



Courtesy RCAC

## ► At the Center of it All

The small city of Lewistown is situated near the geographic center of Montana, a picturesque community that lies along the banks of Big Spring Creek surrounded by five mountain ranges. Its location has inspired the town to embrace the slogan “Find Your Center” as part of its tourism promotion efforts. Therefore, it’s only fitting that Lewistown is also at the center of exciting economic and community development initiatives underway in the heart of central Montana.

The county seat of Fergus County, Lewistown is home to around 6,000 residents who have a long history of embracing a collaborative and “can do” spirit to support local projects and community development. Still, like many small towns across the country, Lewistown is facing challenges due to changing economics, shifting demographics, and outmigration of young people to larger population centers. The community, led by a variety of issue-driven committees inspired by the WealthWorks approach to rural economic development, is tackling these challenges head-on by exploring opportunities to build on

# Lewistown, MT: Building Strength from the Center

local assets and improve the town from within by making it an attractive place to raise a family, own a business, and visit on vacation.

## ► ROC Workshops and Trainings

In October 2015, the Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) and the Snowy Mountain Development Corporation (SMDC) organized and facilitated workshops that first introduced the WealthWorks model to Lewistown. Called “Recharge Our Community” (ROC) workshops, these events created the space for local residents, business owners, and leaders to think in new ways about economic development through the WealthWorks model and look closely at multiple forms of wealth and build value chains to root wealth locally.

ROC workshops are part of RCAC’s Building Rural Economies program, which promotes the WealthWorks model and entrepreneurship education. “Folks were interested in seeing change and what could be done differently in terms of economic development in Lewistown,” says RCAC’s Carol Cohen, who serves as value chain coach for Lewistown. “These meetings looked at the gaps and opportunities that existed locally and looked at what businesses could be developed and expanded. It encouraged folks to look at what they have, not what they don’t.”

RCAC and SMDC were natural partners to collaborate in organizing and delivering these trainings as each organization brings its own strengths and expertise. RCAC is a nonprofit that has worked for four decades with rural communities in the West to build local capacity through technical assistance and training. SMDC serves a six-

county region in Central Montana and is both a U.S. Economic Development Administration-designated Economic Development District and Certified Regional Development Corporation from the Montana Department of Commerce. Turnout was high at these initial meetings which was a positive early sign for the progress and enthusiasm to come. “There is a real sense of community here, so having 60 people at meetings is not a surprise in Lewistown,” says SMDC Executive Director Kathie Bailey. “The key is to build and maintain a culture of engagement.”

## ► Identifying Demand and Supporting Entrepreneurs

Part of the ROC trainings provided a forum to support entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs in the community by introducing them to the WealthWorks model, in particular by exploring the eight forms of wealth and focusing on demand. Over 60 participants graduated from the ROC training, including Tammy Eckhardt, who now owns and operates Sew Pieceful, a quilt and fabric shop located on Lewistown’s Main Street that opened in the fall of 2016. Eckhardt is a first-time small business owner who credits participating in the training with giving her the knowledge and confidence to open her business, which she did about a year after attending the workshop. “It was valuable to network and find other people who were like-minded and driving business downtown,” she says. “Everyone was willing to share their successful ideas and help brainstorm problems. I also learned to not just open a business to do what you want to do, but to listen to your customers and bring in what they are looking for.”



A fundamental aspect of WealthWorks is to identify demand, and Eckhardt knew that such a demand existed for a store like Sew Pieceful in Lewistown, noting that some quilters would often travel up to 130 miles throughout rural Montana to get the supplies they needed for their craft. The store lifts up many of the forms of wealth that Eckhardt and others learned about through the ROC training, including promoting individual, intellectual, cultural, social, financial, and built capital. Sew Pieceful's location on historic Main Street also helps position the city as a regional destination for shopping and retail. Since opening, the store has already expanded its size and inventory and is part of a growing downtown business district which recently saw two new businesses fill vacant storefronts in recent months. "What is happening in Lewistown is exciting. We are moving forward," Eckhardt says.

### ► ROC Committees—Leading the Way on Community Development

Another major outcome of the ROC workshops was the development of six working committees rooted in the concept of value chains and wealth creation that were established to look

at a variety of key issues in the community. They are focusing on nature tourism, youth engagement, downtown redevelopment, housing, workforce, and finance. These committees, led by a cross section of local leaders, business owners, residents, and others invested in the future of Lewistown and the surrounding region, are identifying opportunities for local community and economic development efforts and are forging new connections and possibilities. RCAC, the city of Lewistown, Fergus County, and SMDC have contributed funds to support a community coordinator position to provide assistance to these committees and to track successes and challenges.

Two of the committees in particular are making strong progress in meeting these goals. These are the Youth Engagement Committee (now

called the Creekside Committee) and the Nature Tourism Committee.

#### ROC Youth Engagement Committee/Creekside Committee:

Lewistown is eagerly awaiting the beginning of construction on the Creekside Marketplace and Pavilion, a transformative project planned to redevelop a blighted industrial site on East Main Street. Once completed, the Marketplace and Pavilion will be a public gathering destination consisting of green space and gardens, picnic areas, trails, and restrooms, all centered on a pavilion that will be used for live music and other performances.

It will sit along the Big Spring Creek that winds through town.

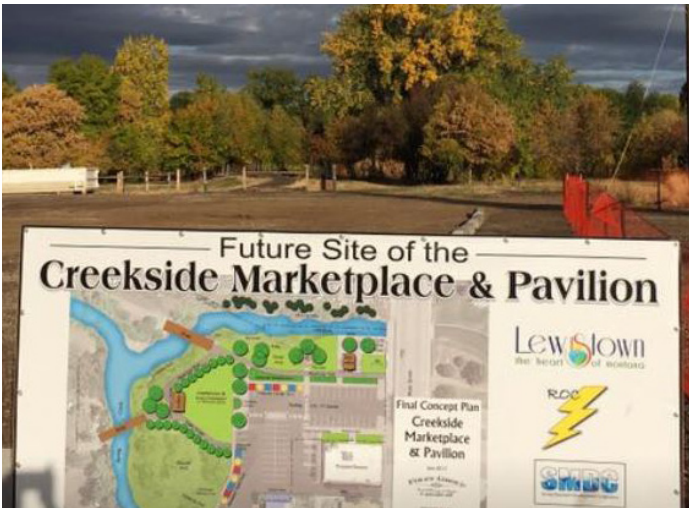


Courtesy MEDA



Courtesy RCAC





The ROC Youth Engagement Committee, now referred to as the Creekside Committee, emerged from the ROC trainings and took ownership of this effort. The general idea for such a project had existed in previous forms, including as part of the visioning and planning of two cohorts of participants from the Leadership Central Montana program, an initiative managed by SMDC. The downtown master plan in 2005 also mentioned this area as a potential site for such a project. As part of its initial planning and outreach efforts to gauge demand and interest, the committee conducted a survey and heard back that young families in the area were looking for more community amenities, an enhanced quality of place, and space to meet, relax, and celebrate. The Creekside Marketplace and Pavilion will meet this need, and its prime location on Main Street demonstrates the desire to enhance downtown and create a gathering place for residents and visitors alike. The Marketplace and Pavilion will likely be a focal point in the city's annual Chokecherry Festival, held every year on the first Saturday after Labor Day, which can bring up to 5,000 people to Main Street for food, music, games, and more to celebrate one of Montana's famous local fruits.

Committee members have been



responsible for outreach, fundraising, and generating overall support for this project, anticipated to cost around \$1.4 million. A mix of funding sources are making Creekside a reality, including support from the city, state, local businesses, community organizations, and private contributions from local residents through the Central Montana Foundation. Project funding of \$850,000 is being collected from local contributions, and at the time of writing that goal is in sight. "People in this community are willing to step up and donate to projects like this," says SMDC's Kathie Bailey. For all the progress made in moving this project towards reality, SMDC, in partnership with the City of Lewistown, ROC Youth Engagement Committee, and

Friends of the Trails, was recognized in 2018 with an Innovation Award from the Montana Economic Developers Association.

The enthusiasm generated for the Creekside Marketplace and Pavilion also led to Lewistown's first local brewery—Big Spring Brewing—opening in an

abandoned historic building adjacent to the Creekside location, along with Central Feed Grilling Company, a locally owned restaurant. The initial survey and community conversations had recognized a demand for a brewery in Lewistown and the work



of the ROC committee created a positive environment for opening such a business on Main Street. In a letter to SMDC, the restaurant/brewery owners wrote, "The beauty of our building remodel, steady patrons through the doors, and excitement surrounding the park have given other projects in town momentum. We can see a renewed pride in our community and people with confidence to invest in themselves and our town."

Support for the restaurant/brewery included technical assistance and workforce training funds secured by SMDC, as well as assistance from the Fergus County Port Authority. The Port Authority had been inactive for over ten years, but through the ROC Finance Committee, it was re-launched to support business start-up, expansion, and recruitment. The Port Authority has assisted new businesses such as the brewery and is working to establish a new grocery store for Lewistown.

The Creekside Marketplace and Pavilion is scheduled to open in 2019. John Sanford, a Creekside Committee member, was quoted in a social media post as saying, "I'm excited to be a part of this group because not only does it target the youth demographic that we originally intended for, but also every other one, too. I can't count how many people of all ages have expressed their excitement for Creekside. This is the kind of project that will bring families back to Lewistown for many years to come."

## ROC Nature Tourism Committee:

The Nature Tourism Committee is also making progress in building up Lewistown and the surrounding area as an outdoor recreation destination, all while boosting the eight forms of wealth for the area. From hiking and biking trails to sport fishing to hunting, Lewistown and the wider region are part of Montana's \$7 billion a year outdoor recreation industry. Committee members, many of whom work in the industry, assessed visitor demand and needs through a SWOT analysis, forms of wealth exercises, and questionnaires.

The committee was responsible for the creation of a City of Lewistown and Fergus County map to better inform visitors during their time in the region by highlighting points of interest,

trails, visitor amenities and other outdoor attractions. This map is available at the visitor center and at motels, restaurants, and local businesses. The regional tourism office also shares it at outdoor recreation trade shows throughout the country. Additionally, customer service workshops were also designed for local businesses and their employees to learn how to better serve guests and make Lewistown an even more welcoming place for visitors.

Another key focus of the Nature Tourism Committee identified through discussions and asset mapping exercises was the need for expanded wayfinding in Lewistown and the surrounding areas to assist visitors and create a sense of place. Wayfinding



expansion was already underway in Lewistown and will continue, but a specific need was identified

to improve signage and information to market those attractions outside the city. The committee continues to explore options and funding mechanisms to support this initiative.

## Doing Economic Development Differently

"The WealthWorks model brings people together to develop relationships. It changes mindsets and allows people to start to see things differently," says RCAC's Carol Cohen. Framing the conversation around the eight forms of wealth and looking at demand







and value chains provided a solid foundation and common language for committee members to help build support for these locally driven efforts that have gained momentum with each passing year.

“The WealthWorks model of looking at the different forms of wealth was really useful here because we often don’t think about economic development like this,” notes Kathie Bailey from SMDC. Just as critical has been creating the space to lift up local leaders and partners who have a vision and belief in the potential of these projects. Says Bailey, “You have to have a champion or multiple champions. This process has been able to give those champions a leg up and additional support. It also gives them a voice where maybe that hadn’t had a strong voice before.”

From supporting entrepreneurs with their business planning to guiding transformative community development projects through engaged committees, the economic and community development initiatives in Lewistown anchored in WealthWorks are better positioning the city for success as a desirable place to raise a family, start a business, or spend time on vacation. By focusing on quality of place, creating good jobs, and building on local assets, Lewistown will continue to be at “the center of it all” in Central Montana for many years to come.

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## the wealthworks inventory



- ▶ **Individual:** Committee members are bringing their skills, expertise, and knowledge to these efforts; small business owners are sharing their insight and supporting each other and opening new businesses.
- ▶ **Intellectual:** Workshop participants are gaining a better understanding of the WealthWorks model and how to apply it to projects; local leadership training is building capacity; branding and tourism efforts in the region are promoting Lewistown's assets.
- ▶ **Social:** There is a legacy of collaboration and contributing time and money to community development projects; a “can do” attitude exists in the community to get things done.
- ▶ **Cultural:** Gatherings like the Chokecherry Festival on Main Street every September bring thousands of people to Main Street; there is a desire to mix old traditions with the new, as demonstrated through historic renovation at the brewery next to the site of the future Creekside Pavilion.
- ▶ **Political:** Snowy Mountain Development Corporation has long-lasting partnerships and relationships at the local, state, and federal level, as well as with the business community; many committee members working on these projects are involved in a variety of local leadership positions; the Lewistown City Commission has been supportive of the vision for the Creekside redevelopment.
- ▶ **Natural:** Lewistown is surrounded by a beautiful landscape and mountains ideal for outdoor recreation activities; the Big Spring River flows through town.
- ▶ **Built:** Main Street is home to many historic buildings that are adding new businesses; the brewery is in a formerly abandoned historic building and the Creekside Pavilion will be developed on a former industrial site; wayfinding signage will support with tourism initiatives.
- ▶ **Financial:** Support for many of these projects comes from a mix of partners including local and state sources, foundations, local donations, and more; the re-launched Port Authority is providing support to start-ups and encouraging business attraction and retention.
- ▶ **Local ownership and control:** New local businesses such as Sew Pieceful and Central Feed Grilling Company/Big Spring Brewing are growing in Lewistown, including those that are owned and operated by first time entrepreneurs. These businesses are meeting a demand for a variety of services and are ensuring that Lewistown remains a key regional shopping, retail, and entertainment hub.
- ▶ **Better livelihoods:** From supporting entrepreneurs with their business planning to guiding potentially transformative community development projects, the economic and community development initiatives in Lewistown are better positioning the city for success as a desirable place to raise a family, start a business, or spend time on vacation.

### Information sources:

[www.rcac.org](http://www.rcac.org)

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

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

[www.facebook.com/Creekside-Marketplace-and-Pavilion-1634922016564642/](https://www.facebook.com/Creekside-Marketplace-and-Pavilion-1634922016564642/)

[www.rcac.org/success-stories/sew-pieceful-in-lewistown-montana](http://www.rcac.org/success-stories/sew-pieceful-in-lewistown-montana)

Personal communication with Kathie Bailey (SMDC), Carol Cohen (RCAC), Tammy Eckhardt (Sew Pieceful), and Pam Higgins (RCAC).