

# LANDER VALLEY: 2020

*Lander, Wyoming*

Lander is a town of 7,500 residents located in Fremont County near the picturesque eastern slope of the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains in west central Wyoming. Over the past twenty years, like many western towns, particularly those supported by one industry, it has experienced boom and bust. For years its economy was largely supported by an iron ore mine but all that changed in 1983 when the mine closed: 500 jobs were lost, hundreds of homes went on the market, and half the businesses closed. By 1990 Lander's population had been reduced by almost 25 percent.

Recently, however, this situation began to turn around. From 1990 to 1992 Lander grew by 2.4 percent. In 1993, a book, *The 100 Best Small Towns in America*, rated Lander fifth. This report created a sudden interest in Lander from a number of areas. By October 1994 informal statistics indicated that approximately 18 percent of Lander's population had arrived in the past three years from other towns in Wyoming, from the Midwest, and from California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Many of these new residents had come from towns that were becoming too expensive or crowded. Paula McCormick, the director of the Chamber of Commerce, reported a 600 percent increase in requests for information about Lander since 1990.

## Population growth and the economy

With this population influx, the economy has begun to grow and diversify. Tourism is increasing, while agriculture and government agencies continue to form the more traditional economic base. Major local employers include a new bronze foundry which employs around 60 people, government agencies such as the Wyoming State Training School and the county courthouse, the Lander Valley Regional Medical Center, and many businesses related to the growing tourism boom. A Main Street Beautification project has redone streets and sidewalks and worked with business owners to improve their storefronts in order to attract visitors. In addition several environmentally-based organizations are

headquartered here: the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), the Wyoming Outdoor Council and the Wyoming Nature Conservancy.

The new visibility has been a mixed blessing. On the one hand it attracts those seeking to relocate to improve their quality of life. On the other hand it pro-



duces a sudden population growth which, without careful planning, threatens to alter the community and change the small town atmosphere, access to recreational areas, and clean environment that attracted people in the first place.

Communities that grow at 2 percent a year can thrive but those experiencing a rate of 7 percent, such as that of Jackson, Wyoming, face serious challenges—affordable housing, land use, traffic congestion, air and water quality, and many other issues related to population pressures. *Lander Valley: 2020* was formed to prevent this situation from occurring. Spearheaded by the Chamber of Commerce and run by a volunteer Steering Committee and volunteer Task Forces, it is showing that a combination of fortunate demographic trends and the dedicated involvement of some of its citizens can make possible a positive vision for the future.

## The 2020 planning forums

The goal of *Lander Valley: 2020* is to develop a vision of what Lander Valley is

to be in the next 25 years. The process Lander chose to plan for growth while preserving its valued quality of life began two years ago. Citizens invited the Sonoran Institute to help plan and facilitate a visioning process using a consensus-based approach to organize people and ideas.

The first Successful Communities Workshop, held in April 1994, was attended by 200 people. Participants were asked to discuss what they liked about living in Lander, what changes the Valley is likely to see in the near future, and how the community could work together to make sure that these changes work for the people of Lander.

The attendees themselves were demographically representative of Lander: 21 percent of the participants had lived in Lander for less than five years, 30 percent were natives or had lived there more than 30 years, and 21 percent had lived there 10-20 years; 18 percent were over 60 years of age, 45 percent between 40-60; and 37 percent between 20-40; 17 percent were employed as professionals, 15 percent as business owners, 9 percent as ranchers, 5 percent by the government, and 14 percent were retired.

When asked what they valued about living in the Lander Valley, the participants listed its open spaces provided by viable ranching and farming concerns, diverse locally-owned small businesses, a good educational system, high quality health care, clean air and water, and an abundance of wildlife. In response to a question as to what was needed in order to maintain these values in the future, close to 70 ideas were suggested, among which were:

- intensive combined city/county land use planning with the participation of more residents;
- increased business development, including more restaurants and retail stores;
- more greenways, parks, and recreation centers for youths;
- protection of farmers/ranchers, for the benefit of the community, land and the economy;
- improved air quality and solid waste recycling center;
- increased tourism as a viable growth industry;
- increased interest in and appreciation of the Wind River Indian Reservation; and
- improved library services and better educational opportunities.

## Growth and quality of life

In order to translate this vision into action, ten task forces, representing a cross-section of interests, were formed. A second 2020 workshop was held in October of 1994 to update the progress of the task forces. Lill Erikson, director of the Corporation for the Northern Rockies, a nonprofit organization created to help develop sustainable economies and to protect local values, spoke about other communities that are also dealing with increased growth problems.

In the spring of 1995 the *Lander Valley: 2020* Steering Committee sponsored two events: an informational meeting about the community planning process, called "Groundwork for Growth"; and a second Successful Communities workshop. Approximately 100 community residents attended "Groundwork for Growth" to learn about approaches that other towns and counties were using to accommodate rapid population growth and the importance of consensus. A representative from the Dubois Town Planning Commission spoke about the Upper Wind River Development Permit System, a permitting system that is less restrictive than zoning and basically affects businesses rather than ranchers. A speaker from Jackson commended Lander for looking ahead before growth got out of control, saying that Teton County's population tripled between 1970 and 1990 and that the county, without an updated land use plan, has experienced myriad problems. A representative from the Wyoming Open Lands Project spoke on private, voluntary options for open land protection. A questionnaire handed out at the end of the meeting revealed that a high percentage of the participants did feel that some type of land use planning was necessary.

"How do we improve our quality of life as we grow?" was the topic for discussion in the second Successful Communities Workshop held in May 1995 and facilitated by Luther Propst of the Sonoran Institute. Small discussion groups developed a list of key growth and planning issues and then presented the three most important to the forum. These were categorized and prioritized and then used as a basis upon which short- and long-term action steps were identified.

## How To Get in Touch with Lander Valley: 2020

**Contact:** Paula McCormick

**Tel:** (307) 332-3892

**Fax:** (307) 332-5336

**Email:** N/A

**Web:** N/A

**Scope:** Town/county

**Inception Date:** 1992

**Participants:** Residents, ranchers/farmers, businesses, civic organizations, nonprofit organizations

**Project type:** Communitywide visioning, comprehensive community planning, public education

**Methods used:** Public education, town meetings, newsletter, task forces

**Lessons learned:** Importance of anticipatory planning, access to information, economic diversification, and inclusive

Every event planned to date has been widely publicized to encourage participation. Reports on each of the meetings have included demographic information on the attendees. This documentation is not only helpful to illustrate the diversity of participation but also serves to demonstrate to those with other opinions that voices from their areas of interest have been heard. In mid-1995 the first 2020 newsletter was published and disseminated through direct mail.

## Challenges

The greatest near-term needs are for leadership and funding. Long-term planning is a labor-intensive activity and momentum plays a key role. For a small town, funds are limited and widespread citizen participation critical. As of mid-1995, three task forces remain: agricultural preservation, natural resources and land use planning. Each one requires a substantial commitment of time.

To date, this effort has moved forward on a modest budget of several thousand dollars. Grantmaking proposals are being submitted to government agencies, but otherwise local residents are the only ones

supporting the costs of the meetings, newsletter, mailings and other organizational needs.

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## UPDATE December 1997

Although *Lander Valley:2020* is no longer an official part of the Chamber of Commerce, the volunteer steering committee and task forces have continued to meet. With a grant from the U.S. Forest Service, the agriculture partnership task force published a brochure, "Choices for Landowners," educating ranchers about ways to preserve and retain ownership of their land. The same grant funded a three-year plan by the water task force to assess future water needs for the Valley.

*Lander Valley:2020* held an economics workshop with Ray Rasker, author of *Measuring Change in Rural Communities*. He spoke about the importance of compiling community data to create and measure indicators of change. The library task force developed an advisory council to assist on meeting the needs of the information age with computers and the Internet.

Future activities might include a possible partnership with the Wind River Indian Reservation to tackle alcohol and drug problems. *Lander Valley:2020* would also like to hold educational seminars on land use because, although growth rates are manageable at present, no local zoning ordinances exist and the county land use plan is over 20 years old.

In order to attract funding, *Lander Valley:2020* is beginning the process of forming a nonprofit organization. The energy of the volunteers, the support of the steering committee, and resources supplied by the Sonoran Institute, including its book, *Preserving Working Ranches in the West*, have been invaluable, but paid administrative help and office facilities are now needed as well.

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