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Peer Learning Network News

Fall 2021

This newsletter provides updates from the fall state PLN sessions, featured ideas and stories inspired by conversations and topics explored during our monthly meetings, and a view forward to the January PLN Housing Solutions Roundtable. Plus, we share news from WeCAN, as well as resources for your communities and for you as community leaders. Visit the WeCAN PLN webpage for news, detailed meeting notes, and updated learning opportunities.

Join Us for the Housing Solutions Roundtable!

The topic of housing is wide reaching and, in too many places, a heavy burden for those unable to secure stable, healthy, and affordable housing. Innovative strategies are needed, but where does anyone begin to tackle the issue? You've come to the right place. At this solutions focused roundtable you will:

- Receive basic tools from Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming professionals who have curated a toolkit for attendees.
- Hear from professionals and community members from across the West tackling this issue head on in small towns and rural communities.
- Network with peers across the three states who might be experiencing the same issues as you.

This event is designed for anyone experiencing housing insecurity, concerned citizens, policy makers and active volunteers or professionals engaged in housing strategies and solutions. Our focus is on rural communities with populations under 10,000.

Do you need a framework and language for more productive housing conversations with community stakeholders?

Are you ready to assess needs and develop housing solutions for your community?

Do you need practical tools and resources to achieve local housing goals despite common market challenges?

The Montana, Idaho and Wyoming Peer Learning Network, a project of the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN), is bringing together some of the innovative and practical solutions happening right now as part of the solutions roundtable - solutions that you can adapt in your own community.

The Montana, Idaho and Wyoming Peer Learning Network invites you

Housing Solutions Roundtable

January 13, 2022

8:30am-11:30am Pacific | 9:30am-12:30pm Mountain

Local & regional solutions to create housing in *small towns & rural communities*

Learn from & network with community members and professionals in Montana, Idaho & Wyoming

More info and to register visit communityreview.org/peer-learning-network

Some of the solution stories you'll hear about include:

- Building preservation, rehabilitation, and repurposing
- Re-thinking ownership models to include resident-owned communities, co-housing, or cooperatives
- Market demand for small-footprint models like Tiny Homes, Accessory Dwelling Units, or micro-apartments
- Self-build options and strategies
- Creative financing and incentive structures, including crowd investment, fee waivers or density bonuses

For more information and to register for this free event:

communityreview.org/peer-learning-network/pln-registration



PLN State Meeting Summaries

Idaho

September: Volunteerism

In early September, Idaho had an inspired group engage with the monthly Peer Learning Network. The main focus swirled around the act and art of volunteerism. A group share brought to light volunteer opportunities such as:

- Rotary Club team spirit serving beverages at their fundraiser
- Place-making event that brought intro- and extroverts together in a fun and knowledge-sharing space
- Local TNR (trap/neuter/spay) project to help strays remain safe and healthy
- Activity based involvement with children who might otherwise not have this support or experience to play and trust and feel good about themselves
- Backyard Harvest to promote food security and generational participation
- Chalk on the Walk for town pride and feeling of accomplishment
- ADA way-finding to leverage and help remove public-access physical limitations
- Church cleaning project with alternating families
- School board for a voice in education

Some ongoing need-based community projects that often see weak involvement were noted as County Fairs, projects that involve sweat and dirt, Idahoact.org for anti-trafficking awareness.

Ideas then circulated for how to increase volunteers and develop leaders. Some resources to address this are:

Rural Development Initiative (Oregon): rdiinc.org

Heartland center for Leadership Development (Lincoln, NE): heartlandcenterinfo.org

International City/County Management Association: icma.org

Leadership Summit's two-year program: visitmccall.org/leadership-academy/

Other resources included Strength Finder (book); Brené Brown TED Talks; Hidden Brain podcast (NPR).

A quote to end the meeting resonated with all:

Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

What Makes Volunteer Efforts Work for Volunteers?

- Being able to see the result of my effort.
- Fun!
- Working as part of a team.
- Getting to know new people, build new relationships.
- Making a difference regarding a topic or need that's important to me.
- Opportunity to share particular knowledge, skills, and interests with others.
- Learning new things/self-development.
- Being seen/appreciated for my volunteer effort.
- Help take care of something that belongs to all of us.

Idaho

August: Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education took front and center for Idaho's August PLN meeting.

The need for affordable, secure, all hours of day/night to be provided cannot be over-estimated. Early childhood education should carry the same weight as our K-12 school programs provide. Major challenges for qualified day care are funding, infrastructure, and certified training.

Location, location, location. Ideas range from churches, camp sites, and most popular is an Assisted Living environment. Having a "single point of access" for families to connect with opportunities, statewide and/or locally, is another issue. Lack of access to broadband is important to consider.

Pocatello is a success story, covered in this link: idahoaeyc.org/pocatello-elc

An outdoor preschool in Valley County, called ROOTS, is inspiring: rootsforestschool.com/

Unique Idaho work is coming along to really address these issues: wcmcdc.org/early-childhood-education/

State-wide strategic plan: static1.squarespace.com/static/57ab3678be659454809bc46e/t/60e88ff8820e305b049f1e68/1625853947242/Idaho%27s+Statewide+Early+Learning+Strategic+Plan+-+June+2021.pdf

November: Shop Local

Community "Buy Local" campaigns focused the November meeting.

Key insights:

- Collaboration is key, and so is telling the stories of the people creating these products.
- Do listening sessions as you're thinking about how to market your community. Who are the story leaders?
- Keep your messaging consistent — everyone should use the same messaging.
- Co-opetition — a business strategy that uses insights from game theory to understand when it is better for competitors to work together to increase the benefits for all players.
- 60% of every dollar stays in Idaho when you shop local. 42% stays here when you shop from a national chain. Each dollar spent in your community gets reinvested 7x when spent at a local establishment.
- Businesses should use and support each other.

Resources

Americans for the Arts [arts & economic impact calculator](http://arts&economicimpactcalculator) allows you to estimate the economic impact of your arts organization or your whole nonprofit arts community.

Two Degrees Northwest 2dnw.org Supports food, art and heritage businesses and organization in a 13-county area of north central Idaho and southeastern Washington and encourage residents and visitors to buy locally made.

Wyoming

August: Housing

The Wyoming August PLN meeting started with a presentation by Kim Porter on the Wyoming Housing Toolkit: wyomingbusiness.org/commtoolbox

Key points in the conversation:

- The continued confusion that is attached to the term "affordable" housing. Some see this as being subsidized.
- Affordable and available (financially) seem interchangeable.
- Other ongoing challenges are to provide home ownership/readiness tools, state-wide communication, sustained leadership.
- The tag line to Inspire and Connect (Think and Explore) resonated across the board for how to create a network that covers multiple communities' issues.
- The idea of a three state (Wyoming, Idaho, Montana) platform to share ideas and resources continues to hold interest and value.

Resources

Community Builders: communitybuilders.org/

Wyoming Planning Association: wyopass.org/

Wyoming Community Foundation: wycf.org/

Thrive Laramie strategic plan: cityoflaramie.org/1117/Thrive-Laramie-Housing

October & December: Housing

Montana just can't stop talking about housing! Part of this conversation focused on identifying solutions stories for the Housing Solutions Roundtable. Here are a few:

- In Red Lodge, the community foundation, Habitat for Humanity and Montana Land Trust teamed up on a project that will provide 12 permanently affordable homes using a "Mutual Self Help" model. More info: trustmontana.org/homes/red-lodge/
- Lewistown is in the process of converting an historic apartment building that's been abandoned for years into downtown housing. In Livingston, an old hospital was repurposed.
- In Whitehall, a couple opened up an assisted living home — that probably freed up homes for working-age adults and families.

Issues raised include:

In some small communities, the majority of rentals are owned by people from out of town, and there's no control on price escalation.

Habitat for Humanity requires water and sewer connections, and in small communities, that limits where they can work.

There is lots of demand for assisted living, but few resources in small communities.

Housing for middle-income workers is the biggest gap in many places and needs more attention.

Trailer parks are a conundrum, and the prevailing practice of flipping ownership and increasing lot rents doesn't help.

In general, support and assistance programs are patterned on "the way things are," and don't question basic structures like "why couldn't security deposits just be paid for like insurance?"

Resources

John Oliver's [monologue on trailer parks](#) captures a lot of the issues.

Neighborworks nwmt.org Offers lending programs, housing education and works with mobile home parks residents to purchase and manage their communities.

[A New Generation of Town Makers](#), part of a five-part series on small-scale, incremental change. Among the highlights: the idea of focusing intensively on a small neighborhood or zone to redevelop it. They call it "finding your farm," an area to cultivate intensively.

September

Community Branding, pt. 2

This Part 2 conversation continued the focus on community branding and marketing, looking especially at how to engage communities in seeing value in who they are. A community brand tells the story of who you are, a consistent image that the community can deliver on.

We see pride demonstrated in beautiful public spaces, parks and other community assets, like downtown. Schools and school sports are often part of community pride. In Lockwood, Bob Riehl said that building a high school (an idea in the works for decades) is a huge source of pride, and now varsity sports will be coming soon to add even more.

In Troy, Shauna Kelsey noted "we've made the most progress when kids are involved in projects," like laying sod for a new soccer field. Involving youth in the community review surfaced ideas for a new skate park (done) and a mountain bike club is now in the works.

Key take-aways:

- Start small; engage multiple partners and invite participation. Build momentum step by step.
- Engage youth. Listen to them and engage them in a project.
- Patience: sometimes it takes time to cultivate change.

WEBINARS

& Other Resources

Lorie Higgins' New Article— Rural Life: What Keeps People from Getting Involved?

[This article](#) was published in *Connections*, an annual journal of the Kettering Foundation. Her article provides an examination of community review survey data from 2018 to May 2021 and seeks to understand why people are coming up against barriers to civic engagement in their communities.

GNAR Amenity Migration Webinar Series

The Gateway and Natural Area Region (GNAR) Initiative's most recent webinar series just wrapped up. This one was called Boomtown: Amenity Migration in the Rural West and the Rise of the "Zoom Town." Watch the webinars [here](#) or catch all of the other webinars on series on [GNAR's YouTube channel](#). PLUS see the GNAR Online [Community Toolkit](#) with resources, case studies, model ordinances, and other tools to help with GNAR communities' unique planning, transportation, economic, community development, and sustainability challenges and opportunities.

Want to Know More about the Infrastructure and Jobs Investment Act?

The National Association of Counties assembled a useful [summary](#). Geared at counties, but a great overview for everyone.

Book Recommendation

Ryanne Pilgeram's [Pushed out: Contested Development and Rural Gentrification in the U.S](#) offers a rich portrait of Dover, Idaho, whose transformation from "thriving timber mill town" to "economically depressed small town" to "trendy second-home location" over the past four decades embodies the story and challenges of many other rural communities.

An Article Challenging Perceptions about Rural Brain Drain

Kelly Taber's article in the Daily Yonder, [Research Results: "Who Comes Home?"](#) explores commonalities amongst communities that attract their young people back home after college (sometimes long after).

Local Foods, Local Places Toolkit and Inspiration

This USDA and EPA-run program helps cities and towns across the country protect the environment and human health by engaging with local partners to reinvest in existing neighborhoods as they develop local food systems. There is not a current application open for community partnerships, but the [program webpage](#) includes a toolkit for communities interested in using local foods to spur downtown and neighborhood revitalization, and an inspiring collection of stories, videos, photo essays and more.

25% WeCAN Discount on Winter/Spring Courses

Use the code WECAN for a 25% discount on all of the Harbinger Consultancy's online courses for community and economic development professionals, community leaders, land trusts, downtown organizations and other groups focused on community well-being. On tap:

- Outdoor Recreation Roadmap: A Community-Led Approach to Leveraging Your Natural Assets for Economic Success and Local Renewal
- The New Community Project Roadmap: Lessons from Crowdfunding for Repeatable Success in Building and Sustaining Community Initiatives (offered in collaboration with Crowdfund Better)
- Do-It-Yourself Trail User Research You Can Start Right Away
- Tell the Economic Story of Your Farmland Protection & Food System Programs Without Hiring an Economist
- Tell the Economic Story of Your Conserved Lands and Trails Without Hiring an Economist

Group discounts for two or more from the same community or organization. Learn more and register: harbingerconsult.com/online-courses

Resources Related to American Rescue Plan Act Fund-

You'd have to be hiding under a rock to miss the buzz about community recovery funds from the American Rescue Plan. What's that? You've been hiding under a rock? Or maybe you're tired of hearing more of the same and you're looking for creative ways to tap ARPA funds to boost your community. Here are three, collected by the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking.

With the American Rescue Plan (ARP) providing an unprecedented \$350 billion in flexible fiscal aid, Bass Center scholars and collaborators offer policy and practice recommendations for how state and local leaders can use the funds to invest in communities and rebuild more equitable local economies. (Note: some of these ideas may require some creativity and/or regional collaboration to adapt to smaller rural communities.)

Helping residents 'buy back the block' with American Rescue Plan funds

Elwood Hopkins and Tracy Hadden Loh discuss how local leaders can leverage ARP funds to help residents "buy back the block" through supporting community ownership of real estate and new cross-sector arrangements and coalitions for deep resident engagement. This can ensure that these resources make a real, long-term difference for communities harmed by COVID-19, racism, and poverty. [Read more](#)

The American Rescue Plan can be a lifeline for business districts

Kelly Humrichouser and Patrice Frey of Main Street America argue that municipal leaders should use ARP funding not only to support businesses individually but to invest in holistic strategies that support local business district recovery. [Read more](#)

How local leaders can use American Rescue Plan funds to support playful learning in cities

To address disparities in educational outcomes for school-age kids, local leaders need to invest in the creation of learning ecosystems both within and outside of formal educational settings, Helen Shwe Hadani and Jennifer S. Vey write. [Read more](#)

New EDA-Led American Rescue Plan Grant Program Aimed at Local Tourism Recovery

EDA's ARP Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation grant will fund infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects to help local tourism industries recover from the pandemic. Deadline: January 31, 2022. [Apply here](#).

Questions about the Peer Learning Network? Contact your state facilitator

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