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Peer Learning Network News

Inaugural Edition — April 2021

Welcome to the first monthly WeCAN Peer Learning Network newsletter!

We launched the WeCAN Peer Learning Network (PLN) in December 2020 to create a place for community leaders to ask for advice, share successes, and learn with like-minded people who understand the challenges of rural community development work. The PLN network is designed specifically to help leaders like you who have been engaged in the community review process connect with peers from other communities in your state and the three-state region (Idaho, Montana & Wyoming).

During our kick-off meeting, we broke out into three state planning sessions to discuss what we wanted to accomplish, how often to meet, what meeting formats to use, and how we'll know it's working. What emerged from each state is a monthly Zoom meeting, and the willingness to experiment with a variety of formats, selecting topics as we go along. The watchwords seemed to be flexibility, experimentation, relevance and engagement.

We agreed to meet a couple times a year as a region. Our next three-state meeting is in the planning stages for late summer or early fall 2021.



Six Discussion Formats PLNs Are Experimenting With

Mastermind — an open conversation prompted by one person or community team sharing a challenge they are wrestling with.

Community/project show & tell — a presentation about a community process or project, or a virtual field trip, followed by open discussion.

Networking rooms — breakout rooms to discuss issues of mutual interest and get to know other participants better.

Expert “rapid fire” — quick (e.g., 3-minute) introductions by topic experts that kick off an open conversation and Q&A

Expert presentation panel — an expert or small group do a presentation that kicks off a discussion and Q&A

Perspective sharing — open discussion and insight-sharing about a topic of mutual interest

Next State PLN Meetings

Idaho

May 12, 10-11 a.m. PT

Housing challenges in rural communities. A brief presentation on a study of second home owners will tee up participants sharing specific solutions or case studies that might be applied to address rural housing challenges.

Montana

May 28, 9:30-10:30 a.m. MT

Part II of a mastermind on community identity and branding that began with the April meeting.

Wyoming

May 5, 4-5 p.m. MT

Engagement & leadership

February

Topic: Childcare

Four resource panelists did three-minute introductions to themselves and their programs, and we heard about the ongoing work the Eastern Plains Economic Development Corporation has spearheaded to build a licensed childcare facility in Baker. An open conversation and Q&A followed.

Key conversation takeaways:

1. Dads need to be invited and involved in community efforts to address childcare.
2. The presenters can—and want to—help with specific challenges like recruiting childcare operators.
3. The Big Sky Trust Fund is an important source of funding for childcare studies and projects.

March

Topic: Space to Place/Creative Placemaking

Big Sky Economic Development in Billings shared program details and lots of great photos from the Billings [Space2Place](#) program, which challenges community members to imagine underutilized spaces differently through micro-grants to convert them into memorable and inviting places. And we went on a live video tour of Hillner Park, which the Lockwood Optimist Club has maintained for years, to see how they are applying creative placemaking principles to imagine new community-welcoming uses for different parts of the park and forge partnerships with Scout groups and other organizations to begin developing a butterfly garden and bird watching blind.

Key conversation takeaways:

1. Everyone walked away looking with new eyes at spaces in their community that could be transformed.
2. Murals seem like low-hanging fruit because they beautify spaces and create a buzz, but they are often better placemaking projects when they are combined with other features that encourage people to stop, linger and gather rather than just walk by.
3. There are many ideas for funding sources—community foundations, garden clubs, service organizations, community and business sponsorships, and economic development organizations, for starters.

April

Topic: Community Identity and Branding

Prompted by questions from Lockwood, this mastermind discussion focused on how to build community pride, identity and a brand, even when residents think there's nothing particularly special about their place.

Key conversation takeaways:

1. Working with outside facilitators and involving a cross-section of the community helps coalesce a brand.
2. Focusing on what's special to residents about their community is a good place to start creating an authentic brand.
3. Reviving tourism host training and Welcome Wagon-type committees was a key idea that emerged during the Reimagining Rural project. These efforts can be really grassroots like the ["We Speak" program](#), the



The Light Bike Trail (Billings, MT) is an in-progress, mapped, walkable and bikeable trail of 11 neon-lit bicycle art installations, running through downtown alleys. The project invites residents and visitors to explore parts of the community that are usually in the shadows. It received a Big Sky Economic Development Space2Place grant to kick it off. Photo: Downtown Billings Alliance

genesis of which is mentioned in this [video about Oakridge, Oregon](#). Oakridge pioneered “We Speak” to provide a way for visitors to connect with business owners and staff who have expertise in what the community offers (wildflowers, camping, rivers, etc.).

Wyoming

March

Topic: Getting more people involved in community projects

This mastermind discussion focused on challenges that Fort Laramie is facing with people expressing “I’m not working with THAT person” or “We tried that 20 years ago” or “Nothing ever comes of anything I don’t want to waste my time.” PLN members shared strategies that have worked for them and discussed common experiences.

April

Topic: Transition and change

This open discussion focused on how our communities are handling and managing change due to drivers such as COVID, new residents, etc. One takeaway: the need for continuing leadership education to build capacity of new leaders to take on change roles effectively.



Visit the [WeCAN PLN webpage](#) for news, detailed meeting notes, and updated learning opportunities.



Housing in Gateway Communities

Free webinar series on housing in gateway communities from the Gateway Natural Amenity Region Initiative (GNAR). The first session is in the books but there are several others still to come. High-quality facilitation, fascinating presenters and topic, and peer learning, to boot: usu.edu/gnar/gnarlyproblems

Net Inclusion Webinars

This free virtual conference meets very Wednesday through June 2, bringing together practitioners, advocates, academics, internet service providers, and policymakers to share information and insights about technology and broadband access. Learn more, register, and catch replays for the webinars you missed at digitalinclusion.org/net-inclusion-2021-webinar-series/

WeCAN Discount on Exploratory Scenarios Planning Course

Three 1 1/2 hour sessions, June 9-23, 2021. Learn to use Exploratory Scenarios Planning to engage your community on complex, pressing, high-uncertainty issues like over-tourism, rapid growth and development, the effects of climate change, economic change and volatility, inequity, and housing affordability. Register by April 30 for the lowest early registration fees and use the code WECAN for an extra \$40 discount. Learn more and register: harbingerconsult.com/exploratory-scenarios-planning

In the next newsletter

- More news from the state PLNs
- Mini-grant updates
- Results from our PLN priority topics survey

Questions? Contact your state facilitator

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