

Community Development



MSU Extension Community Development engages Montanans to strengthen the social, civic, economic and leadership abilities of their communities. MSU Extension approaches community vitality work with the values of collaboration, curiosity, excellence, and responsiveness, ensuring that our efforts are community-centered and community-driven.

BIG SKY, BIG LEADERSHIP

Big Sky, Big Leadership is a statewide leadership initiative of MSU Extension, designed to help build the skills of rural community leaders to work more effectively for positive change in their communities. This program is designed to fit community needs, help participants understand local community dynamics, and improve awareness of local issues while they develop problem-solving skills, learn how to work with groups, and deal with conflict.

Seven counties have participated since the program's inception, including Broadwater, Golden Valley, Musselshell, Park, Powder River, Rosebud, and Wheatland. Pondera and Blaine counties are actively planning programs.

In September 2022, MSU Extension conducted an evaluation of the program in Park and Wheatland Counties. Participants are reporting long-term impacts on the community, including:

- **Improvements to the skills of community volunteers,**
- **Greater effectiveness on local boards,**
- **Contributions to improved function of boards** on which they serve, and
- **Increasing the amount of time they volunteer** in their community.

REMOTE WORK PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATE PROGRAM



The Remote Work Professional certificate program is a 1-month remote course designed to equip workers and business owners with training to:

- **Find a job** working remotely for a company
- **Expand a business** to serve customers remotely
- **Increase skill levels** for people already working remotely

Participants receive assistance with finding remote work, building their businesses, and connecting to a network of other remote workers.

Nine affiliate universities offer the course, of which Montana has the second most participants.

56 Montana participants increased their virtual work skills and job opportunities in the Remote Work Professional Certificate Program in 2022.

reIMAGINING RURAL

Reimagining Rural is a program to help invigorate local communities. MSU Extension leads in-person gatherings with virtual speakers who share positive rural stories and data, and a community discussion of the ideas and how they might apply locally. The format increases volunteer engagement in rural communities and helps people think bigger about possibilities for their community.

In 2022, 16 communities participated, including Boulder, Cascade, Cut Bank, Forsyth, Glasgow, Glendive, Lewistown, Malta, Rudyard, Columbus, Terry, Valier, Wheatland County, Whitehall, Wibaux and Worden/Ballantine.

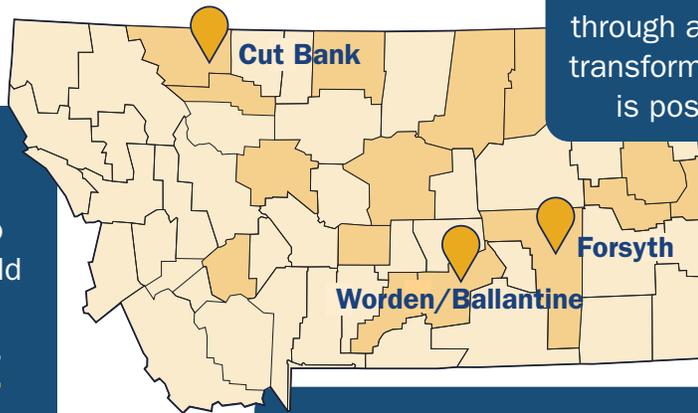
Impacts are different in each rural community.

“We have some awesome ideas brewing for the future of our community.”

– Reimagining Rural participant

Forsyth hosted a newcomer welcoming event for more than 75 people. Newcomers met local leaders, were introduced to local food vendors and were entertained by a youth band. Leaders saw their town through a newcomer’s eyes and transformed their image of what is possible for their town.

Cut Bank realized there were greater things about their community to promote instead of the cold temperatures for which they are currently known. **Cut Bank matched their Reimagining Rural grant with an additional \$16,000** to hire professionals to create a welcoming, attractive brand for their city.



Worden/Ballantine, with a combined population of 833, created a sense of community for local residents with food truck nights throughout the summer. **Events culminated in the Beef, Beets and Barley festival that attracted more than 500 community members** in late September.

HOUSING

Housing is an issue closely tied to rural community vitality, and according to the recent **MSU Extension Needs Assessment** survey, one that needs to be addressed. Across the state, concerned citizens are interested in coming together to discuss solutions to housing challenges. A lack of affordable, suitable and available housing limits a community’s ability to hire employees, welcome new families into a community, and grow businesses.

MSU Extension agents offer programs to help guide discussions and build networks that address the complexity of housing challenges. MSU Extension can offer a neutral perspective to convene a conversation among stakeholders and make connections to community leaders and resources that can provide expert assistance.

HOUSING WEBINAR SERIES

In 2022, MSU Extension hosted rural housing webinars featuring rural sociologist Benjamin Winchester of the University of Minnesota Extension. Winchester spoke in June for an Extension-only audience and in August for a general audience of more than 70 people across Montana.

As a result of the first two Winchester housing webinars, an additional rural housing webinar series was developed to answer housing questions that came up in partnership with the housing nonprofit organization NeighborWorks Montana. The additional series had more than 120 people register.

