

# RESOURCE TEAM **A**SSessment REPORT

**for**

# **A**BSAROKEE

**Field Assessment of May 16 - 17, 2005**

*In partnership with*

Montana Department of Commerce,  
Montana Economic Developers Association,  
USDA/Rural Development,  
Big Sky Economic Development Authority,  
Snowy Mountain Development Corporation

&

**200+ of the people of Absarokee.**

# SUMMARY

Absarokee has what most communities seek and fail to find:

- A naturally beautiful and healthy environment...
- Genuinely caring people that provide a real "safety net" for life's curveballs...
- Plenty of jobs, many of them secure and well-paying...
- A substantial business taxbase so residents get far more public services and facilities than they actually pay for...
- Active and effective community volunteers in many aspects of life there and covering all ages
- Access to both the essentials and amenities within town or an easy drive.
- Young families moving in with long-term plans and jobs that could keep youth from leaving or draw them back.
- Minimal government, but effective, responsive government much of it through easily accessible local service districts.
- Wide variety of housing and buildable lots that while comparatively expensive for rural Montana, are in line with Columbus, Red Lodge, and Billings...and miner incomes if not many small business income or wages.

Yet the **Absarokee Conundrum** appears to be:

- Loss of long-established businesses that filled big gaps and steeply declining sales for many others.
- A transition from Stillwater miners' young families moving there to the influx being a slower migration of empty-nesters and retirees for seasonal or year-round homes/cabins.
- Health care services that have been unusually good for a town this size that are shrinking away
- A much higher-than-average proportion of local students being home-schooled, choosing to opt out of the well below-capacity public schools.
- A shortage of workers for many jobs, likely to grow worse, while at the same time many miners don't live there as their wives can't find jobs they want.
- An emptied-out Main Street more reminiscent of the shrinking farm-market-center towns of Central and Eastern Montana.

While some of the answers would undoubtedly take a lifetime spent there actively engaged in many parts of the community, and decades of mulling it over, to derive, we have some guesses, suspicions, ideas, and resources for the conundrum as well as for simpler questions and projects broached by the 200+ residents who shared their thoughts with us over a hectic 2 days.

As a veteran now of 9 Resource Team Assessments, 7 as a team member and 2 on the hosting side, I was particularly struck by the quality of insight of so many Absarokee folks who came to share them at the listening sessions. There were a lot more profound, intriguing, and non-obvious points than I'm used to at these as many folks tend to talk about the obvious or what was in the newspaper recently. It gave us all an unusual amount of food for thought which along with the subtleties of the challenges in Absarokee meant that we took a few more weeks to think about what we heard here.

The community really did an exceptional job in planning, organizing, and operating the whole process of a Resource Assessment. We tried new listening group segments that in general worked very well. The tour was very well planned and showed us a lot of both

Absarokee's past and its many potential futures. The hospitality both in food and lodging was gracious and very nice, although we all complained about the food as it was just too good, especially the home-made cookies, that all of us left Absarokee with diets in shambles and cookie crumbs on our shirts. Huge thanks to Lucille Mooney, Mike Reynolds, and the several dozen others who put in a lot of time to make this happen. I've seen firsthand what disorganized hosting for a resource team looks like and so especially appreciate the job Absarokee's folks did.

This report isn't meant to be read cover-to-cover, but browsed to find what you're interested in or trying to get done. Use it, use the references and sources as starting points, and you'll get a long ways.

**Report Summary for people whose kids are waiting for a ride:**

1. The sewage lagoon needs work and expansion.
2. The volunteers taking care of the public parks and facilities are carrying more of the load with volunteer labor than can probably be sustained.
3. The miners' long, clustered work shifts are designed to allow an hour or longer commute, which coupled with the bus service means miners can live in an 80 mile radius or so of the mine. Change the shifts to make long commutes less bearable and miners will gradually make Absarokee a priority for their housing.
4. Homes and businesses, rentals and for sale properties, don't match up with local incomes. That'll keep most year-round residents out of the local market and discourage business start-ups and expansion, while leaving landlords with empty buildings, a lose-lose situation.
5. The existing clinic depends on enough local patronage to justify its significant operating costs and the physician there is nearing retirement. Pharmacy's missed, but unlikely to come back.
6. The school's got substantial problems to have that many kids and parents choosing the much more arduous home-schooling solution and we weren't there long enough or deep enough to identify what those problems are.
7. Absarokee and the surrounding area needs more motel rooms as well as B&B's, lodges, ranch recreation, etc. before a tourism strategy will really pay off since visitors spend 80% of their dollars in the town they sleep that night in. However destination dining and day-trips from the surrounding communities basically just needs more promotion since there's already excellent dining and scenic drives.
8. The community has a lot more potential as an arts community simply because it is one already, it just isn't displaying enough its many talents.
9. There really didn't seem to be pressing reasons to incorporate as a town, even though we expected to see such a need. The many existing special districts give people a voice and focus probably beyond what they'd have with a mayor/city council/city staff structure.
10. All of us separately realized just what a great place Absarokee is on all the things that really count.

*Al Jones, Team Leader*

THANKS FROM ALL OF US!

## **PROCESS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THIS REPORT**

Montana Economic Developers Association (MEDA) provided staff support for the coordination of a resource team to assist Absarokee, Montana, in evaluating the town's assets and liabilities and in developing suggestions for improving the environment, social and economic future of the area.

Lucille Mooney of Classic Glass Images was the liaison for the team and had a small army of volunteers to assist: *Absarokee Community Foundation, Absarokee Civic Club, Absarokee and Area Merchants Association, Cobblestone Community Center, Lions Club, Rosebud Café, Stake-Out Restaurant, Dew Drop Inn, Milligan's IGA, Olie's Corner, Fishtail General Store, Stillwater County News, Absarokee High School, United Bank, Senior Center, Stillwater Lodge, Bed and No Breakfast, The Big Yellow House, Mike Reynolds, Wanda Flanagan, Jodie Evans, Sarah Johnson, Nick Morrison, Larry Jahn, Don Scheafer, Kent Harris, Don Vondra, Norm Tjeltveit, Shayne Collins, Stillwater Mine and Ken Bechen.*

Resource team members were selected to visit, interview citizens, business and community leaders and develop ideas for the region. The team members were selected based on their fields of expertise that Absarokee planners indicated would be needed to respond to the problem areas identified.

**The Resource Team interviewed over 200 people May 16 – 17th, 2005.** The notes from the community input sessions are included in this report. The team was available to listen to the following groups: *Civic Club, County, Post Office, Absarokee Water and Sewer, Church Groups, Teachers and School Board, Beartooth Recreation, Outfitters, Rafting Companies, Community Swimming Pool, Medical Clinic, Emergency, Fire Department, Businesses, Realtors, Retailers, High School Students, Ranchers, Agriculture, Senior Citizens, Stillwater Mine, Non-Profit Organizations, Miners and Spouses and Local Construction Businesses.*

Each person was asked to respond to three questions designed to begin communication and discussion and to serve as a basis for developing the report. The three questions were:

- a. What do you think are the major problems and challenges in Absarokee?**
- b. What do you think are the major strengths and assets in Absarokee?**
- c. What projects would you like to see completed in two, five, ten and twenty years in Absarokee?**

Upon completion of the interviews, the team met in a work session to compare notes and share comments. The team then agreed that each team member would analyze the things said, synthesize what they heard with their knowledge of programs and resources, prepare their notes and suggestions, and forward these items to be combined into this final report to Absarokee.

A preliminary oral report and a summary of group recommendations were presented to the people of Absarokee the evening of May 17th.

Following the oral report, this formal written report was prepared and is presented to Absarokee. Copies will be made available in print and electronically. The report is available on the MEDA website at <http://www.medamembers.org>.

A meeting is planned for July 11 at the Cobblestone School to review the report with the people of Absarokee and to set priorities and initiate action plans.



**ABSAROKEE, MONTANA  
RESOURCE TEAM  
May 16 – 17, 2005**

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**Schedule for MEDA May 16 and 17, 2005  
Absarokee Resource Team Assessment**

**May 16<sup>th</sup>**

Team arrives before noon. Lodging will be at Stillwater Lodge, Bed No Breakfast, Big Yellow House

12:00 - 1:00pm	Lunch at the Rosebud Café
1:00 - 2:00 pm	Tour of Absarokee
2:15 - 2:45 pm	Civic Club/County/Post Office/Absarokee Water and Sewer
3:00 - 3:30 pm	Church Groups
3:45 - 4:15 pm	Teachers/School Board
4:30 - 5:00 pm	Beartooth Recreation/Outfitters/Rafting Companies/Community Swimming Pool
5:15 - 5:45	Medical Clinic/Emergency/Fire Department
6:45pm	Dinner at the Stake-out Restaurant

### **May 17<sup>th</sup>**

7:30 - 8:45 am	Working breakfast session Businesses/Retail/Realtors
9:00 - 9:45 am	High school students Held at the Absarokee High School
10:00 - 10:45am	Young Families/Day Care/Preschool/Home Schooled/PTA
11:00 - 11:45am	Ranchers/Agriculture
12:00 - 1:00 pm	Lunch at the Senior Center - listening session with senior citizens
1:15 - 2:00 pm	Stillwater Mine Inc.
2:15 - 2:45 pm	Non-Profit Organizations
3:00 - 3:45 pm	Miners and Spouses
4:00- 4:45 pm	Local Construction Businesses
5:00 - 6:45 pm	Working dinner for the team
7:00 - 8:30 pm	Town Hall meeting

### **REPORT BY: LINDA BECK**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Working with the Absarokee Resource Team was a great experience. Working with the people of Absarokee was a positive eye-opening experience. My background is working with corporations and interviewing groups of employees to do fact-finding on what issues might be working against the bottom line and what might work to improve the productivity of their specific departments and/or the organization. I'm anxious to experience the same kind of success while working with a town that has no elected/employed and/or recognized leaders.

The "Absarokeeites" as individuals and as groups are open, warm, caring and energetic individuals who are passionate about their beliefs and philosophies. I believe if they are able to agree on common goals and prioritize them with some action planning, they have a great opportunity to improve their bottom line by whatever number they choose. The strong community spirit was the prevailing theme from each of the groups we interviewed – invaluable resource.

**MAIN TOPIC: SCHOOLS****ISSUE:**

Enrollment at the Absarokee School has declined. The Absarokee residents are very supportive of the school and volunteerism is high for existing school activities. Athletic events are well attended and supported by the populace. However, we received information that 49 students are currently home-schooled and some others who reside in the Absarokee area choose to attend school in Columbus or Red Lodge. It would seem important to find out exactly why this is happening and if possible make changes that would encourage some of these students to return to the public schools. If even half of these students were to return to the Absarokee Public School System, it would begin to restore the school to its former enrollment.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The information we received on the number of home-schooled students leads me to believe there is a need for more in-depth exploration of why many students choose not to attend the Absarokee School but instead are home-schooled, or attend in Columbus or Red Lodge. If it is true that 49 students are home-schooled it would be both interesting and productive to evaluate the reasons for the abdication from the public school because we have conflicting information that suggests a difference of opinion on why people choose to home school students rather than send them to public schools. For example we were told by students that they think that it is for

religious or other reasons, but on the other hand received information that at least one cause is related to how the parents perceive the public school. We have no information on how many Absarokee children attend Columbus or Red Lodge rather than Absarokee, but that information and the reasons for it would be valuable too. Because the public school has declined in enrollment in recent years, it may be time to re-evaluate the priorities that may have worked well in the past and institute some changes that would make it desirable for the abdicating students to return to the fold.

**RESOURCES:**

I don't have knowledge of specific resources for this assessment but believe that Ann Clancy of Clancy Consultants might be a good resource – there may be grants available to pay for such an assessment. Ann Clancy's phone number in Billings is (406) 252-6120.

**MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY PARADIGM SHIFT****ISSUE: COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION**

There are many volunteer groups at work in Absarokee – some of which overlap in their goals and/or activities. Information is not always shared among the various groups, which tends to detract from their effectiveness and from their productivity, not to mention causing frustration among the members.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Form a "committee of chairs" (CoC) comprised of representatives from each of the volunteer groups, task forces, county commissioners, Beartooth RC&D, et al. An agenda might include an opportunity for the "CoC" members to present their group's plans, activities and needs to the committee members. The committee is then able to coordinate the activities of each and support the activities that are priorities for the entire group. This process would allow consensus and establishment of priorities for resources available to Absarokee and a forum to discuss and better understand each other's needs. In the beginning, weekly meetings would help to establish the processes needed for collaboration. As time goes on it's possible monthly meetings would suffice.
  - This is a process Big Sky EDA used in Billings and it resulted in

- less antagonism, competition for resources, establishment of priorities for the various groups, etc. The members in Billings were: MSU-Billings Chancellor, Director of the Chamber, City Administrator, Montana Department of Commerce, the Mayor of Laurel, Beartooth RC&D, County Commissioners and the Executive Director of Big Sky EDA. The Executive Director of Big Sky EDA was the facilitator for the group – he called the meetings, provided the meeting place and provided an agenda.
- Some results from these meetings were agreement on which agency was to do what (Big Sky EDA became the recruitment agency for Yellowstone County for example), agreement on how the City and the other agencies could work effectively together and how priorities would be established, etc. The group no longer meets as a team, but the processes and agreements that were established as a result of that committee forum continue to work well for the participants.

**RESOURCES:**

The time of the representatives of each group. This group could be chaired by Beartooth RC&D in the beginning (or one of the County Commissioners) and eventually be chaired by a volunteer from one of the member groups.

**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUES: TOURISM FOR ABSAROKEE**

Absarokee is positioned perfectly to be a tourist attraction. Events that the community has sponsored have been well received and well attended. However, more consistent year-round activity from tourists should be encouraged.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Because I have spent many hours riding horseback in the Absarokee area I have a real appreciation for the area and think of it as a perfect place for horse-related events. Two events I feel would contribute greatly to the recognition and appreciation for the area if done on a yearly basis are:

- The American Quarter Horse Association/Montana Quarter Horse Association yearly rides. The 2005 ride is scheduled at the Staubach Creek Ranch in Winston, MT (near Townsend I believe) so if someone wanted to attend and assess the viability of doing a ride in Absarokee it might be a good idea. My experience with the ride was when I was the ride manager for rides 1997, 1998 and 1999 at the Eagle Nest Ranch near Columbus. We were able to draw riders from all over the United States and some from Europe. There were approximately 200 people participating in some form or another each year. This is a yearly event and could be held in the Absarokee area very easily. It is most easily managed if on private property and would bring in riders, family members, and “tag-alongs” that would not soon forget the Absarokee area. Some of these attendees also would stay at Absarokee facilities and eat in Absarokee restaurants. This ride was hosted near Absarokee for a year or two but it didn’t seem that there was a concerted effort to advertise it nationwide or even in Montana, which resulted in only drawing 20-30 riders. It was also held in the Roundup area and only about 15 riders attended. Because we were able to get many people involved on a volunteer basis for the 1st 3 years I believe that effort/success could be duplicated with the volunteerism demonstrated in Absarokee.
- Endurance riding has become a huge draw in the United States and overseas. The Fort Howe ride near Ashland is an international ride that attracts people from all over the United States and Europe. The management of these rides requires certification and many volunteers, but is another one of those efforts that would be well suited for the Absarokee area. The participants from around the country tend to come to ride sites 2-3 days ahead of the scheduled ride and stay for 2-3 days afterward. The spend time sightseeing and spending money.
- These types of activities plus advertising Absarokee as an alternate route between Billings and Red Lodge on all state and national publications issued by our tourism department would enhance the opportunities

for Absarokee to expand its economic base considerably.

**RESOURCES:**

The “volunteerism” strength of Absarokee residents, plus the Montana Quarter Horse Association, the American Quarter Horse Association and the American Endurance Ride Conference would be the resources needed to accomplish these goals. A local rancher willing to allow rides on his/her ranch would be required or a ride manager willing and able to work with the BLM or Forest Service to provide trails for the rides. Jan and Bill Stevens of Ashland who manage the Fort Howes ride would be great resources for a successful, ongoing endurance ride.

- Fort Howes website:  
<http://www.forthowes.net/> Jan and Bill Stevens telephone number is: 406.784.2469 and their E-mail address is: circlebarranch@rangeweb.net
- AERC website address is: [www.aerc.org](http://www.aerc.org)
- American Quarter Horse Association – ride page:  
<http://www.aqha.com/recreation/ride/index.html>
- Montana Quarter Horse Association:  
<http://www.mqha.com/>

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**REPORT BY: VICTOR BJORNBERG**

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**INTRDUCTION:**

To the Absarokee Community Leaders who put the Resource Team Assessment and the RTA Team

members, I do apologize for missing the community sessions and the work of the Team. I hear that it was my loss and that the Community did a great job. Congratulations! If you questions about any of my comments, suggestions or programs that the Montana Commerce Department’s Tourism Division offers, contact me at 841-2795, [victor@visitmt.com](mailto:victor@visitmt.com).

**MAIN TOPIC: AFTER THE BOOM**

**ISSUE: CAPITALIZE ON ARTISANS**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

A number of communities have discussed cultural tourism development in their areas and regions. One group that has acted on this discussion and created actual products and promotions is the Hands of Harvest organization in north central Montana. This involves communities in Montana’s “Golden Triangle” that banded together to promote their local artisans, art galleries, studios, historic hotels and guest ranches, museums, local produced goods and other locally owned and operated businesses that highlight the craft and heritage of the area. Their product has been an 80-page four-color guidebook listing 100 entities that met the Hands of Harvest criteria and paid a \$25 membership fee. The guidebook sells for \$12. There is a website that is in the development stage: [www.handsofharvest.org](http://www.handsofharvest.org). This organization has offered to serve as a mentor for other areas and regions interested in developing a similar effort.

The Hands of Harvest project grew out of a statewide Cultural Tourism Workshop series sponsored by the Missoula Cultural Council, Montana Arts Council, Montana Committee for the Humanities, US Forest Service, and Montana Commerce Department Tourism Division. The Montana Arts Council, MSU Extension, and local community organizations have put together an Artist Marketing Workshop format. This is available to communities or regions that want to sponsor and organize the workshop as a service to the local arts community. It focuses on the marketing side or art. Like our agriculture community, artists are good producers, but may not have much background or understanding of the marketing side needed to make their endeavor a financial success.

**RESOURCES:**

Hands of Harvest: The Crafts and Heritage Trails of North Central Montana: Wendy Wedum, Cascade County Extension Service, (406) 454-

6980, FAX (406) 454-6984,  
wwedum@montana.edu, www.handsofharvest.org

Montana Arts Council: Cinda Holt,  
Communications Director & Business  
Development, (406) 777-0090, FAX (406) 777-  
1777, cholt@montana.com, http://art.mt.gov

Dave Sharpe, MSU Extension, 994-5608,  
dsharpe@montana.edu

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**MAIN TOPIC: AFTER THE BOOM**

**ISSUE: SERVICING NEW MARKETS –  
TOURISTS AND CULTURE/ART BUYERS**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

If the Absarokee community feels that tourism is a specific economic development strategy it wants to pursue, there is a program offered by the Montana Commerce Department’s Tourism Division, MSU Extension and UM’s Institute for Tourism & Recreation Research (ITRR) called the Community Tourism Assessment Program (CTAP). This is a 9-10 month “self help” process offered to three communities each year by the Tourism Division (Travel Montana) with facilitation assistance provided by MSU Extension and UM’s Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research. A local community action committee uses the process and facilitation services to analyze local resident attitudes about and interest in tourism, their community’s tourism potential, gaps in visitor services, and the identification of affordable projects or actions that could strengthen the role of tourism in the local economy. The key to the program’s success and effectiveness for the community is a committed broad-based group of community members willing to invest 9-10 months of their time and study in this “self help” process.

Applications are now being solicited for the 2005/2006 Session of CTAP. Application forms are available by calling Victor Bjornberg, Montana Commerce Department Tourism Division, 841-2795, victor@visitmt.com or by downloading them from the division’s website:  
<http://travelmontana.state.mt.us/OURPROGRAMS/TourismDevEd.shtm>

Since the CTAP program was created in 1991, 35 Montana communities have participated. A number of communities in Yellowstone Country have

participated in the process and could provide Absarokee insights into its value: Livingston, 1996-97(the chamber was the sponsor agency; Livingston is the only CTAP community that decided not to pursue any tourism-related projects after the process was complete which is what the process is all about – helping communities decide what they would like to do with tourism, if anything. Doing nothing is just fine if that’s what they community decides); Red Lodge, 1999-2000 (the chamber was the sponsor); and Three Forks, 1995-1996 (the chamber was the sponsor). The full list of CTAP communities and the projects that resulted from the process are on Travel Montana’s Intranet site:

<http://travelmontana.state.mt.us/OURPROGRAMS/TourismDevEd.shtm>

The Arts Marketing Workshops, Montana Arts Council and Hands of Harvest program mentioned in AFTER THE BOOM – Capitalize on Artisans section could be useful here as well.

The Montana Superhost Program is another tool that is covered in the TOURISM – Customer Service section.

**RESOURCES:**

Montana Commerce Department Tourism Division: Victor Bjornberg, Tourism Development Coordinator, 841-2795, [victor@visitmt.com](mailto:victor@visitmt.com)

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**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUE: SCENIC LOOP**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Coordinate efforts with the Friends of the Beartooth All American Road. This nationally recognized scenic byway has a Corridor Management Group whose job is to both develop interpretation for that highway as well as promote it. While you are not within the Beartooth’s designation area, you can help the group develop interesting ways for people to access the All American Road communities. With the lower portion of the Beartooth being temporarily closed by the mudslides, now would be a good time to offer assistance in informing visitors about options in the area and alternative routes to and from Yellowstone via the Beartooth and Absaroka Mountain Range area.

**RESOURCES:**

Friends of the Beartooth All American Road:  
Coordinator, Kim Capron, (307) 587-3669,  
kim@associationresourceswy.com; Area contacts:  
Denise Parsons, Red Lodge Chamber, 446-1719 or  
1720; Glory Mahan, Red Lodge, [gloryb@vcn.com](mailto:gloryb@vcn.com)

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**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUE: YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Absarokee is not an entrance to Yellowstone National Park. I wouldn't spend a lot of time trying to become recognized as one. You could promote Hwy 78 as a way to access the Beartooth Scenic Highway and its access to Yellowstone, but any tie to Yellowstone is secondary to the attractions and activities Absarokee can offer visitors.

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**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUE: AGRI-TOURISM**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

MSU Extension and the Montana Commerce Department worked with a number of other partners to develop a Farm & Ranch Recreation Business Workshop Series offered in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the workshops are currently not offered, there was a video created as well as workshop resource books. The video, "Fun on the Farm: Starting a Farm and Ranch Recreation Business," is a three part, 45 minute video covering an overview of farm & ranch recreation business types (15 minutes), business and licensing considerations (15 minutes), facilities and marketing (15 minutes). The video is available through MSU Extension Publications in Bozeman. It is VIDEO 36 for ordering purposes.

There are a number of Montana guest ranch associations that offer marketing, networking and education services to their members. These include the Montana Dude Ranch Association and the Montana Ranch Vacation Association. They would be contacts for entities looking at developing an agri-tourism program or business. In addition, there are a number of successful guest and working guest ranches in the Absarokee area that interested

parties could approach for some insight into adding a tourism component to an ag operation.

**RESOURCES:**

*MSU Extension Publications, Culbertson Hall, Box 172040, Bozeman, MT 59717, 994-3273*

*Montana Dude Ranch Association (Bozeman Office), 284-9933, [www.montanadra.com](http://www.montanadra.com)*

*Montana Ranch Vacation Association (Roscoe), 328-6883*

*Lazy E-L Working Guest Ranch, Roscoe, 328-6858*

*The Stoney Lonesome Ranch, Absarokee, 932-4454*

*The Hawley Mountain Guest Ranch, McLeod, 877-496-7848*

*JLX Ranch, Nye, 328-6205*

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**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUE: CREATIVE MARKETING**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

For basic marketing tools, the Montana Commerce Department's Tourism Division has compiled a No & Low Cost Marketing reference sheet that outlines the services the division offers as well as contacts for AAA (a major visitor information source for travelers to our state), Montana's 9 gateway community Visitor Information Centers and the 6 tourism regions. This information is available on the division's intranet site:

<http://travelmontana.state.mt.us/OURPROGRAMS/TourismDevEd.shtm>

For creative marketing tools, look at communities or other businesses that you think do a good job and go pick their brains.

**RESOURCES:**

A community and attraction/event that comes to mind are:

*Reed Point's Hotel Montana & the Let Er Go*

*Sheep Drive Organization: Russ & Connie*

*Schlievert, 326-2288*

*Philipsburg, Shirley Beck, (800) 525-0169*

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**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUE: DESTINATION POINT AND DESTINATION DINING**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Communities receive the most benefit from visitors when they can get them to stay overnight. The “rule of thumb” is that a visitor (tourist) spends 80% of their vacation dollars in the communities where they spend a night. Successful tourism destinations have plenty of accommodations, a variety of food service offerings, shopping opportunities, group, family and individual activities, and good customer service.

In my quick review of Absarokee-based lodging listed in the MONTANA TRAVEL PLANNER (MT Commerce Department – Travel Montana publication), there is:

- 1 motel (6 rooms)
- 3 B&Bs (8 rooms)
- 2 guest ranches (1 working ranch with visitor services, 1 with a lodge for hunters, fishers, etc)
- 3 Vacation Home properties (1 with 4 cabins, 1 house, 1 log house with 4 bedrooms).

That’s a very small supply of accommodations, hardly enough to support a “destination.”

By the nature of their service and operations, the guest ranches and vacation homes can be looked at as “destinations” in their own right. These typically don’t have walk-in customers, but work with people who book in advance, have required multi-day stays, and are coming to the area specifically to experience what these ranches or vacation homes have to offer.

Strengthening community interaction/networking with the owners and operators of these facilities could expand the benefits to community businesses that can provide visitors with things they are looking for.

In my opinion, it would be a long-term project for Absarokee to become a visitor destination of any size or scale. If they community see this as a desirable goal, then the Community Tourism Assessment Program mentioned in AFTER THE BOOM – Servicing New Markets would be one step to take to begin is long term process. Becoming a destination dining area would be shorter term. Given that you already have the the Grizzly Bar & Café in Roscoe; Montana Hannas in Dean; Cowboy Supper Club in Fishtail, Carter’s Camp in Nye, the 307 in Columbus, and excellent dining inside Absarokee that just hasn’t been marketed as regional destination dining.

Red Lodge is an unusual tourism community in Montana in that more is spent there for dining than for gasoline or lodging, showing how surprisingly powerful destination dining can be.

**RESOURCES:**

Montana Commerce Department Tourism Division: Victor Bjornberg, Tourism Development Coordinator, 841-2795, [victor@visitmt.com](mailto:victor@visitmt.com)

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**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUE: BUILD ON EVENTS OF OTHERS**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

If Absarokee is interested in developing special events that draw in visitors from outside a 100-mile radius, the Montana Commerce Department’s Tourism Division has a Special Events Grant Program (SEGP) that can assist. The SEGP is designed to assist in getting new (less than 3 years old), annual, ongoing events off the ground. The Grant funds are awarded through a competitive application process. The funds can be used for marketing, overhead expenses like security, insurance, speaker fees.

The grants are offered annually. The SEGP Grant Pool has been \$50,000 with 7-9 events awarded grants each year. The SEGP applications are usually available in October and the submission deadline is mid-January. Information about the program is available at <http://travelmontana.state.mt.us/OURPROGRAMS/TourismDevEd.shtm>

**RESOURCES:**

Special Events Grant Program: Carol Crockett, Tourism Development Specialist, Montana Commerce Department Tourism Division, 841-2796, [ccrockett@mt.gov](mailto:ccrockett@mt.gov)

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**MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM**

**ISSUE: CUSTOMER SERVICE**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Montana Commerce Department Tourism Division offers a Montana Superhost customer service training program through a contract with

Flathead Valley Community College. The College contracts with six Montana Superhost Trainers to provide up to 150 training sessions across Montana each year. There is a \$20/person fee for the session (\$15/person for members of the sponsoring organization such as chambers, RC&Ds, civic clubs, local governments, etc), and 20 participants are the minimum requirement. After the 20 participants are signed up, any local volunteers from museums, visitor information centers or other non-profit, tourism related organizations are allowed in free. Nancy Walker of Billings (formerly of Big Timber) is the Montana Superhost Trainer in the Absarokee area. A Montana Superhost Session Scheduling form and program info is available on the Tourism Division's intranet site:

<http://travelmontana.state.mt.us/OURPROGRAMS/Superhost.shtm>

**RESOURCES:**

Montana Superhost, Jodi Smith or Ben Traina,  
756-3674, FAX 756-3351, [superhost@fvcc.edu](mailto:superhost@fvcc.edu)

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**REPORT BY: GLORIA O'ROURKE**

*Montana Economic Developers Association  
Montana Economic Development Services  
118 E. Seventh St.; Suite 2A  
Anaconda, MT 59711  
Ph: 406.563.5259 Fx: 406.563.5476  
[gloria@medamembers.org](mailto:gloria@medamembers.org)  
<http://www.medamembers.org>*

**INTRODUCTION:**

If you were able to attend even one Absarokee listening session, you probably heard that Absarokee is the 31<sup>st</sup> Resource Team Assessment conducted to date. Thirty other communities in Montana have previously gone through this process. I have had the privilege to be a part of most of those assessments. Of all 31 assessments, Absarokee had the most across-the-board community representation and involvement. Your enthusiasm, spirit, pride and love for your community was made obvious and demonstrated over and over throughout our visit. It was my honor and pleasure to be "Absarokeeized." I hope the recommendations and resources in this report will assist you in continuing the good work already begun.

**MAIN TOPIC: RECREATION**

**ISSUE: IMPROVEMENTS TO FACILITIES**

Several outdoor facilities (pool, showerhouse, basketball courts, bleachers, other courts, etc.) are in need of upgrade or repair.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

As the outdoors is such a critical factor to life in Absarokee, those involved in upkeep and maintenance of Absarokee's public places could contact the resources below for assistance. Following the town meeting in Absarokee May 17<sup>th</sup>, a bumped into a young man who said that there used to be a skatepark in Absarokee, but it had fallen under disrepair. The resource below ([skatepark.org](http://skatepark.org)) is fantastic for all aspects of skatepark needs.

**RESOURCES:**

The Steele-Reese Foundation  
Ms. Jeanne E. Wolverton  
Western Program Director  
P.O. Box 249  
Alberton, MT 59820  
406-722-4564  
406-722-4982 (fax)  
[jeannew@blackfoot.net](mailto:jeannew@blackfoot.net)

Lilly Endowment  
Grant Services Office  
P.O. Box 88068  
Indianapolis, IN  
46208 - 0068  
Phone: 317-924-5471  
Url:  
<http://www.lilly.com/about/community/foundation/endowment.html>

Skateboard Park Assistance:  
<http://www.skatepark.org>

## MT Fish Wildlife and Parks

There are several programs that would be of interest to Absarokee, so be sure to visit the website below. Perhaps of most use to Absarokee would be the Land & Water Conservation Fund. This program grants up to \$75,000 with a match required of 50% of project cost. Eligible applicants include any political subdivision of the state or sovereign Indian nation: incorporated cities or towns, counties, school districts, state agencies and tribal governments. Outdoor recreation facilities such as ball fields, open space acquisitions, public parks, swimming pools, skating rinks, picnic facilities and walking trails.

Please visit

<http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/parks/grants.asp> for full details.

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### MAIN TOPIC: RECREATION

#### ISSUE: AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES, SUPERVISED SUMMER PROGRAMS

Parents and students alike mentioned the need for coordinated after school activities and/or supervised summer programs.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

The team heard several times that Absarokee is blessed with strong churches. Minot, North Dakota, while much larger than Absarokee, has a program that could easily be duplicated in a community of any size. It boils down to whether or not a community wishes to make the after-school/summer schedule a priority.

Quite simply, a congregation commits to providing after school activities one day per week. The program has been successful in Minot for several years and has proven to be a win-win project for all involved, from Senior Citizens to parents to teachers and children.

The guidelines for what can be taught, activity guidelines and organizational framework can be received from contacting Jeff O'Rourke, below.

Another option is to look into the Afterschool Alliance program. "The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of afterschool programs and advocating for quality, affordable programs for all children. It is supported by a group of public, private

and nonprofit organizations that share the Alliance's vision of ensuring that all children have access to afterschool programs by 2010."

This link takes you step by step through what can be done to start a program:  
[http://www.afterschoolnow.org/start\\_a\\_program.cfm](http://www.afterschoolnow.org/start_a_program.cfm)

#### RESOURCES:

The leadership and members of churches in Absarokee.

Pastor Jeff O'Rourke

Phone: 701.852.0684 email: [jeffo@ndak.net](mailto:jeffo@ndak.net)

Visit <http://www.afterschoolnow.org> for lots of ideas on how to begin and build an after school program.

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### MAIN TOPIC: AFTER THE BOOM

#### ISSUE: RE-INVENTING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

The other Absarokee Resource Team members will no doubt have excellent ideas for you in re-inventing the businesses of Absarokee. Several years ago, I came across this excellent article regarding Business Retention and felt it may be of help to the business community in Absarokee.

#### RESOURCES:

**12 Essential Steps for Jumpstarting the Business Retention Process**  
*By Del Birch*

Creating an effective, sustainable business retention program *looks* easy on paper. Actually implementing it is *easier said than done*. Providing an ongoing retention program that delivers value to your customers is a significant accomplishment and a major competitive advantage for your community.

We've identified 12 essential steps that economic development and community leaders can take to create an effective program sustainable over the long term. Again, we offer a note of caution: these steps only look easy on paper. Creating and then maintaining an ongoing retention program is not easy. Here's another caveat: this is not an *a la carte* line where steps can be taken – or missed – at will. Building an effective, sustainable retention program

is a systematic process. Each step in the process is critical and essential.

There's no question that retention takes a substantial investment in time, energy and willpower. While the investment is high, the potential return on investment is equally high – keeping wealth and job creating companies in your community and growing job opportunities for area residents.

**Remember what every private sector company already knows: *satisfied customers* – your community's employers – *typically don't leave*.**

**Step #1 Recognize the value of retaining existing businesses.**

Attraction or retention? Consider that up to 80% of job growth in any community is generated by firms already located in the community. Can you really afford to ignore the customers – your community's existing employers – that you already have?

**Step #2 Generate a commitment from key service providers. Build the team.**

Retention requires a team of dedicated service providers who are ready (and willing) to respond to customer needs identified through the interview or outreach process. Don't bother with outreach without a strong, committed, dedicated team in place. And, don't expect the team to coalesce immediately. Team-building takes time so start early.

**Step #3 Focus on a common objective: job growth through retention and expansion of existing businesses.**

The objective is simple: create more jobs at existing firms. How is this done? First, use outreach to build relationships and identify the firm's needs. Second, deliver required services efficiently, enhancing the firm's bottom line. Third, maintain open lines of communications with CEOs to ensure that they are happy and satisfied.

**Step #4 Target specific business segments yielding the highest return on investment.**

Economic development organizations have limited budgets, staffs and time. It makes sense to target limited resources to those firms that have the highest propensity to create jobs and wealth. Retention is Darwinistic. Focus limited resources on winners, not losers.

**Step #5 Create an efficient team communications network.**

Winning teams know each player's strengths and weaknesses. Winning teams communicate efficiently. Today, winning teams in business use technology and email to communicate quickly and efficiently.

**Step #6 Initiate customer outreach**

Why talk to your community's business owners? You want to accomplish specific goals: 1) learn more about the companies that employ area residents; 2) identify the needs of the company and then deliver those services efficiently; 3) learn what business owners like and dislike about the business climate in your community and state; and, 4) use this knowledge and intelligence to constantly improve service delivery and the business climate.

**Step #7 Create a useable, accessible, dynamic customer database.**

Empower your team to efficiently meet the needs of businesses by giving them the data, knowledge and intelligence gathered through outreach. Databases are useless unless they are used. Allow service providers on the local retention team to access company profiles and satisfy customer needs faster, smarter and better.

**Step #8 Respond to customer needs consistently and promptly.**

Train your team to respond to pre-qualified company needs quickly. The service provider receiving a referral should contact the CEO within 24 to 48 hours for a follow-up meeting. This demonstrates to the CEO that the local economic development team understands the real time constraints that the firm faces in today's dynamic business environment.

**Step #9 Use the database to anticipate needs.**

The data from your outreach effort is current, accurate and highly specific to your community and region. Analyze it for opportunities to add services, improve existing services, and identify programs and policies that can make your community and state more competitive. You're gathering relevant, accurate information from your business owners so use it!

**Step #10 Measure customer satisfaction.**

Adopt another technique from the private sector: call companies requesting assistance and ask if they were happy with the assistance provided to them. Follow-up with the customer to ensure customer satisfaction. This strengthens the customer relationship and provides valuable feedback about the quality of programs and service delivery.

**Step #11 Make necessary changes to increase customer satisfaction.**

Follow-up with the customer provides a good checks and balances for the team. It identifies those service providers who are doing a superior job – and those who are not. Use this information to strengthen the team and replace non-performers with service providers totally committed to superior customer satisfaction. Customer follow-up can identify opportunities to improve program. Use this feedback to make programs more user-friendly.

**Step #12 Constantly strengthen the team to benefit the customer.**

Once you have a team in place, use it to benefit the customer. Tap the expertise of your multi-organization team as an informal economic/community development “think tank.” Analyze gaps in resources and programs. Create and/or suggest new programs or program enhancements. Respond to recurring problems or opportunities. And, always remember: *satisfied customers typically don't leave.*

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**MAIN TOPIC: BUSINESS**

**ISSUE: RE-INVENTING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

Hard to find internet service in Absarokee.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Being a road warrior with my work and on the constant lookout for access to the internet, perhaps a current business in Absarokee would be interested in adding a Cyber Café to Absorkee’s services or some point-of-access for travelers needing the internet.

**RESOURCES:**

<http://www.easybrowsing.com/faqcafe.htm> has the frequently asked questions about setting up and operating a Cybercafe..

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**MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY PARADIGM SHIFT**

**ISSUES: VOLUNTEERISM, COORDINATION, AND COMMUNICATION**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

I recently read an article that suggested rather than beating the drum for new volunteers, groups need to improve and expand their existing networks. The idea behind this is that your group could join with another for a specific project for a specific time period; using volunteers already in place and bolster each other with the new found support. While this seems like a no-brainer on the surface, this concept is surprising overlooked in our communities. Each group tends to focus on its own project, identity and budget, and does not stop to look at the support available in a region’s network of organizations. Please take a moment to read the article at the website listed below. I think you will like it!

**RESOURCE:**

**Nonprofit Networking: The New Way to Grow**

How can a nonprofit increase its social impact? Many would say it needs to grow big to be strong. Instead, says HBS professor Jane Wei-Skillern, the answer could be in the power of strategic networks.

<http://www.matr.net/article-14789.html>

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**MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY PARADIGM SHIFT**

**ISSUE: LOCAL LOYALTY – BUY FROM THE DONORS**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Simply put, education can be the key to improving local support for your local businesses. Put up signs or fliers with the statistics of just what it costs locals to drive out of town for “bargains.” The information below was provided by Al Jones, Absarokee Team, SouthCentral Regional Development Officer for Montana Department of Commerce.

Al writes: “ Most folks barely account for the cost of gas when they drive 100 miles to shop at big box stores, grocers, etc. and this mileage cost from AAA assumes THEIR TIME IS WORTH NOTHING. In other words, that they're unemployed, pay no one for timesaving services like day care or lawn mowing, and that they'd just be home watching TV during the hours spent driving. So by running to the distant stores 1x-4x a month, in most cases the shopper is actually reducing their purchasing power while also wasting a day in the process.

Take AAA's current numbers, i.e. .501 cents a mile and multiply that by the actual mileage to the 1-2 primary shopping destinations of your town, (don't forget to figure it as a round trip.)

60 mile jaunt = 120 miles @ .501= \$60 cost so if they really saved 20% shopping there on everything (very unlikely), they have to buy \$300 worth of stuff or about a full week's after tax wages for the average Montanan. Just a thought, since penny-pinchers tend to be penny-wise, pound-foolish. It's also why the large discount stores have far higher net profit rates than average retail stores (see [www.chainstoreage.com](http://www.chainstoreage.com) for the breakdown by store type.)”

Al's recommendation: Take the AAA driving cost per mile, multiply that with the roundtrip mileage to the retail centers your shoppers regularly drive to "to save big money" and then show the math, perhaps on billboards on the way out of town.

[www.chainstoreage.com](http://www.chainstoreage.com)

To add to that information, I recently read about a group in Bozeman (of all places!) that has been striving for three years to encourage people to shop at local, home-grown stores rather than big box stores or national chains. Absarokee (and my hometown of Anaconda) can learn much from this group's effort. To save you time, I placed in bold print the article highlights.

"Gallatin Valley Independent Business Alliance (GVIBA) is not here to tell people where to shop," Johnson emphasized in discussing the Buy Local campaign, "but to inform the public of the benefits."

The group's efforts to raise awareness seem to have made an impact. Even some consumers who say they often shop at stores such as Wal-Mart say they think about local options. "I'm not saying that people need to buy 100 percent locally - it isn't possible in all cases - but **even if people could shift 15 percent of their business it would mean a huge amount of money staying longer in the community,**" Ogle said.

The idea has spread to other parts of the region, as well. Livingston has its own Buy Local group. Lara Salazar, one of the members, says that GVIBA was "a big inspiration," though community members had been meeting informally even before GVIBA's launch.

**Salazar said that GVIBA "offered their experience, and even their logo and message to our group, even though their situation and needs are different from ours.** They have done a great thing for their community."

**"On the radio and in newspapers, more and more businesses are using advertising to highlight local connections. You see things like businesses saying that they support local nonprofits and the high school.** It seems to me that these kinds of ads are a good measuring tool for what the campaign has done,"

Johnson sees such growing public awareness as the primary effect that GVIBA has had on the local community: **"It is a slow process, word of mouth,**

**but the best way that any business grows is by word of mouth."**

**"GVIBA does not expect huge changes immediately," Johnson added. "We are expecting a nice steady growth, like a good business."**

#### RESOURCES:

Read the entire GVIBA article at:

<http://www.matr.net/article-14778.html>

Check out additional information at

[www.chainstoreage.com](http://www.chainstoreage.com)

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#### MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM

##### ISSUE: SIGNAGE

Absarokee could definitely benefit from improved signage. Many communities believe the myth that it is almost impossible to work with MT Department of Transportation to post new signs.

##### RECOMMENDATIONS and RESOURCES:

Improved signage to advertise all that Absarokee has to offer is highly recommended.

To provide more reasons for travelers to stop, develop a strategy:

1. Identify kinds of visitors (i.e. leisure, pass through, sightseers, retirees, friends etc.)
2. Recreationists; destination visitors
3. Heritage/Cultural Travelers; seeking enrichment from local history
4. Commercial and Business Travelers; international trade, agency/business travelers

Identify where visitors come from. Tourism development efforts can focus on serving these markets more effectively by anticipating and fulfilling their needs. Pass-through tourists need visible information and activities (farmers market, hikes) and improvements to entrances/community appearance to entice them. Heritage and cultural travelers seek local history, culture and arts (historic buildings, community/tribal culture, local artists/craftsmen, events). Commercial travelers need business support services (data ports in hotel rooms, access to copying/printing services, meeting rooms, cell phone coverage). All of these segments seek good quality dining and shopping experiences.

You MUST visit the MT Dept. of Transportation website regarding Outdoor Advertising Regulations.

<http://www.mdt.state.mt.us/rw/oacinfo.html> Here is a small portion of the information available on the website:

*Congress passed the Highway Beautification Act to control and limit signs along the interstate and primary highways which allows the traveling public to enjoy the nation's scenic beauty.*

*The Montana Legislature also enacted laws consistent with the federal act. Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) is responsible for enforcing these laws, and failure to do so could jeopardize millions of dollars in highway construction funds.*

*Outdoor advertising signs are not prohibited, but there are specific limitations such as where they may be located, how close they can be to other permitted signs, how large they can be, and how they must be maintained.*

*Signs may be placed in areas that are zoned for commercial and industrial use or in unzoned areas where commercial or industrial activities are located. It's our responsibility to determine if those areas qualify for the placement of signs.*

*Permitted signs must be at least 500 feet apart along interstate highways and 300 feet apart along primary highways. Outside of incorporated cities and towns they cannot be closer than 500 feet from a public park or public forest boundary. Also, they must be at least 500 feet from highway rest areas or from an interstate highway interchange.*

*Signs may vary in size but cannot be larger than 672 square feet in area. (A sign that is 48 feet long and 14 feet high is 672 square feet.) The sign cannot be more than 48 feet long and no higher than 30 feet above the surface of the roadway.*

*In addition, there are several other regulations that may apply. Before applying for a sign permit, you should discuss your plans with a right-of-way agent at the MDT district office in your area. Visit: <http://www.mdt.state.mt.us/rw/oacdistrct>*

**Another great resource is found on the SBA website.**  
<http://www.sba.gov/starting/signage>

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**MAIN TOPIC: HEALTH CARE**

**ISSUE: CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS**

Overall, I got the impression that the community of Absarokee is grateful for the current medical facilities in place in Absarokee. Concern was expressed, however, as to the stability and long-term availability of the current services.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Down the road, it may be necessary for the Absarokee area to fine-tune just what level of medical services it can sustain. I recently learned of a new program (new to Montana) called Rural Health Works. "The purpose of Rural Health Works is to provide a process by which community residents can evaluate their health system. The process leads to increased use and expansion of health services and ensures the existence of health services. Rural Health Works engages community residents in local health care decision-making by showing them the importance of the health care sector to their local economy. The hard facts are illustrated with locally specific numbers and are the key to obtaining local participation. Rural Health Works teaches the process to state professionals so they can employ the process in their rural communities."

As I understand it, under this program, Absarokee's current healthcare resources would be analyzed. Based on this information and a ton of other data (participants are trained in using the software) options would be plugged in to determine just what the community could support – and how – how the medical asset would stimulate economic development in the community. For example, a small community I recently worked with is considering the purchase of a kidney dialysis machine – which is very expensive. They were not certain if the customer base would support the cost. One purpose of Rural Health Works is to determine if indeed the equipment could be sustained.

**RESOURCES:**

Visit the Rural Health Works website at:  
<http://www.ruralhealthworks.org/GenInfo/aboutUs.asp>

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**MAIN TOPIC: HEALTH CARE**

**ISSUE: PHARMACY, TELEMEDICINE, TELEPHARMACY**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

How about looking into a cooperative? Distance Learning and Telemedicine options? Developing and expanding medical partnerships may hold part of the answer when local resources are limited. The training and resources could be provided by St. Vincent’s, which would contract with the cooperative to deliver services. If there is interest in networking with other nearby counties, information and technical assistance can be obtained from USDA Rural Development.

**RESOURCES:**

USDA Rural Development, Cooperative Development Specialist  
Bill Barr  
P.O. Box 850  
Bozeman, MT 59771  
Ph: (406) 585-2545  
e-mail: [Bill.Barr@mt.usda.gov](mailto:Bill.Barr@mt.usda.gov)

USDA-Distance Learning & Telemedicine Grant Program is designed to meet the educational and health needs of rural communities. Eligible uses of funds include equipment for distance learning classrooms and equipment for telemedicine programs. This technology allows smaller clinics to interact with health care specialists located elsewhere in the state or country. Eligible applicants include hospitals, health care clinics, educational institutions, libraries, etc. Regulations and applications are available at: <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov>

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**MAIN TOPIC: HEALTH CARE**

**ISSUE: INSURANCE FOR SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS AND STAFF**

As a small business owner myself, I understand completely the challenge of finding affordable health care.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Realizing that small business owners all across the state face the same insurance need, the Montana Chamber went to work on the problem. If you are part of your local or area chamber, you can join a group policy through the state chamber. For the straight scoop, contact Webb Brown (see contact info below.)

Another option may be the newly developed Cover the Uninsured program. This program was

launched in the U.S. to provide free or low-cost insurance for children, low cost primary health care, state and national programs, lower prescription drug costs and pharmaceutical assistance.

<http://covertheuninsuredweek.org/individuals/>

**RESOURCES:**

Webb Brown  
Montana Chamber of Commerce  
2030 11th Avenue, Suite 21  
P.O. Box 1730  
Helena, MT 59624-1730  
406-442-2405  
<http://www.montanachamber.com>

Cover the Uninsured

<http://covertheuninsuredweek.org/individuals/>

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**IN CONCLUSION:**

And finally, perhaps I have saved the best for last. The Heartland Center for Leadership Development is a fount of information regarding all aspects of community and economic development. The Heartland Institute recommends a community review each of the items on this list and get to work on areas that need bolstering in your community. (see below)

**20 CLUES TO RURAL COMMUNITY SURVIVAL**

**1. Evidence of Community Pride:**  
Successful communities are often showplaces of care, attention, history and heritage.

**2. Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life:**  
People believe that something worth doing is worth doing right.

**3. Willingness to Invest in the Future:**  
In addition to the brick-and-mortar investments, all decisions are made with an outlook on the future.

**4. Participatory Approach to Community Decision Making:**  
Even the most powerful of opinion leaders seem to work toward building consensus.

**5. Cooperative Community Spirit:**  
The stress is on working together toward a common goal, and the focus is on positive results.

**6. Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities:**  
Successful communities have learned how to build on strengths and minimize weaknesses.

**7. Awareness of Competitive Positioning:**  
Local loyalty is emphasized, but thriving communities know who their competitors are and position themselves accordingly.

**8. Knowledge of the Physical**

**11. Acceptance of Women in Leadership Roles:**  
Women are elected officials, plant managers, and entrepreneurial developers.

**12. Strong Belief in and Support for Education:** Good schools are the norm and centers of community activity.

**13. Problem-Solving Approach to Providing Health Care:** Health care is considered essential, and smart strategies are in place for diverse methods of delivery.

**14. Strong Multi-Generational Family Orientation:**  
The definition of family is broad, and activities include younger as well as older generations.

**15. Strong Presence of Traditional Institutions that are Integral to Community Life:**  
Churches, schools and service clubs are strong influences on community development and social activities.

**16. Sound and Well-Maintained Infrastructure:**  
Leaders work hard to maintain and improve streets, sidewalks, water systems, and sewage facilities.

**17. Careful Use of Fiscal Resources:**  
Frugality is a way of life and expenditures are considered investments in the future.

**18. Sophisticated Use of Information Resources:**

Relative location and available natural resources underscore decision-making.

**9. Active Economic Development Program:**  
There is an organized, public/private approach to economic development.

**10. Deliberate Transition of Power to a Younger Generation of Leaders:**  
People under 40 regularly hold key positions in civic and business affairs.

information that is beyond the knowledge base available in the community.

**19. Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside:**  
People seek outside help for community needs, and many compete for government grants and contracts for economic and social programs.

**20. Conviction that, in the Long Run, You Have to Do It Yourself:**  
Thriving rural communities believe their destiny is in their own hands. Making their communities good places is a pro-active assignment, and they willingly accept it.

\*Reprinted from Heartland Center Leadership Development, Spring 2002 *Visions Newsletter*.

**REPORT BY: KATHIE BAILEY**

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Email: smdcdist6@hotmail.com*

Congratulations on a really great job organizing, marketing, and conducting the "Community Listening Sessions"! Absarokee has so many wonderful resources, including its wealth of people, that other communities could only wish for. At one of the listening sessions, a community member stated that when new people come to Absarokee from other parts of the world, that these people become "Absarokeeized" and gain the values of the Absarokee residents. Most communities are feeling that new people come to the area and try to impose new values on the community. I believe people become Absarokeeized because the community draws people with these common values. I know that in my short visit to Absarokee, I became Absarokeeized and have a deep love for the community, its potential, and its people. Absarokee has so many possibilities before it, with a little collaboration and cooperative working spirit, great things can happen there.

Following the listening sessions, we were able to receive correspondence from some of the community members that weren't able to participate because of work, shyness, didn't feel the community would listen to them, or for whatever reason. There were some really outstanding thoughts and many of them echoed what we had heard throughout the listening sessions. Daniel Burkhart contacted us because he works in Billings and was unable to attend the sessions. Dan has a concept for the community to develop an identity and carry that theme through in everything that can possibly happen. Dan's concept is using apple trees and carry the "marketing theme" throughout the community, it's identity, activities and locally made products. We may not all like apples, but there is a wealth of talent in Dan and he has a well thought out marketing strategy. His enthusiasm is like so many of you in Absarokee and he had the entire Resource Team brainstorming ideas and sending e-mails back and forth. This really should be occurring in the community and at a community "brainstorming" session. If most everyone could agree on one theme and work towards capturing and marketing that identity, Absarokee would be on the map like other communities that have used such a strategy for revitalization efforts. While you might not like the "apple theme", I do, and I think it could be used with crafters, quilters, artisans, culturally, economically, to start new businesses, to promote

existing businesses, for employment opportunities for youth, and for streetscape design. I would encourage you to look around your community and seek out the "Dan's" that are there with a wealth of knowledge, ability, skills, and attitude to help move the community forward collectively and creatively.

In conclusion, if I could leave you with one thought...it is this, you have everything within the community to make the difference you are all seeking. The key to the success is being willing to work together, meet half way, to accomplish the goals that all of you want and can envision. Remember that the "sum is always greater than the individual".

## **MAIN TOPIC: RECREATION**

### **ISSUE: IMPROVE CURRENT FACILITIES**

Throughout the sessions, consistently it was mentioned that the community needed to make improvements to recreational facilities within the community. It was mentioned that the pool needed improvements to the showerhouse, bathroom and kiddie pool. While the pool is funded through taxes and a wealth of volunteers, the operating budget is barely enough to maintain operations and certainly not enough for major infrastructure improvements.

The basketball, tennis, baseball and soccer facilities were discussed. These are tremendous facilities that offer great recreational opportunities within the community, but are limited because of inadequate lighting and seating capabilities. Again, these programs are predominantly maintained through volunteers with limited if any taxes, certainly not enough funds necessary for additional infrastructure improvements.

Structured programs for youth were mentioned as needed in the community, especially those held after school hours and during the summer. With changing family structure, this is a common problem in many communities within Montana.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Capitalize on the funds and volunteers that you currently have assisting the program by using these resources for match to leverage additional grant resources. It would be helpful if the multiple agencies, informal organizations, and volunteers that are working on the variety of recreational opportunities within the community collaborate and prioritize their efforts to work on the highest priority projects first and then move on to the next highest, etc., etc. If the numerous organizations within the

community compete for the save grants and limited resources available, they will find that no one will be successful in these endeavors.

The Colstrip Parks and Recreation Department has numerous after and before school programs in cooperation with the Colstrip School District. If you're interested in seeing a program in action and talking with a Montana community, I'd suggest that you contact Rick Harbin at 748-2612. Rick can help you get in contact with staff that work with the program.

#### **RESOURCES:**

##### **Recreational Trails Program Grant -**

Approximately \$800,000 is available for grants for recreational trails annually through the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks 80/20 cost-share program. Application deadline is usually June 1st with application materials needing to be to a wildlife & fishers biologist in mid-April. For information contact:

Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
State Trails Program Coordinator  
PO Box 200701  
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Land and Water Conservation Fund - The LWCF provides matching funds to state agencies and local communities known as stateside grants. These grants help state and local governments acquire, develop, improve and maintain high quality outdoor recreation areas. Projects funded include sports fields, playfields, support facilities, picnic areas, campgrounds, playground equipment, shelters, and recreational support facilities. Project applications are due around July 1 and require six to twelve months of preparation. Applications must include the results of a recent outdoor recreation survey conducted according to their guidelines. For detailed information:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

##### **Land & Water Conservation Fund Program**

Parks Division  
1420 6th Avenue  
PO Box 200701  
Helena, MT 59620  
<http://www.fwp.state.mt.us>  
(406) 444-3750

There are numerous other private foundations and grants available for recreational equipment and facilities. To assist you in this search, for about \$25

you can secure a **Montana Foundation Directory** for 2004-2005 through the Montana State University-Billings Library at:  
1500 University Drive  
Billings, MT 59101-0298  
(406) 657-2262  
[keperusich@msubillings.edu](mailto:keperusich@msubillings.edu)

Other websites for grantwriters include:

*Council on Foundations* [www.cof.org/index.htm](http://www.cof.org/index.htm)  
*Foundation Center* [www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org)  
*Foundations.org* [222.foundations.org](http://222.foundations.org)

There are several publishers of Grants and Funding guides and magazines at

*Oryx Press* [www.oryxpress.com/grants.htm](http://www.oryxpress.com/grants.htm)  
*Chronicle of Philanthropy* [www.philanthropy.com](http://www.philanthropy.com)  
*Thompson Publishers*  
[www.thompson.com/tpg/fed\\_gts](http://www.thompson.com/tpg/fed_gts)  
*Aspen Publishers* [www.grantscape.com](http://www.grantscape.com)  
*C and D Publications* [www.foundationdatabook.com](http://www.foundationdatabook.com)

Youth in Action/Community Service Grants: This program supports ongoing community service programs to stimulate new and creative youth-led community service programs. Web:  
<http://www.n4h.org/programs>

Youth Development, Education, and Social Entrepreneurship Program Grants: The foundation's goal is to empower poor and at-risk youth to become productive citizens, and looks primarily to preventative programs to accomplish this goal. Web:  
<http://www.jenesis.org>

**The National Youth Development Information Center:** This is a project of the National Assembly through its affinity group, the National Collaboration for Youth. NYDIC provides practice-related information about youth development to national and local youth-serving organizations at low cost or no cost. Youth grant opportunities can be found at  
<http://www.nydic.org/nydic/funding.html>

Altec/Styslinger Foundation  
210 Inverness Center Dr.  
Birmingham, AL 35242

Deramus Foundation, Inc.  
c/o David Zimmerman  
120 W. 12th St.  
Kansas City, MO 64105

MacDonald Family Foundation  
P.O. Box 64788

Los Angeles, CA 90064 Ph: (310) 571-2492 Fax:  
(310) 571-2496

Robertson Foundation  
c/o American Express TBS, Inc.  
1185 Ave. of the Americas  
New York, NY 10036-2602

Sherwood Foundation  
c/o Susan Buffett  
105 N. 54th St.  
Omaha, NE 68132-2810

Dennis & Phyllis Washington Foundation, Inc.  
P.O. Box 16630  
Missoula, MT 59808-6630  
Ph: (406) 523-1300  
Web: <http://www.washcorp.com/foundation>



**MAIN TOPIC: AFTER THE BOOM**

**ISSUE: TAKE CHARGE**

While it seems that Absarokee may still be in the boom with the Stillwater mine fully operational, it is also evident that the community is not benefiting by the boom because workers are able to live outside of the county, the busses do not stop in Absarokee, and the community is not realizing the benefits of the mining boom.

The community is experiencing some vacancies within the business district and also noting unrealistic rent prices based on vacant building owner's expectations of the community.

There was also comments that led me to believe that their is no central business organization but rather several which have specialized functions.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

With all of the things considered, I have some suggestions that may have merit and produce results for the community.

1.) If the community or organizations could find one contact person to coordinate events, information, and provide assistance to businesses, I think that community efforts would be marketed more effectively, their would be "focus" for the community rather than a scattered approach, and overall the community may see movement forward. This position would most likely needed to be a paid position and funding would have to be sought from grants that encourage capacity building,

2.) Along with the staff to coordinate activities, the businesses could collectively market and advertise. Small businesses don't have the individual resources to do an ad campaign on television or through the paper, but collectively small businesses are able to market at an affordable rate. (ie. Lewistown Downtown Businesses were able to do a television campaign on the Great Falls TV station that resulted in Great Falls people coming to Lewistown and Christmas shopping, smaller businesses received some television marketing, and the local residents tended to shop more locally because they too saw the ads on television.)

3.) As a community, Absarokee has a great resource in the Beartooth RC&D. A program that they are starting up in the region is the **Business Expansion And Retention (BEAR) program**. Linda Beck from Big Sky EDA has been conducting the BEAR program in Billings for some time and Linda is working with Beartooth RC&D and Betty Curry to do a "Country Bear" program. I would encourage volunteers and businesses within your area to become involved in this program. It's a great program that tries to identify business's needs before the business fails. It also can help businesses get connected with the right resources to help make their business more profitable. Volunteers are needed to interview the businesses, convey their needs and get them connected with resources, and follow the progress of the program. It's a very educational program for everyone that gets involved.  
Resource: Betty Curry 962-3914.

4.) Finally, I think it is important for the community to conduct a business survey to determine the market mix, niches, gaps in the market, what assistance do existing businesses need, determine clusters of businesses and study how you can help them work together more effectively.

**RESOURCES:**

Beartooth RC&D Area, Inc.  
P.O. Box 180  
Joliet, MT 59041  
(406)962-3914  
<http://www.beartooth.org>

Main Street Program  
%National Trust for Historic Preservation

<http://www.mainstreet.org>

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## **MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY PARADIGM SHIFT**

### **ISSUE: DOING BUSINESS**

Rural Communities are changing with the evolution of the Big Box Stores, families working three and four jobs, and great transportation systems. It's time to embrace these changes and adapt. I always say that "lemons make great lemonade". The key is to turn that negative into a positive. At the listening sessions it was mentioned that Billings could be our friend instead of the enemy. Indeed, Billings has the population that you want to capture shopping in your stores, coming to your events, and telling their friends they had a great time in Absarokee. The Forest Service was also mentioned warily, yet they have some great resources to assist communities and offer a "playground" for the community. How can you work together to capture the best they have to give? They could offer access to cross country skiing, horse drawn sleighing, cross country biking opportunities within the community. The Forest Service could also be a partner in establishing businesses that utilize small diameter woods or biomass products.

Businesses especially need to embrace the change and adapt. A banker once told me that if you have a great product, invention, or business with little competition, that within five years there will be multiple businesses doing the same thing that you are doing and you better be ready to change or have the next great product or invention ready to come out. Independent business owners are struggling because they lack adequate resources to withstand the highly competitive market. Some communities are collectively pooling their resources and creating cooperative owned stores that take a lot of the risk out of each individual community member, yet gives them the ability to keep the necessary products and services sold in the local community. Colstrip is opening a "Got Socks" community owned cooperative clothing store this month. It followed other communities like Malta, Powell Wyoming, Glendive, etc. The stores are even considering forming another cooperative of them to increase their buying power and pool their purchasing.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1.) Communities that are close to the United States Forest Service may find benefit in discussing with the Forest Service about their programs and potential to work with the community. One program that we've used is the Rural Community Assistance programs help rural communities build skills, networks, and strategies to address social, environmental, and economic changes.

The Forest Products Conservation and Recycling program helps communities and businesses find new and expanded business opportunities based on forest resources. The Market Development and Expansion program helps develop new markets for natural resource based goods and services.

2.) In the paradigm shift that communities find themselves, we need to rethink how we work and the structure of our businesses. Smaller communities are considering cooperative businesses which are owned by community members, which increase the local support and loyalty to the business. Cooperatives also offer members a chance to run the business, ensuring friendly staff, and high levels of customer service. The Montana Cooperative Development Center can help local groups interested in forming a cooperative store with the following services:

- Promote the development of new cooperatives or the improvement of existing cooperatives.
- Present the cooperative model as an alternative for addressing rural development issues, especially focused on research and development of "value added" enterprises.
- Provide "business incubation" assistance to prospective enterprises organized as cooperatives.
- Assist with "technology transfer" to enable those enterprises to operate profitably.
- Equip individuals with the skills to operate or manage cooperatives.

3.) If communities could identify resources to coordinate community activities, marketing efforts, and events, there would be less confusion, a broader base of support, and central contact and referral point creating focus within the community. There may be resources from entities such as the Forest Service, but probably the best approach is for the community fund this through local efforts. A Business Improvement District (BID) could be established and the businesses would pay for this support through taxes. Possibly, the community could assess a local option tax because it is a tourist community and capture funds through the tax for these efforts. Or, possibly the businesses themselves could set up a membership organization and pay for these coordination and

marketing efforts. It might be hard at first, but the rewards would come in with increased business, a community with a “theme” and focus, and increased tourism in the area.

**RESOURCES:**

1.) Montana Cooperative Development Center  
PO Box 3027300  
River Drive North  
Great Falls, MT 59403  
tel. 406-268-2644  
fax. 800-816-3276

Cheryl MacArthur, Executive Director  
Email: cheryl@mcdc.coop  
Juanetta Keeler, Director of Operations  
Email: juanetta@mcdc.coop  
General email: mcdc@mcdc.coop

2.) Custer National Forest  
1310 Main ST  
Billings, MT 59105  
(406) 657-6200  
R1 Northern Region (Northern Idaho, Montana,  
North Dakota)  
Dave Atkins  
Box 7669  
Missoula, MT 59807  
Phone: 406-329-3132  
Fax: 406-329-3132  
email: datkins@fs.fes.us

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**MAIN TOPIC: INFRASTRUCTURE**

**ISSUE: FUNDING**

The issue always seems to be funding the infrastructure needs of a community. Absarokee is no different than other Montana communities. There were a variety of infrastructure needs mentioned in the community; however, I noticed that there were a lot of infrastructure needs met within the community, such as the paved streets, Main Street improvements and tremendous recreational facilities.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1.) Most infrastructure projects need to start with an assessment. There are several programs out there to help with conducting these assessments and I believe Absarokee has recently completed a detailed assessment. The funding sources are traditional and

very competitive because most Montana communities are competing for them. They include programs such as TSEP, DNRC, SRF, CDBG and other “alphabet soup” programs. If you need help with these, contact Beartooth RC&D. They can help you access the right programs.

2.) The Principles of Smart Growth can be helpful when addressing infrastructure needs within a community. Smart Growth principles were established to help communities prepare for future growth while planning in the present. Like all planning issues, some principles can be widely supported, some supported by only a few, and others aren’t supported by anyone in the community, but they offer some ideas and suggestions to consider as you look at the future of your community and where you may be going. If Absarokee doesn’t have a growth plan and the county doesn’t have a growth plan, I would suggest working on one.  
Create Range of Housing Opportunities and Choices: Providing quality housing for people of all income levels is an integral component in any smart growth strategy.

Create Walkable Neighborhoods: Walkable communities are desirable places to live, work, learn, worship and play, and therefore a key component of smart growth.

Encourage Community and Stakeholder Collaboration: Growth can create great places to live, work and play -- if it responds to a community’s own sense of how and where it wants to grow.

Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place: Smart growth encourages communities to craft a vision and set standards for development and construction which respond to community values of architectural beauty and distinctiveness, as well as expanded choices in housing and transportation.

Make Development Decisions Predictable, Fair and Cost Effective: For a community to be successful in implementing smart growth, it must be embraced by the private sector.

Mix Land Uses: Smart growth supports the integration of mixed land uses into communities as a critical component of achieving better places to live.

Preserve Open Space, Farmland, Natural Beauty and Critical Environmental Areas:  
Open space preservation supports smart growth goals by bolstering local economies, preserving critical

environmental areas, improving our communities' quality of life, and guiding new growth into existing communities.

Provide a Variety of Transportation Choices: Providing people with more choices in housing, shopping, communities, and transportation is a key aim of smart growth.

Strengthen and Direct Development Towards Existing Communities: Smart growth directs development towards existing communities already served by infrastructure, seeking to utilize the resources that existing neighborhoods offer, and conserve open space and irreplaceable natural resources on the urban fringe.

Take Advantage of Compact Building Design: Smart growth provides a means for communities to incorporate more compact building design as an alternative to conventional, land consumptive development.

**RESOURCES:**

Smart Growth Principles  
<http://www.smartgrowth.org/default.asp>

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**MAIN TOPIC: HEALTH CARE**

**ISSUE: ABSAROKEE'S HEALTH CARE NEEDS**

Health care in rural Montana is a growing and worsening problem with few answers. At the listening sessions it was obvious that the community valued the satellite clinic from St. Vincent's in Billings, wanted to secure pharmaceuticals in the community, and maybe even have a growing need for an assisted living center in the area. Substance abuse was barely mentioned, yet the resource team continues to hear undertones about the problem in the community.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1.) Check with the Wheatland Memorial Hospital and Nursing Home regarding the tele-pharmacy project that they have recently been involved with. It may be possible to provide tele-pharmaceutical services within your community.

2.) Support and assist the efforts to start a private assisted living center within the community. Demographics of Absarokee indicate that an assisted

living center could and will be needed in the future. (However, you have some very healthy elderly people and I'm beginning to wonder if the fountain of youth is near Absarokee.) Keeping senior citizens within their home community, means families continue to live in the community, or come to visit all creating critical mass for a community to economically survive. Also, it is one of the nation's growing industries with the "baby boomers" aging. The community of Hysham, MT is actively working on an assisted living facility and could give you ideas of what has worked and what hasn't.

3.) If there is a substance abuse problem within the community, recognize it and start to address the problem. There is a story of a business that was going to move into a community, however when it talked to the community leaders they said there was no substance abuse problem, but the youth told them of the serious problem. The business didn't move to the community because the community was not realistic about the strengths and weaknesses of the community. A community that is not actively addressing their problems, is part of the problem. After my brief visit to Absarokee, I don't know if a problem exists or not. I do wonder, because substance abuse is a serious problem in most Montana rural communities. I also wonder why a community wouldn't admit the problem and be looking for ways to help those with the disease, especially in such a caring community.

4.) Participate in the Montana Faith-Health Demonstration Project's Rural Access to Care being held August 10, 2005 in Lewistown at the Yogo Inn. The forum will discuss access to primary care providers, hospitals, or specialists; lack of pharmacies in rural areas; populations that cannot financially access services; and finally peoples perceptions about using public assistance programs for health care. The forum will review existing information and evidence about the problem to rural access to care; highlight projects and initiatives that are improving rural healthcare in Montana, and develop an action plan for the future.

**RESOURCES:**

Wheatland Memorial Hospital and Nursing Home  
530 3rd N.W.  
Harlowton, MT 59036  
632-4351

Housing and Community Facilities Resources  
USDA Rural Development  
Rural Housing service

PO Box 850,  
Bozeman, MT 59771  
(406) 585-2515

Montana Department of Housing  
Community Development Block Grant  
PO Box 200501  
Helena, MT 59620-0501

Montana Continuum of Care Coalition  
3001 Westridge Drive  
Bozeman, MT 59715  
(406) 586-1572

Neighborhood Housing Services, Inc.  
509 First Avenue South  
Great Falls, MT 59401  
(406) 761-5861

Montana Faith Health Demonstration Project  
% Heather Fink  
180 24th Street, Suite G  
Billings, MT 59101

or  
Rural Access to Care Forum  
Commonweal Consulting  
% Tracy Velazquez  
commonweal@mcn.net  
(406) 587-7774

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## REPORT BY AL JONES

*Personal Opinions, Probable Resources, Observed Opportunities, and Early Guesses*

*Regional Development Officer for South Central Montana (Billings-based)*  
*Montana Dept. of Commerce Business Resources Division Regional Development Bureau*  
[aljonesrdo@bresnan.net](mailto:aljonesrdo@bresnan.net) 406-655-1696

**The Absarokee Conundrum:** *Plenty of good jobs, great tax base for public services, beautiful setting, good climate, high social capital/lots of caring people who know each other, but solid businesses fail or struggle, population growth has slowed, kids still leaving...why?*

**A Warning on a strategy focused on drawing more miners households to Absarokee is that just as the fluctuations of the Mouat Mine made big**

**ripples, the more dependent the community is on any one large employer, the more painful the results when at some point employment goes down or wages plateau. As that happens with any employer over time, leaving the mine's workers dispersed over 4 counties and many towns is actually a more robust solution.**

Based on what I heard, what I saw, questions I asked, and some mulling on this quite puzzling problem that affects so much of Absarokee in so many ways, here are my guesses so far:

1. The union-negotiated **long shifts at the mine coupled with many days off in a row**, in part to increase efficiency 4-13% at shift changes, **means that commuting to the mine from further than a 20-30 minute distance is considered feasible.**

That's scattered miner households after that across Carbon and Yellowstone County and beyond rather than confining it to basically along the roads to Nye as far as Columbus as it was before the shift change. The bussing makes the commuting even more doable for miners' families that don't chose to live within 20-30 minutes' drive of the mine (or couldn't find affordable housing in the time they had when they relocated, so overpriced local rents and housing in Stillwater County helps keep demand for the bus service strong. ) Changing the shifts to shorter ones, i.e. 8 hour instead of 12, with longer workweeks, i.e. a conventional 40 hour, 5 day week or 4 10's would have at least 5 impacts:

**A. It would make 2-3 hours a shift in commuting time far less attractive, encouraging new miners to locate closer to the mine.**

B. It might raise bussing costs to the point that they could no longer be offered free and miners would have to start bearing more of the financial cost of the commute as well probably using the bus mostly instead of always to get to work which would also increase patronage of Stillwater county restaurants, stores, consumer services, banking, recreation, etc.

C. It would probably end the oddly long commuting pattern of the miners who haven't moved their families here, i.e. from Kellogg, Idaho for instance who use the long breaks to return home. I can't see how that really works out for the miner and their family so finding out more about why they don't move (*can't sell the old house? Wife's job? Kid's school? Family there? Lower taxes?*) couldn't help but be very informative and surprising.

D. It would decrease efficiencies of shift changes at the mine and might well make recruitment harder. I think having a less exhausted workforce (by their own choice to support a long-commute

preference would be more productive, safer, happier, and healthier; that's been the consistent finding in shortening workhours from the old 60-84hr wk 6-7 days a week to 40 hrs 4-5 days a week-productivity went up, injuries and illness went down, especially in physically demanding jobs like mining. It would also give them more time to spend with their kids daily instead of only on their off-days, more time to rest and heal (8.5 hours sleep nightly is now considered what most people need and the current shifts would suggest a miner could at best get 4-6 hours for many nights in a row, and catching up sleep on off-days doesn't actually work for the body as the new sleep research shows.) It would also make it far easier for the miners to be active in community affairs of all types as well as facilitate part-time businesses by miners' households that could become full-time businesses for spouses, children, or parents.

Resources on this question:

<http://www.dcmsonline.org/jax-medicine/2001journals/April2001/shiftwork.htm> is an excellent introduction by a physician

[http://www.roundtheclocksystems.com/library4\\_biblio.html](http://www.roundtheclocksystems.com/library4_biblio.html) is an excellent digest of many sources and authors on the topic of shiftwork and its impacts.

[http://nzctu.labor.net.au/policy/1027290655\\_21731.html](http://nzctu.labor.net.au/policy/1027290655_21731.html) is a lengthy, recent study from New Zealand.

<http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~ota/disk1/1991/9108/910807.PDF#search='Diurnal%20RhythmsWorkplace'> is a longer study by Princeton on this topic

<http://psych.fullerton.edu/mwhite/473pdf/473%20Circadian%20Rhythms%20&%20Work%20Schedules.pdf#search='Diurnal%20RhythmsWorkplace'> zeros in on the human cost of the kinds of shifts the miners have negotiated to accommodate long commutes. Cal State at Fullerton report

<http://www.circadian.com/publications/costs.html> refers to a consulting firm that specializes in this area's estimates of the many hidden costs that this approach of very long shifts is likely costing Stillwater Mine now. The long shifts seems like a lose-lose-lose-lose proposition to me for everyone.

[http://www.talkaboutsleee.com/sleep-disorders/archives/books\\_circadian.htm](http://www.talkaboutsleee.com/sleep-disorders/archives/books_circadian.htm) offers 2 books on the impacts on personal health of disrupted circadian rhythms (not getting enough of the right kinds of sleep due to shiftwork.) It takes several weeks or more to "reset" the body's clock for sleep patterns so for example the 7days on and 7 days off

would be incredibly difficult to really adapt to. [http://www.talkaboutsleee.com/sleep-disorders/archives/books\\_shiftwork.htm](http://www.talkaboutsleee.com/sleep-disorders/archives/books_shiftwork.htm)

Other keywords to search: diurnal rhythms (sleep/alertness patterns which are what shift work disrupts) or circadian rhythms,

2. The lack of jobs for miners' spouses who want more than part-time, minimum wage, seasonal work probably drives much of the location decision for each family. Surprisingly the U.S. Census has show for 25 years at least that the more money a spouse earns, the more likely the other spouse is to work. Counterintuitive, but it seems to be true when you think about examples you know now. If there are young children at home, it's extremely challenging for the non-mining spouse to start a business or say commute 2 hours to Billings for a job, not to mention the apparent lack of childcare options. Not knowing enough of the miners' spouses to know what kind of jobs they take, seek, are qualified for, or how they look for them, it's hard to say whether comparable jobs actually exist in Stillwater County (*witness the dependence of Montana Silversmiths on hundreds of miners' spouses over the past 20 years.*) **Perception of local jobs availability and quality, especially by an "unconnected" newcomer is often far lower than reality.**

Doing a back of the envelope calculation for Fromberg and Bridger, it looked to me back when gas cost about half as much as now that commuting a few less miles than Absarokee to Billings would make between \$1.50-\$2.00 per hour reduction in actual wages. In other words if you drove to Billings 50 miles each day for a \$7/hr job, after the actual cost of commuting but not of your time, you were actually earning around \$5.50-5/hr which may well have been available within walking distance of home (and adding 10 hours a week back into one's life.)

3. **Bright lights, big city allure.** Several of the miners' wives we spoke with, certainly not a statistically reliable sample since we're talking about a thousand miner households right now and probably four thousand families over the past 20 years, said that most of the wives did come from communities larger than Absarokee or Columbus so they had the expectation of shopping, services, housing, medical care, employment, dining, entertainment, etc. that a quick tour of any smaller community would be disappointing.

Billings has these amenities at the scale of a city of 300-500,000 people because about 460,000 rely on it

and that supports about 300 restaurants, millions of square feet of retail space, 5,000 health care workers alone, hundreds of consumer service providers from hair stylists to attorneys, a wide array of entertainment and events, and 72,000 jobs. Unfortunately Billings housing costs are comparable or less than Columbus and Absarokees as well with a much greater range of existing housing to choose from, and many more within close proximity to a school.

Neither Absarokee nor Stillwater County can pretend to match that, nor will simply complaining about it improve things either.

Thousands of people living in the West are now choosing smaller communities within easy driving distance of a major city, although that will tend to be people older than the average miner as it takes awhile for personal preferences to shift to quiet, friends, scenery, wildlife, stargazing, little traffic, being known instead of anonymous to most folks on the street, etc.

In other words, the **solutions** to the Absarokee Conundrum may well be:

1. Working with the miner's union and Stillwater Mining management to restructure mine shifts to shorter, more frequent ones that didn't encourage tacking 2-3 hour commutes onto the shifts,
2. Making the busing price to the riders more representative of its cost (which'll still beat a car's cost substantially),
3. Improving awareness of the mine's HR staff and miners' households about jobs and business opportunities available now so they don't rule it out due to lack of spouse opportunities.
4. Have miner appreciation days at the school for their families to introduce them to the town and its amenities. I.e. a pig roast, some music/dancing, some kids' activities. Right now I'd guess most people who form an opinion about the school have never been inside it, much less met the people there.
5. Don't overly obsess about the miner's families as the only real population source for Absarokee. Folks from all over in their 50's-70's with a wide variety of backgrounds and skills have already been moving there, accelerating that trend seems extremely doable and would help sustain the community's medical services with new customers as well as home-building, retail sales, new community volunteers, etc..
6. Absarokee is within commuting range TO Billings as well for higher paying jobs or ones where coming in several days a week works, so drawing more full-time, year-round residents who don't work

in town is probably more viable than nearly anyone thinks. This could be done as simply as modifying how residential real estate agents listing Absarokee properties and lots market them to Billings as places to work from instead of summer homes, ski chalets, or retirement living.

### **Main Topic: Recreation**

#### **Upgrading the Public Swimming Pool:**

#### ***Lavatories with plumbing, Showerhouse, Repair or Expand the Kiddie Pool***

I think you might talk the County Road Crew into dumping some tons of sand on the low ridge around the pool to encourage more of a "beach" feel so parents can read or doze there, teens can sunbathe and socialize, little kids can build sandcastles and fall without injury...technical challenge would be keeping it from becoming the biggest cat litter box in the county. It's just amazing how much fun people can have with a bunch of sand next to a clean body of water deep enough to get soaked in.

Really developing concessions sales there not only creates additional revenue to pay for these improvements but also enhances the overall experience, especially for kids although a cool drink on a hot day is welcomed by anyone. The Coke or Pepsi bottler serving the area (either Red Lodge's or Billings, any of the restaurants, bars, or grocers can tell you who and where they are) would be delighted to help set up and often donate fountain equipment so you can sell soft drinks by the glass instead of the far greater hassle and expense of cans or bottles. I'd suspect you could generate \$1-3,000 a summer just off of fountain drinks, iced tea, and lemonade.

[http://www.amusementtrader.com/adslst.php?categ\\_id=24&](http://www.amusementtrader.com/adslst.php?categ_id=24&) is an example of one place where you can find a used water slide to add to the pool, one good enough to charge a few bucks for a day pass on. The City of Billings did this with a basic rectangular public pool at Rose Park 6-7 years ago to create a revenue stream for maintaining and improving the pools; paid for itself at \$4-5/day in short order (just swimming remains free) and it would also provide a wider draw to the pool (as well as give visitor's kids something to do.)

#### **Loan source for both the pool and ballfield improvements:**

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rhs/cf/cp.htm> takes you to the USDA's Rural Development Agency's Community Facilities programs which is where you could borrow the money at low rates, long term to do the pool improvements/repairs. Everyone

looks of course for grants (pool aren't eligible for the grants) which are rare, especially for this amenity, but a loan repaid from taxes, admissions, concessions, etc. is very doable. 20 years at 5% on a \$50,000 improvements loan would only have \$4,000/yr in debt service using this tool and perhaps an additional mill levy on the recreation district. The trick is to think through either an additional tax or consistently generated revenue stream like concessions/admissions rather than hope for "grants" "bequests" "business gifts" "county money" "state or feds money" etc..

**Main Topic:  
After the Platinum/Palladium Boom...  
like after the Mouat Mine Chromium Boom...  
riding the booms and busts of mining...**

Robbins' 1990 intriguing book "*Colony & Empire, the Capitalist Transformation of the American West*" looks at Western history from a less romantic angle, looking for lessons we can learn from our past beyond the well-known parts. Turns out that since 1849 many of the West's towns and cities were based on mining, but not the solo prospector with a gold pan and a few hand tools out in the wilds. Instead it's mostly been large crews of recently arrived/recruited employees, eventually unionized, working in the community for years with families brought from back home with the control of the mines held by large, sophisticated companies with professional, technical managers, far distant investors, and at the mercy of the international commodity markets. Sounds familiar in Stillwater County, let alone Red Lodge when it was 2.5 times more populous than it is now, Bearcreek, Fromberg, Silesia, Joliet, Roundup, Colstrip, Gardiner (used to be 3000 local miners relying on it), Jardine, Butte, Anaconda, Helena, Belt, Cooke City, and many more have started, grown explosively, and some survived, some died entirely like Elkhorn, Virginia City, or Electric, and some diversified.

Aspen, Vail, Steamboat Springs, and Red Lodge obviously found new identities as Western Ski Towns (brilliantly explained in Hal Rothman's book "*Devil's Bargains, Tourism in the New American West*".)

Helena went from a gold camp to a silver and lead smelting center to something else after the British Parliament quit coining the Indian Rupee in silver in 1893, shutting down forever much of the West's silver mining and smelting industry (and triggering a severe recession across the entire West.)

This sort of thing happened several years ago when the price of platinum and palladium forced

manufacturers of multi-layer ceramic capacitors for computers, cel phones, cordless phones, etc. to switch to the far less expensive nickel, erasing nearly **40%** of the worldwide palladium market in a couple of years and creating much of the economic pressure on Stillwater Mine as palladium dropped from a \$1000/ounce to \$200/ounce.

**Platinum and palladium's primary applications turn out to change substantially about every 10-20 years for the past hundred years**, switching back and forth from an element used in oil refining, vehicle emissions controls, chemical filtering, electronics, pharmaceuticals, and fuel cells to Cartier's jewelry for European royalty, the dominant wedding and engagement band material, and a non-tarnishing, hypoallergenic substitute for sterling silver.

The cattle brought into feed the miners by Nelson Story, Granville Stuart and others became the ranching industry from the Beaverhead to the Judith Basin. What unexpected offshoots do we have here? An example would be Montana Silversmiths, drawn and grown here with a stable and available workforce of Stillwater Mining wives. A less obvious offshoot would be the survival and thriving of the Grizzly Bar, the Cowboy Bar, Montana Hannas, and Carter's Camp in what would be too far from enough customers if it weren't for both the mine's own workforce and the transportation improvements it's generated through past their doors.

The railroads were drawn to the mine sites as were the road-builders like John Bozeman so the towns got a better transportation infrastructure than most places (i.e. Absarokee's roads and highway upgrades.) That's a significant advantage Absarokee has over many other Montana small towns in gorgeous scenery, excellent and well-maintained roads that are steadily being improved. Scenic drives that are safe, easy, smooth, and dotted with amenities get most of the traffic while the drives that don't meet that criteria but still have spectacular scenery often draw only the most knowledgeable locals and intrepid bicyclists, motorcyclists, and 4-wheelers.

**What are the lessons William Robbins and Hal Rothman offer that might help Absarokee** (*the books are very rich and lively, ones that anyone who lives in the West would find well worth the time.*)

1. **Booms and busts are inevitable in mining communities because of the combination of international commodity markets for the output and the unexpected impacts of technology** (like making a modern coal miner equal to 4-10 coal

miners of 50 years ago which makes a big difference in mining town population, coupled with personal vehicles that last over a hundred thousand miles so commuting from an adjacent county or larger city becomes quite feasible.)

2. **The booms and busts last longer than we usually realize**, with the Stillwater Mining complex 20 years into a boom and with the fuel-cell applications of it's metals (palladium absorbs 400x it's mass in hydrogen so it's in most fuel-cell or hydrogen storage designs now) as well as jewelry, and many decades of proven reserves of a very rare and useful set of metals, the current status quo of a thousand good jobs at the mine could hold true through 2050.

3. High labor costs, a dwindling pool of applicants, exhausting work and schedules that encourage older workers and family men to seek something else to do, production quotas that have to be met, and vast existing investment always leads to new labor-saving technology (*at least since the Bubonic Plague wiped out a third of Europe's population repeatedly so it's a pretty established trend over the past 700 years as Norman Cantor's recent books point out.*)

Coal mines' use surface draglines or underground long-wall mining machines, and with 50% of coal miners close to retirement, that's an example close to home for the 870 Montana coal miners. See David Simpson's book examining this in "*Productivity in Natural Resource Industries, improvement through innovation*" 1999 or watch the History Channel's "*Modern Marvels*" shows on Coal or Mining Technology.

That'd lead me to guess that over the coming decades, there'll be fewer underground miners working long shifts, maybe 200-400 less both through unfilled openings thanks to the Baby Bust and younger generations turning away from most of the blue-collar occupations despite higher pay and better working conditions. (*I call it "The Quest to live in Dilbert's World" based on the realities portrayed in the comic strip of being a modern high tech worker*) as well as from upgrades in ore extraction technology (probably new sensors, more software-driven controls, more remote viewing with video cameras instead of eyeballs, electronics instead of hydraulics, etc.)

Additional jobs will develop at Columbus based around the Stillwater metals refineries and recycling, but not as many as will gradually fade away over the next 30 years at the mine itself. This is just my own guess, not something I've heard. It's

just based on the general pattern for all high-cost, labor-intensive industries with international competition like coal mining, steel-making, auto-making, appliance mfg., electronics mfg., shipbuilding, chemical mfg., railroads, etc.

Unions always fight this hard, generally accelerating the trend they're trying to reverse, and the brutal escalation of health insurance costs that neither the employers or employees can afford are already the real crux of the matter and likely to be big battles with no winners over the next decade...so health insurance costs at the mine rising from probably \$5-15,000/yr per miner now, so a cost burden of \$10-15 million a year now that's rising at 15-50% a year becomes unbearable at some point as given the rate of health insurance inflation, the premiums could be equal to the mine's current gross revenues in another 15 years! When you buy a GM car today, \$4200 of the purchase price goes to fund the health insurance costs of just it's retired workforce! Workers compensation costs will also remain a compelling burden on miners since underground work remains among the most dangerous jobs in America and it's still very physically demanding work.

So painful confrontations between union and management over health insurance are inevitable as they are with every employer offering benefits to an organized workforce with negotiating power, and will encourage labor-saving technology implementation at an increasing rate over the coming decades. In other words, the mine is almost certainly at or past it's peak employment in the Absarokee area and I suspect that gradually, mostly through attrition, 200-300 of those jobs over the next 20 years will disappear due to technology, labor costs, and lack of applicants. That makes betting Absarokee housing and businesses on increasing the miner population a less than sure-fire strategy as it was in the 1980's and 1990's.

### **What does that mean for Absarokee's future?**

A common constraint we heard was that landlords of both commercial and residential property didn't realize that the boom ended several years ago with pretty much the miners that'll live in Absarokee settled in. Being the closest town with amenities to the mine, I'd assume that that a handful of new hires or tired commuters to the mine will build or buy in Absarokee each year, but not at much if any of a premium over Columbus. Many local folks believe the rents are too high both for what's offered and in relation to either the business's income or the resident's income. If the high rents were appropriate and were getting takers, there'd be some new

commercial space, some new 4-8 plex apartments (the most efficient size), and other space created whose low-interest debt could be serviced by these premium rents. The apartment rents we heard would service realistic mortgages while the commercial rates we didn't hear enough about (monthly rent, pass-through costs like utilities, square footage of the building, remodeling allowance if any, long-term lease incentives if any) to be able to say which ones are unrealistically priced and which ones aren't. Rule of thumb is most Main Street businesses won't be able to spend more than 10-15% of their gross sales in paying for the costs of their space (and that's assuming 30-40% gross profit margins instead of the 10-20% many shoppers now expect if small merchants are supposed to appear competitive with the big chains'.) Average small business does around \$340,000 yr in sales, if we cut that in half to fit Absarokee's small customer base and nearby competitors in Columbus and Billings, to \$170,000, that'd sustain \$10-20,000/yr in rent so for a 1,000 sq.ft. old storefront, that'd require sales of \$100-200/sq. ft. which are more like Rimrock Mall in Billings' small store sales per square foot while in Absarokee they'd be probably closer to \$20-40/sq. ft....see how brutal the math is in retail?

**It's hard for any landlord to get good pricing signals from the local marketplace** and every tenant brings different resources and expectations to a negotiation. If the problem is as severe as many indicated, here's some ideas for changing that:

Merchant's Association members each take their actual square footage, multiply their monthly rent or mortgage payment by 12 to get a year's worth, add the year's utilities, property taxes, property and casualty insurance, and maintenance to the rent or mortgage total, divide that by the number of square feet they have and you'll have a range of actual and comparable rents.

Putting together an anonymous schedule of square foot costs, probably \$1-\$7/sq. ft. , what would be essentially a current rental rate survey for the town, and then mailing it to the absentee landlords and giving it to the present ones (and their leasing agents/realtors) would be a fair start and might fix the problem. If the owner doesn't have significant debt to service on the property, they really are under no pressure to lower the rates until they get a tenant, give up and actually manage to sell the building (which is of course based on it's rentability or cost of occupancy so an overpriced building without a tenant is almost unsalable since the building's price would

require a mortgage that would take make the new rent too costly for the market or owner-occupied space.)

5. A central place in town, like a bulletin board at the post office, where people with a spare bedroom, basement, or whole house **could post the rental information would not only make it far easier to find somewhere to live, it would also show the community at a glance what was available** (encouraging some to offer theirs, repair or improve theirs, or adjust rents/deposits/utilities) while providing an ongoing comprehensive survey of the local rental market, for the cost of some corkboard and thumbtacks. This could be done at the Laundromat, the Rosebud Café, or some other common spot.

#### **MAIN TOPIC: Business Improvement District**

A BID's structuring is spelled out in state law <http://data.opi.state.mt.us/bills/mca/7/12/7-12-1102.htm> takes you to the first section, 1102 and proceed to 1103 etc..

This is a way for Absarokee's consumer-focused businesses to form an entity that takes a voluntary tax/service charge the businesses levy on themselves and then uses it for very specific purposes at the guidance of a board of local business owners. Examples that might be useful in Absarokee is advertising campaigns to draw more day visitors or promote events/festivals, fund a Main Street program, bring in marketing specialists to improve competitiveness, build new highway signage, build public restrooms, turn empty lots into free shopper parking, further streetscape improvements, etc.. The challenge is that there aren't enough businesses in Absarokee for this to be a considerable sum of money but it would allow some strategic choices. The upside is that since there aren't many businesses here, putting together a BID wouldn't take that much time to do and would be more powerful than a merchant's association. If it was me, I'd use the revenues first to put up permanent roadside signage to draw Interstate 90 travelers to the area, probably for destination dining, outdoor recreation, B&B's.

#### **Main Topic: Empty Storefronts**

Beyond whether the buildings are overpriced, many of the vacant ones appeared to be in good condition but too small for most retail operations to have enough inventory to survive.

My thoughts would be:

A. The **IGA** store is unusually well-run and the biggest "anchor" business downtown to continually draw area customers. **Expanding it** into the back

parking lot another 10-25' and onto the adjacent lot where there's a modular building doing property management, the grocery store could add about 2-4,000 sq. ft. of either additional grocery items or more non-food convenience items like OTC medications, diapers, paperbacks, school supplies, toys, or simply more frozen food cases for convenience meals and a deli section.

This would be the single biggest move in enhancing the health of the downtown long term in my guesstimation. Whether the owners want to take on the additional probable \$500,000 debt and hassle, I don't know although I met their parents at the Senior Center who described them as tireless workers and they run a very good store (I always tour the grocery stores shelf by shelf as it tells you a lot about a community.) As more merchandise generally translates into more stuff purchased and more frequent visits by shoppers, it would make the IGA more "Wal-Mart resistant" and increase its profitability which is slim in grocery stores... especially rural ones that get hit up by every fundraising effort with the subtle implied blackmail of "we won't shop here if you don't give."

The SuperValu warehouse that supplies them can provide considerable assistance on this question up through architectural and store design and financing. An SBA 504 loan through Big Sky Economic Development Authority, Joe McClure, 256-6875 and a participation loan from the Beartooth Revolving Loan Fund, Jim White 962-3914, would be other realistic tools.

**B. Converting some of the empty storefronts into artists' spaces** was something that struck Betty Curry immediately when we walked the downtown peering into the empty windows.

1. Artist moves studio from home and sets up there with the walls serving as gallery space and the middle as the working studio. This makes both for a more productive work environment for many artists as well as allowing them to display work for sale that otherwise would be stacked in a spare room at home. It is also a considerable tourist/day visitor draw. To make it happen vacant building owners need to make up a flyer on their building, think about the rent (perhaps taking a portion of the art sales from the gallery instead of just a higher fixed rent) and show that they'll consider this. The flyers would need to go to the Stillwater Society of Artists and the Carbon County Arts Guild in Red Lodge at the old train depot behind the library, attn. Deborah Klein. Because artists aren't typically looking for this

opportunity, the flyers will need the headline "Looking for your own artist gallery/studio space?"

This probably has the greatest potential to fill the most empty storefronts the fastest and work well with the other businesses as a traffic draw with non-competing merchandise.

2. Artists' Cooperative Gallery like the Sandstone Gallery in Billings that Leo Olson and Sue Hammersmark helped put together. 10-25 artists agree to split the storefront's rent/utilities each month and rotate staffing it a couple of days a month (typically they'll paint or draw while there). The advantage is there's a regularly shifting array of art, each artist has fans and collectors who'll come in and be exposed to other artists as well, the artists can obviously talk about art when customers and browsers come in, and it minimizes the gallery commissions which privately range from 30-70% of the art's selling price.

3. Branch gallery for the Carbon County Arts Guild could be a possibility as they're overwhelmed with pieces on display. The challenge is staffing it and getting enough sales volume to cover both that and the rent/utilities/promotion costs. Possibly this could be done in conjunction with the Senior Center, using its walls for the art display and senior volunteers as staff. Deborah Klein is the Executive Director and very creative; I know she'll consider it as we've already discussed the idea in general. Betty Curry at Beartooth RC&D would assist on this 962-3914.

#### **MAIN TOPIC: Schools**

We heard from all of the high school seniors and freshmen, some of the teachers, and some of the parents. None of the home-schooling parents came to a Listening Session who at least identified themselves as such while we heard numbers ranging from the 40's to the 90's for how many kids might be home-schooled in the area. Obviously that's always going to be a fuzzy number as the kids that leave school are easy to track while families that move to the area and never enroll their kids in the local school are much harder to count, let alone track.

#### **Are student lifestyles and home schooling the missing linkage?**

The kids claimed they were clean-living college-bound sorts who could readily find part-time or summer jobs in town, liked the town, wouldn't

work at the mine despite the high wages-in part because of their parents' complaining about working there (and apparently not hearing parents who work hard shifts and earn 50-90% less than the mine pays like a great many Montana children live in...nationally 1 in 4 kids will experience a personal bankruptcy in their household before they're 18 now.) In most of these assessments the kids pretend to be mostly temperate about alcohol and while agreeing drugs are readily available, pretend that no one buys them.

The Montana Office of Public Instruction does a Youth Risk Survey that kids fill out anonymously every year, so there's no bragging benefits to pretending to a wilder lifestyle than one has, <http://www.opi.state.mt.us/YRBS/Index.html> if you want to read one of the scariest things I've ever read.

Examples from the 2003 Survey would be:

- 37% of Montana high school students had ridden with a drunken driver in the past month, 20% had done so 6 or more times so more often than weekly.
- 81% had had alcohol in the past month and 11% had their first drink before or when they were 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. 37% reported having more than 5 drinks in a row on at least 1 day in the past month. Legally drunk, depending on body mass would be 1.5-3 drinks in an hour. Does explain where all the opportunities to ride with drunk drivers come from.
- 23% had used marijuana in the past month with 6<sup>th</sup> grade the most common age they first tried it.
- 9% had used meth, 10% had tried cocaine (Wyoming current leads the nation in teenage cocaine use.)

Past OPI Youth Risk Behavior surveys have shown that drug and alcohol use was more pervasive and started younger in the smaller communities than Montana's cities, essentially opposite prevailing opinion but fits what many kids admit to.

The long work shifts of parents, the lack of city police and a very small Sheriff's department with a vast territory, the high incomes of mine workers and availability of part-time income, and the comparative ease of finding discreet sites for parties would typically mean these problems will be greater than average, not less. Nationally, kids get in trouble of all sorts in most commonly in the time between the end of the school day and the arrival from work of their parents, a surprising finding borne out by many studies, so long work shifts, long commutes, evening and night shifts for parents would facilitate mischief for kids.

The 20-30 parents I know that either home school or pay \$3-5,000/year out of middle-class Montana incomes for private schools often are trying

to keep their kids from being drawn into the "socialization" of public schools (*partying, fighting, bullying, sexual harassment, social cliques, exaltation of athletes, many unmotivated learners slowing down classes, etc.*) rather than concerns about the academic quality. This opting out seems to encompass more than assuming religious concerns (2/3rds of the students in Billings' Catholic schools aren't Catholic so it's not the religious instruction they're buying) or the older reason of parents who just don't believe in education at all which underlies many state's falling high school graduation rates.

What intrigues me is that we haven't found this degree of home-schooling in other small towns which might be a difference in reporting, the relatively new influx of people to the area rather than most of the kids coming from long-resident households, or the sizable evangelical congregation, or some other factors. Every home-schooling household makes that choice for a mix of reasons sometimes as a reaction to local school experiences, sometimes as just a perception of schools or curriculum.

**Why aren't the kids looking at staying in the area with the abundance of jobs, many high-paying, a great place to live, family and friends around, and the amenities of Billings less than an hour's drive?**

Most towns think if they had all this, few of their children would leave after finishing high school, yet the majority of the Absarokee seniors indicated they'd be leaving. The freshmen interestingly hadn't formed anywhere near so specific of a goal and seemed surprised by the question in fact. It makes me wonder what acculturation process is happening that points kids away. I asked them if they realized Stillwater Mines' wages were higher (and the hours shorter) than most jobs they'd get with a 4 year degree or many Masters degrees for that matter, not to mention avoiding accumulating student loans that are now averaging \$14,000 at graduation. They obviously hadn't made the comparisons to starting salaries for college degrees nor thought about how they were going to pay for college (and room & board away from home) so it makes me wonder if some sort of training, field trips, guest speakers like from Stillwater Mine's HR dept., Montana Silversmith's HR dept., Timberweld Mfg.'s, Stillwater Packing's, J.P. Simmons, local homebuilders, and others might not help the students see the opportunities around them.

The simplest and hardest step in retaining youth for local jobs or family businesses is countering the complaining, fear, frustration, lifestyle of the parents. If the competent, confident caretakers of a child are constantly worried, the child assumes

he or she is even less prepared to deal with that than their mother and father, i.e. long droughts, declining sales, layoffs, etc. and looks elsewhere. Children watch their parents intently from the time they're born and draw much of their perceptions about reality from their parent's actions, behaviors, resources, and comments.

Of course the other factor is finding a new dating pool having already evaluated and dated most or all of the possibilities locally. **By focusing on attracting youth back when they're in their 30's and 40's instead of focusing on keeping restless 17-18 year olds**, not only are the enticements of a community like Absarokee far more visible and compelling, each person returning tends to bring a spouse and kids as well so it's an average 3:1 population gain and new families make a better customer base for local businesses than restless young singles (think about what you bought when you were single versus married to test that point.) The Heartland Institute in Nebraska has been doing some pioneering work on this, Gloria and I just went through some introductory training on it, so it's an available tool rather than just a vague goal.

### **Main Topic: After School Activities & Summer Programs for Youth**

Because kids have such a wide variety of interests and short attention spans, as well as often an unwillingness to participate in activities that kids a few years younger are enjoying, this is very challenging to do.

I'm guessing the local churches are doing some summer youth activities, I think we heard of Boy Scout (Girl Scout?) troops, soccer, little league baseball, the swimming pool, hiking, fishing, horseback riding, etc. and certainly most of the homes have electronic entertainment in most modes, so the question becomes what else is needed? Kids declare boredom in even the most overstimulated places (Manhattan, Beverly Hills, San Francisco, Boston, Paris, Rome, etc.) so creating costly and labor intensive new experiences to momentarily entertain them doesn't work.

Providing more opportunities for volunteer work around the community, more awareness of jobs and quick projects like helping clean out a garage or weed-choked garden, helping limited mobility seniors, workshops by local retired folks on art, history, science, nature, wildlife, birds, horses, dinosaurs, wolves, rocks, etc. can be easy to do and basically cost free, especially with the Cobblestone available as well as nice parks. The current assumption that if we keep kids frenetically busy and

scheduled it'll solve everything doesn't turn out to be the case, see Steve Leavitt's new book "Freakonomics" to see the hard facts. By any measure I'm aware of, Absarokee looks like a great place to be a kid and the kids at the school made the same statements.

### **Main Topic: Home Schooling**

*Assume the Home-Schooled Kids Probably Aren't Coming Back...*

Whatever the new school funding formula that comes out of the Legislature and consultants looks like, it sounds like it's going to move away from funding so much based on a per student basis and switch more to per school. **So the economic impact of having 50-100 kids opt out of the school, a very roughly \$200,000-450,000 annual budget impact**, will most likely shrink. That's still a budget and student impact that would have me meeting with the home-schooling parents to find out why they had opted out and what might bring them back. In business if we lose a quarter to a third of our customers, it's best to find out why or the trend continues and making former customers happy again is not only an easy source of revenue but also reveals what had many of the remaining customers frustrated. I know education doesn't work like business or like anything else for that matter, but \$200-400,000 in missed operating revenue seems important to a petty mind like mine, not to mention what those missing students could add back in to everything that goes on in the school. The field surveys/interviews need to be done by the principal, superintendent, counselors, or others of the school staff who can accomplish what internal changes are needed, rather than just recommend them like a teacher, parent, school board member, or consultant could. My sister, grandmother, great-aunts, and great-grandfather were all professional teachers or principals and I've taught college and adult education; no home-schooling experience so this is speculative.

Assuming such a field survey never gets done because everyone's too busy, at least that the typical argument in businesses losing customers, an option would be to encourage this:

A. **Form a loose association of home-schooling parents in the area** if one doesn't already exist. These are a common way to balance some teaching skills/materials, do joint field trips and athletics/recreation, share methods and insights among parents most of whom would be new to home-schooling and education, and also improve curriculums by sharing experiences with them.

B. Get the home-schooling parents together in some open meetings at the Cobblestone to discuss whether they'd want to collaborate and open a private kindergarten or elementary school in one of the town's vacant retail buildings or other large enough structure. This is an increasing trend, particularly in Billings and Bozeman, that hasn't gotten much media attention and middle class parents are often paying \$3-4,000 per child out of pocket to fund this since state law and funding formulas currently mean state and local property tax dollars don't follow the student to a private school, only to a public school.

That's changing in many states, i.e. the charter school movement, but it might be a hundred years before Montana does so, so it wouldn't be the way to bet while building a budget.

Typically the sponsoring and organizing core entity is a church or it's congregation, but Bozeman's have been more a result of highly educated parents who got together to access teaching styles like Montessori and intense curriculums that were more academically challenging and balanced (arts, music, etc.) than the public schools. A big advantage to a church-based one is that the unused Sunday School classroom/kitchen in most churches (on weekdays) makes a ready to go facility for this.

The advantage to the community with this would be it would create several teaching jobs, probably part-time and ill-paid, provide a viable use for an empty building, and increase the activity downtown.

### **Final point on kids and the School: The Library**

While we didn't have time for a tour of the school, I did find a few minutes to browse all the shelves in the library, where we held our listening sessions:

1. I wondered if town adults can check out books as they can in many school libraries, although that's often unknown to most of them. Columbus has a tiny public library, Joliet has a nice new one, Bridger has a small one, while Red Lodge and Big Timber have sizable old Carnegie libraries with Big Timber in the midst of a million dollar plus library expansion **while having a library at all in Absarokee was never mentioned as a project, need, or possibility** which only struck me later on. (Big Timber's raised over \$800,000 towards it's library from Sweetgrass County residents in about 2 years time or less.) Big Timber's not much bigger than Absarokee and it's public library is around a hundred years old so that's a long time for it not to come up. Setting up a public library staffed by volunteers in the Cobblestone School or Senior Center would seem like a fairly small project with a

lot of community benefits. Starting with donated books and building bookshelves isn't that big of a project, a table, a desk, and some donated old overstuffed chairs, and a ledger or index cards are enough to equip a library while having PC's with internet connections is becoming less of a need. The Civic Club could provide seed funding and the County might be willing to provide enough to pay the utilities and some operating expenses or perhaps a thousand or two a year for buying new books and magazine subscriptions.

2. **The school's library collection was really uneven, old, and sparse.** Most of the fiction dated back into the 1950's & 60's with, reference relied too much on old almanacs, history was sparse indeed, biographies I didn't even notice, science and art weren't bad, counseling and teen issues was surprisingly the largest and most up to date section, business was minimal, technical and how-to books were sparse... it was overall a tough collection to generate decent research papers out of for class assignments, let alone read for pleasure, new skills, or insights. Some fundraising efforts would make sense as well as encouraging donations from resident's home shelves (my home library beat it in nearly every category and a typical high school library would have 5,000-10,000 books.) Another way to beef it up is to send local residents to the Friends of the Library Book sale at the Billings Parnly Library where for a \$20 bill on the second day or a \$10 bill on the last day of the 3 day sale, this or a community library could get armloads of newer books in both non-fiction and fiction. As the public library in Billings runs the sale and discards entirely the books that don't sell, I'd bet they'd let a small town library getting started or school library pick through the remainders (several thousand some years) for free.

<http://www.billings.lib.mt.us/friends.html> shows you how they raise funds and also when their Annual Book Sale is in October. Some years they run two and I noticed Columbus and Joliet now do them as well.

**A good library that's available to adults rather than just students is one of the most proven local economic development tools in American history** with Benjamin Franklin being the first demonstrator of this idea. (It helped Philadelphia eclipse Boston as the second biggest and most prosperous city in America as he blended the idea of a lending library, adult continuing education, service club, debating society, and think tank by passing personal books around a few dozen men who'd then discuss and present the ideas to each other.) Andrew Carnegie personally spent what in today's dollars would be over a Billion dollars on creating

over a thousand small town libraries so adults could continue to learn after what formal schooling they'd had was over...Big Timber's and Red Lodge's libraries come from that. Billings' public library was a gift of major landowner and former Northern Pacific President Frederick Billings...libraries are what practical business people invest in because they have such a high and diverse return on investment. People who don't track investment returns, bet on sporting facilities to draw prosperity even though it's hard to find anywhere that it's actually worked despite \$10 billion in public investment in just the past decade.

<http://eduscapes.com/earth/libportal.html> connects you to many resources on public and school libraries.

A library district could be formed to create ongoing funding, USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Loans can be tapped to expand or build one (i.e. another use for an empty storefront downtown.) The Civic Club might well contribute start-up monies for this and many of the books could likely be donated from personal collections in the area. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contributes considerably to libraries (Microsoft's Bill Gates), particularly in computers for internet access. <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Libraries/>

### Future Scenarios for Absarokee

As futurist Peter Schwartz points out in his books, thinking about what your community might look like a few years down the road if current trends continue or if recent events reverberate into them, this can be a useful way to thinking about what Absarokee wants to be in the next 5-10 years:

Here's some starting points to show how you can do this...a long walk outdoors can be a great trigger:

#### Scenario 1: 2010

- Gasoline hovers between \$2.75-4. gallon
- Health insurance costs at the mine have risen 200% over the past 5 years, prompting a 60 day strike and layoffs
- 250 new senior households have moved into the county, many around Absarokee, with most building new houses
- School has 60 kids enrolled

Those are pretty unimaginative but reasonable possibilities. What would Absarokee look like? Residential construction would be a big economic driver and some miners would likely become builders or subs. Lumberyard would thrive and expand as would the grocery store.

More home furnishings and décor stores would open up on Main, maybe. There'd be a lot of new volunteers with very different ideas and models. More miners would live outside Stillwater County, relying on the bus, and worrying mostly about the spouse's driving costs for their job, kid-hauling, shopping, etc.. as their spouse's job helps cover increased health insurance premiums and out of pocket costs as well. Many miners move away during the strike as they couldn't miss the paychecks and not all are replaced.

#### Scenario II: 2010

- Rollouts of hydrogen fuel cell powered cars in sizable production runs by Toyota, Honda, GM, Ford, and Daimler/Chrysler drive palladium prices back up to \$600-850/oz. so Stillwater adds another 200 workers in the area but at the Columbus sites, many living in Absarokee area but traveling by personal vehicle rather than bus.
- New septic tank/drain field rules drastically change where and how many new houses can be built
- Mortgage rates of 8-10% end the boom in big homes and second homes. Increasingly these are manufactured homes, drastically reducing the impact on local craftsmen and suppliers.
- With 8 out of the last 10 years in drought, many agriculture and outdoor recreation ventures fold or radically change. Most ranches become horse focused and drastically shrink their farming and livestock activity to reflect new owners and little water.

The subdivisions around Absarokee would get their sewer and water extensions from the town done as Special Improvement Districts and finish filling up. School enrollment would be up somewhat. Many long-time residents and leaders would be gone and the concerns of the community would make significant changes in direction and focus as a result.

#### Scenario 3: 2015

- Every teenage girl in America owns at least one pair of Palladium earrings. Palladium is \$1400/oz.

- *Interest rates remain in the 5-7% range so another 400 second homes or retirement cabins have been built in the Absarokee area by retiring Baby Boomers*
- *A charter school, a church school, an entirely online school, and the old school all compete for students.*
- *The clinic has a staff of 5, a physician's assistant, a pharmacy tech., an R.N., a diagnostics tech., and clerk, with physicians and pharmacists all online and rarely there.*
- *Ollie's Corner area now has an 80 unit motel, restaurant, Starbucks Internet Caf , interactive gaming center, and green Laundromat.*
- *With a dozen show horse arenas in the valley and major horse events 10 weekends a year, main street has gained a saddlemaker, tack shop, vet clinic, and equine nutrition center.*

Absarokee runs an electronic town meeting as an interactive website to determine most actions as does Columbus. Most easy housing sites with sewer/water access are taken now and more ranches are subdividing by using small new water treatment/wastewater treatment systems that cost far less. Many of the former miners who got too old or sore for mine work are now local small business owners or low volume craftsmen.

See how it's done? Identify some things that are bound to change in some fashion that would have real impacts, and think about what several of the ways that could turn out would impact the community. The obvious trends rarely continue like we expect, the minor things often turn out to have big consequences, and events don't happen in isolation so assuming just one big change would occur is dangerous too, i.e. 9/11, the Internet stock market bubble crash, Enron and energy deregulation are all independent big variables with only the Internet bubble widely predicted beforehand.

**ABSAROKEE RESOURCE TEAM  
ASSESSMENT  
LISTENING SESSION NOTES  
MAY 16 – 17, 2005**

**STRENGTHS – CIVIC CLUB, COUNTY, POST OFFICE, ABSAROKEE WATER AND SEWER**

- Close knit community that welcomes new comers.
- Compact community
- Clean community
- No SIDs
- Contagious community energy
- Our kids – good school
- Swimming pool
- Baseball fields
- Believe in our kids
- Some solid businesses
- Clean
- Park District – sidewalks put in
- Streets paved
- Drainage plant and drainage program
- Ditto Park District
- Dedication and commitment of core group of merchants in town
- New highway thru town
- Hope to live here the rest of my life
- Great group of volunteers
- Not bashful about calling on our County Commissioners
- A lot of kids that volunteer for clean up
- Ditto – strong community spirit
- Location – people can go to Billings, visit mountains, skiing, streams
- Ditto – location
- We “Absarokee-ize” people that move in here.
- This is the town people want to live in.
- People pull together - until we get to tax issues.
- Natural gas to heat your home
- Senior Center

**STRENGTHS – CHURCH GROUPS**

- Strong community
- We know everyone and everyone knows us
- We raise our kids as a community
- Isolation – both a strength and a weakness
- Love and care, more so than in larger cities
- Even across church lines, people care and are willing to help in need
- Closeness of church members
- Ditto closeness of church community and community as a whole
- Probably the most caring community I have ever known
- Sense of community is phenomenal

- Work with people with deep roots – feeling of stability
- Exciting that we have more churches in bars!
- Strength of the town is in the churches.
- Pool, Hawkins Park, baseball field
- Volunteer force in the construction end is tremendous.
- Great that churches work together
- Limitless assets – everyone wants to live here!
- Recreation opportunities
- People are willing to give \$\$\$\$ as well
- Businesses are extremely generous
- There is a lot to do here – plays, concerts, etc.
- Incredibly talented people – artists, actors, singers, musicians, etc.

#### **STRENGTHS – TEACHERS/SCHOOL BOARD**

- Location, ditto, ditto, ditto
- Climate
- Small town atmosphere, relaxed
- Wonderful people, ditto
- Family oriented community
- School
- Mine paid for half the high school construction
- Drain system
- Main street improvements
- Absarokee Days, BBQ days

#### **STRENGTHS – BEARTOOTH RECREATION/OUTFITTERS/RAFTING COMPANIES/COMMUNITY SWIMMING**

- Natural beauty
- Trustworthy people that live here – want the best for the area
- Ditto
- Great pool for such a small community
- Over 50 people came to help with the clean up yesterday
- Great school
- Pool and softball fields best thing going for the kids
- Friendly people
- Clean air, clean water
- Still has a rural flavor
- Very safe environment to raise kids here
- Park District
- Lots for kids to do thanks to the Park District
- Recreation group has done a great thing in providing things for our youth to do

- Location – close enough to the interstate, easily accessible yet have that “going out of town” feel
- Even new comers feel the sense of community

#### **STRENGTHS – MEDICAL CLINIC/EMERGENCY/FIRE DEPARTMENT**

- Great job with Parks District.
- State of the art health care facility supported by St. V’s
- People don’t use this facility – they will lose it.
- Open five days per week – P.A. and Family Physician
- Great people
- FFA program
- Support of Community Activities
- Scholarship Drive –
- Veggie Tourney
- **Quick Draw** – art auction and evening of entertainment (skits, etc.) raised over \$27,000 for scholarships. (Donated art, woodworking projects, quick –draw artists that then donate their art) Students have to be involved, do welding for back-drops, huge community volunteer effort. Takes v-og, sponsors, artists, performers, Billings community supports it too.
- Wanda!
- Beautiful valley
- High quality of education
- Active EMS and Fire Dept. – all volunteer

#### **STRENGTHS - BUSINESS, RETAIL, REALTORS**

- Recreation – mountains, valleys, rafting –
- Ditto
- Excellent school
- Churches
- Low crime rate
- Way of life
- People – very friendly, willing to help
- Happy children
- Beauty
- The People
- Streets and trees – those that have worked hard to get main street beautiful
- Wonderful artists
- Quality Supply building – 3800 sq ft. is available (two offices in the back)

- Ditto – our strength is our people
- Fishtail and Nye are part of the entire regional community
- People that work for the kids – putting in ball field, swimming pool, Quick Draw
- Support of the people
- Cobblestone – big asset
- Retail businesses here are competitive
- New quilt shop opening up
- Retired people with education, experience, resources
- Billings is a blessing as well as a curse
- Great location
- On a loop – scenic
- Grocery Store
- Hardware store
- Potential assisted living residence
- Wonderful people, pleasure to come here
- Business comes from Billings, Red Lodge, Big Timber – need to cater to those driving through
- Incredible resource of fine older families and retired people with talents
- Good schools, great kids,

#### **STRENGTHS – HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

- No violence, low crime
- Help children through school, help students
- Quick Draw – raises money for scholarships
- Lived here all my life and everything is good
- Really supportive community
- You know everyone
- Sporting event – whole town comes
- Ditto – supportive community
- Stillwater mine
- Community support – turns out for games
- Close town
- Clean community – decorations, little trash
- Help each other
- Ball field – everyone helps
- Safe place to raise kids
- Ditto
- Strong community – lots of support
- Close community
- Like the flowers on the street
- Nice people
- Ditto
- Good Husky Spirit
- Close community – people are nice

- Clean
- Access to
- Lots of music stuff

#### **STRENGTHS – YOUNG FAMILIES, DAY CARE, PRESCHOOL, HOME SCHOOLED, PTA**

Note: no one was able to attend this session.

#### **STRENGTHS – RANCHERS, AGRICULTURE**

- Natural beauty
- Water!
- Diversity of people in the town
- Retired, summer cabin people, ag, etc.
- Ditto
- Recreation is a big factor
- Good, kind, generous people here
- Fortunate to have several good places to eat – Cowboy, Stake-Out
- Stillwater Mine

#### **STRENGTHS – SENIOR CITIZENS**

- Low key town
- Cobblestone
- We are social
- Great town –wouldn't change a thing
- People
- Keep the clinic
- Absarokee Fine Arts
- School spirit
- Cobblestone Events
- Volunteerism
- Safe community
- Nice place to live
- Supportive community
- Wonderful clinic
- Senior Center – does cards
- Physical Therapy at the clinic

#### **STRENGTHS – STILLWATER MINE**

- Character of people
- Mine helped in building the high school
- Mine contributes to projects and fundraisers in community
- Good place to live, especially for retirees
- Private water system, RSID sewer system, now working together, upgrades of utilities
- Mine contributes eight scholarships here.
- Enormous reserves within the mine, estimated 25-80 years.
- Mine payroll, numerous employees live here
- Spouses work in community such as at Montana Silversmiths

- 56% of employees at mine were hired from local communities
- A lot of agricultural producers went to work at the mine as a second job
- Over 1,000 people at the mine, 200 at Columbus, and approximately 400 at Park Co.
- Mine is recycling materials from vehicles in their processing

#### **STRENGTHS – NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS**

- Expertise, education, experience of retired people here
- Artists, volunteers and outstanding people here
- A lot of ideas – take them and run with them
- Ditto
- It is the people in this room
- Ditto
- So many different volunteer organizations – almost all successful
- Ditto
- Quick Draw
- Absolute tribute to the heart of this community that we have done great things
- People in Billings are investing in Absarokee – artists want to be here and work here
- Billings is an asset
- Cobblestone building and the people that made it happen
- Fabulous Five
- Leaders have made it happen
- Leaders make it fun to volunteer –
- Beautiful
- Billings is our strength, not our weakness
- Medical facilities
- Environmental folks that reward Stillwater Mine for good behavior
- Proximity to Red Lodge
- Potential for ag tourism

#### **STRENGTHS - MINERS AND SPOUSES**

- Good community, good school
- Ditto
- Everyone knows my kids – share rides,
- Sports programs are good
- Miners involved with fire department
- Bus is a strength and a problem

#### **STRENGTHS – LOCAL CONSTRUCTION BUSINESSES**

- A lot of building to do here in town

- Location, location, location
- Terrific people
- People willing to jump in
- All that is available in our back yard

#### **ABSAROKEE RESOURCE TEAM ASSESSMENT**

#### **LISTENING SESSION NOTES**

**MAY 16 – 17, 2005**

#### **CHALLENGES– CIVIC CLUB, COUNTY, POST OFFICE, ABSAROKEE WATER AND SEWER**

- Volunteers are getting older
- People do not agree on tax issues
- Caution: don't get into subdivision nightmares as other growing communities in the area.
- Concern – law enforcement – but it often does get addressed when we ask.
- Empty buildings on Main Street
- Can't buy a pair of Levi's in our county – clothing problems
- Fast traffic and Billings are our main problems
- Eyesore – one building in particular is a blight on our community.
- Clothing store – had to close a few years ago. It could work if the right things were stocked.
- Too close to Billings – people buy everything there.
- Ditto –generally merchants here are very nice, but some are very rude.
- Some merchants need help with customer service.
- Road between Columbus and Absarokee
- Keep the clinic functioning
- School enrollment is going down
- Stillwater Mine bus – allows people to not live here – drops our school enrollment and money spent in the area
- Ditto – building does need to be torn down
- Lights downtown – are pretty but they glare – hard to see
- Home schooling is becoming very popular
- Businesses closing affected morale in town
- Senior Center – Seniors want to be left alone to play bridge – not involved.
- Economics – have to balance what the local people need and will use, yet still bring in tourists
- Can't buy gas in Absarokee
- Paradox – enrollment going down in school, medical clinic hanging by a thread, but we

have the largest employer in the state just up the road from us.

- No houses for sale.
- Sewer is at capacity.
- Youth do not return.

#### **CHALLENGES – CHURCH GROUPS**

- Isolation – both a strength and a weakness
- Lack of stores
- Need to support our businesses
- Sad day when our drug store closed
- So close to each other that we do get personal at times – we attach character/people rather than stick to the issues.
- Ditto – we need help in the art of negotiations
- Try to keep businesses healthy and economy growing – hard to find niche.
- Businesses get hit up for everything (donations) and they are hurting.
- Lack of drug store
- Nothing stays open in the evenings.
- Stores have a hard time staying open because everyone goes to Billings
- Churches have to share ministers because our congregations are small
- Church members move around a lot or live here seasonally – a struggle to support a full time minister.
- We do not shop at home
- Small town has to play by state rules even though our situation is different
- Rent is too high for businesses to rent a building to operate in
- People will ask for donations from a business and then not shop at that business.

#### **CHALLENGES – TEACHERS AND SCHOOL BOARD**

- Larger playground for school
- Homes that are vacant or temporarily vacant, weeds growing up, no ordinance for maintenance
- Junk vehicles
- Empty buildings in business district, distance from Billings
- Limited number of water hookups, 468, lost some of them, some people abandoning hookups and will pay at a later date.
- Downtown district, need coordinated business strategy
- Glare from lights

- Limited workforce, and businesses are asked to donate everytime there is an event.
- Cost of living is expensive here, expensive to buy and rent
- No gas station

#### **CHALLENGES – BEARTOOTH RECREATION/OUTFITTERS/RAFTING COMPANIES/COMMUNITY SWIMMING POOL**

- Can't compete with box stores
- Feel like the individual groups do not overlap – we have lots of boards that are working hard – but do not have one focal group.
- People here are steeped in tradition, which are good, but people do have to look at change.
- Hear “ I am too busy” to volunteer.
- A shame that some people do not support the baseball field or pool because of taxes.
- People in rural areas feel that Absarokee gets everything – Nye and Fishtail do not.
- People who are driving through do not stop.
- Retired people moving in – or of independent means – and it is changing the rural aspect of the county.
- Road expansion is taking our land – then there will not be enough space for housing.
- No winter recreation.

#### **CHALLENGES - MEDICAL CLINIC/EMERGENCY/FIRE DEPARTMENT**

- Hard to hire young people to work here
- Hard to find people to volunteer
- Sewer is maxed
- No pharmacy
- Billings is so close – people drive there for medical care and buy other things along the way.
- Had a pharmacy in the clinic – but can't afford to take the hit – not enough volume

#### **CHALLENGES - BUSINESS, RETAIL, REALTORS**

- No place for people to stay
- Housing limits us
- Infrastructure is out of date
- Housing
- People will use local merchants for “small” stuff – but those are not money makers
- Some services are lacking here
- Stores closed

- Signage
- Bus access changed our local economy
- People would rather shop elsewhere than support our local retailers
- May lose our clinic if we don't use it
- Tough to keep good employees because small businesses can't offer benefits like the larger employers
- State permitting is so frustrating....caused RV park to miss two seasons
- Availability of building sites is limited
- Where are the young professionals?
- Need more service people in the area: plumbers, electricians, builders, machinery workers.
- Not easy to come into a long established community and start a new business – need more support and encouragement from the community for new businesses and new ideas.
- Our natural beauty and recreation facilities need to be protected at all costs, but we also need new roads.

#### **CHALLENGES – HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

- Nothing to do
- ditto
- Businesses start and then close
- Have to be able to drive to do something
- No privacy – everyone knows your business
- 24 hour gas station in town
- Drugs – not as bad as Columbus, or as bad as the grown-ups
- Both drugs and alcohols
- Little or no law enforcement
- Drop outs that use drugs
- Everything is expensive in town
- People mind other people's business
- Drugs - - drinking parties
- Nothing to do
- Boring here
- No fast food
- Everything closes early

#### **CHALLENGES – YOUNG FAMILIES, DAY CARE, PRESCHOOL, HOME SCHOOLED, PTA**

Note: no one was able to attend this session.

#### **CHALLENGES – RANCHERS, AGRICULTURE**

- Small businesses are having a hard time – back door to billings
- Hard to drive miles for a sack of feed, etc.
- Rent of buildings for businesses is high

- Community has changed – long standing ranches are being purchased by people that don't necessarily support the community
- The mine does not support the community – school enrollment keeps going down. The mine bypasses us.
- Community has lost our loyalty to this community – look here first
- How much money from the mine is spent here?
- Community is bottlenecked – we have a business district and that is it. – Both sides of town are owned by people – have to use the business area.
- Subdivision land is increasing in value - \$20 – 30,000/\$50 – 60,000 per acre
- Percent paid for taxes – high

#### **CHALLENGES – SENIOR CITIZENS**

- Rent too high
- People don't shop local
- Medical services – don't want to lose them
- Pharmacy needed
- Ditto
- Don't have transportation – although a lot of them do drive

#### **CHALLENGES – STILLWATER MINE**

- Keeping community sustained and viable over time.
- Law enforcement
- Per capita, we have a drug problem (kids and adults)
- Are movie stars taking over the area like “up the Boulder”

#### **CHALLENGES – NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS**

- Need businesses to come in
- Ditto – not a WalMart or County Market – but businesses that attract
- Stop whining, get a positive attitude –
- We will never be a self-contained village – make ourselves available to be a destination
- People who own business buildings need to make them affordable
- Weather causes limited selling season
- Don't have a clearing house for who is doing what
- Greater Stillwater Chamber of Commerce – Absarokee is not included
- A few buildings that need to be torn down

### **CHALLENGES - MINERS AND SPOUSES**

- Miss our lost businesses
- Availability of products
- Trying to get people involved – get beyond paying dues and get busy
- Hard to motivate people to see good things
- Need to improve optimism in the community
- Need some vision – plan farther out ahead
- Local organizations benefit from activities but often don't realize it is the merchant's that pay for the advertising.
- Expensive for miners to live here, rent is too high – and no jobs for spouses

### **CHALLENGES – LOCAL CONSTRUCTION BUSINESSES**

- Hard to find good help - -felt like tax collector and babysitter at times
- Nobody wants to go through the training to learn a trade
- Permits and licensing – need more oversight to insure good quality projects
- Right now only need septic and electrical inspections – need better quality
- Sewer and water problems are preventing new building
- Lack of consistency as far as accepting permits
- Lack of lots
- Wish there was more land available
- Need new volunteers

### **ABSAROCKE RESOURCE TEAM ASSESSMENT LISTENING SESSION NOTES MAY 16 – 17, 2005**

#### **PROJECTS– CIVIC CLUB, COUNTY, POST OFFICE, ABSAROCKE WATER AND SEWER**

- Become a destination community
- Increase core businesses

- Expand programs with Park District
- Encourage younger volunteers
- Wise planning for growth – i.e., subdivisions
- Clothing store
- Need a pharmacy
- Customer service improvements – Super Host
- Improvement on road between Columbus and Absarokee
- Bolster clinic – don't want to lose it
- Bolster school enrollment
- Fill downtown businesses
- Balance tourism with other means of economic development
- Tear down the blight building – as County to lean on owners
- Home Schooler's held accountable
- Balance economics to provide for both tourists and locals
- Housing
- Major expansion of sewer
- Central organization in town – several boards, but no town governance.
- Encourage youth to return – make the town “sexy”
- Address glare problem.
- Sidewalks to the football field and to the school.

#### **PROJECTS – CHURCH GROUPS**

- Find business niches
- Have our own drug store again
- Fix the street lights: Address problem of lights/glare at night – need a hood or....taller or...
- Conduct a “Shop at Home” campaign
- Educate out-of-town/state building owners as to current/fair price for rent
- Swimming Pool – we have a small pool and will have to meet state regulations to maintain/operate it.
- Business community expand to include some satellite stores (fill-in services perhaps just in the summer time.)
- Need a barber shop!

#### **PROJECTS: TEACHERS/SCHOOL BOARD**

- Businesses filled
- Something unique in town to entice/draw people here
- Motel, keep people overnight

- Something like the snowmobile drag races on grass as a spectator sport
- Keep medical facility open and have our own drug store
- Health facility, fitness center
- Rodeo
- Covered walkway between schools or lunch programs in each of the schools
- Spirit in the community
- Antique mall town
- Unique businesses because you can't compete with Billings

**PROJECTS: BEARTOOTH RECREATION/OUTFITTERS/RAFTING COMPANIES/COMMUNITY SWIMMING POOL**

- Tennis courts and swimming pool maintained and improved
- Continue to keep baseball fields in good shape – and used
- Bring more tourists here
- Address impact of people moving in here that are independently wealthy – changes our rural flavor.
- Bigger, better pool
- Planned growth
- “Z” word - Five houses in five open acres, then five open acres
- Businesses on Main Streets full
- Park District maintains what we have now – but to make improvements, (rest rooms) explore funding. Need \$\$\$\$.
- Busy, thriving downtown Absarokee – people come and then leave. ☺
- Would like our downtown to look like Red Lodge.
- Organize and plan winter recreation – snow shoeing, horse drawn sleigh,
- Log cabin by tennis court – could be renovated and used for sports hut – right now used for storage.

**PROJECT - MEDICAL CLINIC/EMERGENCY/FIRE DEPARTMENT**

- Perhaps have Japanese manage our forests efficiently.
- Streets and sidewalks done all through town
- Good clean up project
- Support medical facility
- Pharmacy
- Winter – have cross country trail, snow shoeing, etc.
- Bike path

- Side streets need work
- Potholes filled
- New sidewalks

**PROJECTS: BUSINESS, RETAIL, REALTORS**

- Tap the education, expertise, resources of retired people
- Assisted living center – hope to open this year.
- More businesses – coffee shops
- When we lost our ice cream fountain, it was the beginning of the end – started a chain of business closures
- Work to capture those driving through – those that go on day trips from Billings, Red Lodge, Big Timber, etc.
- Signage – find a way to advertise – use the two signs that have been grandfathered in on the highway to get overall traffic to Absarokee
- How to encourage those that ride the bus for the mine, stay within Stillwater County.
- Shop local campaign
- Support our local clinic
- A catering business
- A larger directory/visitor's guide that is more inclusive
- Investigate insurance options from Chamber of Commerce group plan
- Sewer lagoon – at capacity - building sites are limited.
- Look at ways to recruit small businesses to Absarokee
- Possibility of branch stores from Billings opening second stores or service centers here
- Develop Absarokee as an Arts Community – encouraging artists and galleries to come to the area
- Develop tourism to its potential
- Develop community park with visitor's center
- Create a history and/or art loop drive through Absarokee, Fishtail and Roscoe.

**PROJECTS – HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

- Bowling alley
- Movie theater
- Arcade
- Businesses that start up – don't make it
- McDonald's
- Can do outdoor things – cliff jumping
- Law enforcement needs to be improved
- More people –

- Improve enrollment of school
- Shopping places
- Lights on the ball field, basketball courts

**PROJECTS – YOUNG FAMILIES, DAY CARE, PRESCHOOL, HOME SCHOOLED, PTA**

Note: no one was able to attend this session.

**PROJECTS – RANCHERS, AGRICULTURE**

- Incentives for the mine workers to live here, or deal with the changes that the bus/transportation has brought here.
- Instill loyalty to local businesses
- Need to work together – let go of grudges, work to keep community and businesses
- **Merchants come up with coupons so that those providing recreational services can hand them out to clients**
- Residents! Counteract the busing to/from the mines.
- Pull all the little groups together and have a central voice, too.
- Cottage industry – light manufacturing or computer industry – that would bring secondary jobs to those families that work at the mine.
- Rentals are available – but prices are high; building lots are available, but high cost
- Network with Billings, Red Lodge to plug into conference crowds
- Investigate liability laws/state code regarding working ranches

**PROJECTS - SENIOR CITIZENS**

- Public restroom
- Don't worry about empty buildings – support the buildings we have and the other businesses will follow
- Clothing store
- Pharmacy
- Barber shop
- Feed store
- Gas station
- Bigger school
- Loop – pave the Stillwater road
- Gas station
- Clothing store
- Bus for transportation to Billings – go to plays, ice skating shows
- Theater
- Teen center for kids

**PROJECTS – STILLWATER MINE**

- More law enforcement services
- Utilizing local materials, adding value, and marketing a product
- Build on scholarship and quick draw events
- Encourage youth to return to Absarokee
- \$400 palladium by this fall

**PROJECTS – NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS**

- Revive Absarokee
- Draw from Billings – as we do with Quick Draw event
- Find ways to encourage people from Billings to visit here
- Scenic loop put in
- Revitalize store fronts
- Become a destination point
- Become an art and antique Mecca – takes a change in mindset
- Indigenous products – feature them
- Build co-ops to keep products and businesses
- A nice park to put up tents and have festivals, add a skating rink
- Think outside the box – may have to leave traditional retail
- Find products that we do not depend on only the Absarokee population to purchase
- Promote those websites!
- Define what groups in town do what...what is the Civic Club's purpose? What is the Merchant Association's purpose, etc?
- Work with county to tear down eyesore on main street
- Banks perhaps provide low interest loans for store front updates
- June 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting for local artists forming a cooperative gallery – we are an arts community
- Leadership to pull all of us together
- Capitalize on Iron Horse Rodeo in Red Lodge

**PROJECTS – MINERS AND SPOUSES**

- Advertising co-op; Understand the expense of advertising Absarokee, work together to get it done – can't be done by merchant's alone
- Increase after school activities
- Structured, supervised summer activities for the kids
- Active Civic Club – to become the center for all of the groups to communicate through. Include Fishtail and Nye.

- Turn Hawkins Park into an asset
- Use log cabin near Hawkins Park for something other than storage
- Fill our business buildings
- General store/mercantile -
- Expand IGA store
- Fitness Center, indoor activities and a place to go in the evening
- Gas
- Community library

**PROJECTS – LOCAL CONSTRUCTION  
BUSINESS**

- Recruit more volunteers – new volunteers
- Educate the surrounding area as to the need for volunteers – county taxes do not pay for improvements to things like the pool, ball fields, etc.
- Pool – nice shower area, changing rooms, kiddie pool to have own filter system and reopen (but needs own lifeguard, too)
- Permanent restrooms and septic system at ball field
- Road improvements
- Eye-appeal of community; appeal to get folks to stop
- Public restrooms downtown
- Tear down dilapidated building and have small park, benches, sitting area
- Beautification - Encourage people to stay- and keep those of us that live here happier too.
- Ball field – parking area, own septic system to save money on port-a-potty
- Bleachers at ball field and soccer field – current ones are too rickety
- Two nights a week for 12 and over swimming
- Adult lap swimming three days per week this year
- New basketball courts outside