared.

Another extremely important area is finding out what other communities with similar needs are doing. Small jurisdictions often do not have the local expertise nor

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Scope: Town/county

Inception Date: 1992

Participants: Residents, businesses, ranchers, planners, elected officials, developers, nonprofit organizations

Project type: Communitywide visioning, comprehensive community development, public education

Methods used: Public forums, working committees, grantmaking, education

Lessons learned: Need for early, tangible successes and for ongoing communication. Time to develop trust among residents in towns and neighboring rural areas.

the budget to staff planning offices or employ expensive techniques to educate residents. The BFCF has been a useful forum in which to exchange this type of information. It also publishes a newsletter to keep citizens informed of recent developments in Red Lodge.

The Beartooth Front Community Forum has gained state-wide recognition for its ability to foster community problem-solving. This past year representatives were invited to attend a Montana Consensus Council instituted by Gov. Mark Racicot. The model of coming together, developing a vision, and then breaking up into small groups for idea generation has worked for the Forum and has helped to educate other public officials on methods that result in consensus.

The Beartooth Front Community Forum is demonstrating how effective a democratic, inclusive, long-term process can be. Early successes, ongoing communication and a "can do" philosophy is yielding very encouraging results.

—CONCERN, Inc.



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In two years, the BFCF has realized many of its goals. Projects such as the construction of a new Boys and Girls Club facility and the expansion of the Water Quality Monitoring Project have demonstrated its ability to incubate ideas that then become reality through the volunteer work of individuals and groups of all ages, independent of the Forum itself.

In December 1995 the Red Lodge City Council unanimously adopted the Land Use Master Plan and in May 1997 approved development codes that would implement its provisions. It was a challenge to sustain people's energy through the five-year process. With help from the Corporation for the Northern Rockies, the Council rehired the original consultant to assist in the detailed process of writing these codes and maintaining the spirit of collaboration between the parties involved. Whereas local developers have supported these efforts, outside companies and developers are less willing to do so. Some have threatened the city with costly lawsuits. According to Gary Ferguson, it is crucial to establish communication and build understanding between the community and corporations. Otherwise, the town's ability to plan its future could be compromised by companies who are willing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to discredit or destroy the community's master plan in court.

The Forum is now focused on diversifying Red Lodge's economy. It has held well-attended public meetings and established a new task force comprised of both BFCF members and local Chamber of Commerce consultants to explore solutions, combining the Forum's commitment to consensus and public inclusion with the Chamber of Commerce's expertise in business and financial affairs.

The accomplishments of the BFCF have both encouraged the community and increased the availability of small grants from various organizations. "Overall," says Mr. Ferguson, "success breeds success."

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