

Peer Learning Network News

May 2021

We're getting into our groove with the monthly WeCAN Peer Learning Network (PLN) newsletter. Look for it in your email inbox during the third week of each month!

Each month, the newsletter will provide updates from the state PLNs and a view forward to the next sessions, plus featured ideas and stories inspired by conversations and topics explored during our monthly meetings. Plus, we will share news from WeCAN, as well as resources for your communities and for you as community leaders.

If you have resources you would like to share or ideas for featured stories, please email them to Michele Archie (michele@harbingerconsult.com).



Food for Thought: The Abilene Paradox

During a recent Wyoming PLN meeting, there was some discussion about the Abilene Paradox—a reference to a situation in which a group makes a collective decision that is counter to the thoughts and feelings of its individual members.

The Abilene Paradox is named after a situation that occurred on a hot dusty day in Coleman, Texas. Four adult family members were relaxing on the front porch when someone suggested they go to Abilene for dinner. One by one, each family member indicated that they wanted to go. After the trip, one family member said she would rather have stayed home. Gradually, each family member revealed the same feelings. In reality, no one wanted to go.

Dynamics like this can be a sign that your community (or your organization, or maybe even your family) could use some practice handling conflict and agreement—or a perspective shift that encourages a healthier, more productive approach to communicating what we really want and handling disagreements and conflict.

Do you want to explore this further, on your own or with your community? The Southern Rural Development Center created an interactive unit on the benefits of public conflict. It includes a role-playing exercise about the Abilene Paradox and a handout that explores the paradox, group-think, and recognizing and overcoming false consensus. Download the unit [here](#).

Next State PLN Meetings

Montana

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

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

Wyoming

June 2, 4-5 p.m. MT

Topic: Leadership. Participants will find a resource (YouTube video, Ted Talk, etc.) that addresses leadership and share with the group.

Idaho

June 9, 10-11 a.m. PT

Topic: Workforce development and support, including housing, training and childcare. Childcare is the topic on tap for the July and August sessions.



PLN State Meeting Summaries

Idaho

May

Topic: Housing

Twelve peers continued the discussion on housing that began in March, expanding it to include the influx of new residents in rural communities and the need for more housing options.

Participants were enthusiastic about the idea of zone changes that could include Accessory Dwelling Units to increase housing stock within the existing sewer, electric and other infrastructure. The need to have planned, pro-active zoning was discussed to envision and get ahead of projected development pressures in rural places.

In many rural communities, long-term housing is needed to support locals, especially in resort communities where short-term rentals provide second home owners have a competitive market. In McCall, the Economic Development Council is spearheading a new experiment to provide second home owners with incentives like hotel and restaurant vouchers or ski rentals in exchange for renting their homes to local employees is gaining traction.

Other housing challenges include dispersed development, increasing stress and development needs on

infrastructure to serve development. The conversation included the concept of “boomers” driving the demand for dispersed larger square-footage housing, while there are shifting “generational” expectations of square footage, acreage, and the possibility for cluster development to increase shared undeveloped green space.

Diversifying planning and zoning boards to include multiple age groups was discussed to address some of the generational differences and ideas about housing needs and desires represented by diverse stakeholders in communities.

Key conversation takeaways:

1. Rising land prices, ecological impacts and changing housing preferences are calling into question the mentality of spreading out across the landscape.
2. Converting short-term rentals to long-term rentals is an attractive strategy for addressing immediate housing needs of communities—but it can require creative incentives and one-on-one relationship building with property owners.
3. Rural communities can look at urban solutions like requiring fewer parking spaces per dwelling unit, to encourage more residential use of buildings in town.

Montana

Watch this space

As we establish our new monthly schedule for the PLN newsletter, the May issue is out before Montana had its May meeting. Watch for that summary next month, and check out meeting reports from April and earlier in the [April PLN newsletter](#).

Wyoming

May

Topic: Engagement and Leadership

Guest speaker Tara Mastel, Associate Specialist in Leadership Development and Community Development Program Leader for MSU Extension, shared the outcome from a fall 2019 conference to elevate rural vitality and leadership development in Montana.

At that “Reimagining Rural” conference, presenter Ben Winchester talked about demographic trends since the 1970s. Across the U.S., the rural population influx tends to be people in their 30’s and 40’s, new to the region, and not those returning to a home town.

For many rural communities, maintaining a feeling of continuity and community culture can be challenging because young “local” people move away and don’t tend to come back. That means assimilat-

ing newcomers drawn to “go rural” by a simpler pace, cost of housing and living, and a good place to raise their families. (This is not solely a challenge. Families with kids can also be a target market, as can returning residents. Both of those are targets of Choteau, Montana’s community marketing efforts mentioned in the [April PLN newsletter](#).)

Focusing on leadership in rural communities, Tara Mastel reported an interesting analysis that Ben Winchester did on the need for rural leadership. For successful, sustained projects, he suggested, one in every 22 people must lead—by which he meant the capacity to run or contribute to organizations like government and

Food for thought...
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quasi-governmental boards or non-profit boards and committees.

In Park County, James Klassens reported that their community leadership program—now in its 15th year—has been indispensable in cultivating new leaders. Many of the alumni serve on community boards and councils.

Key conversation takeaways:

1. Leaders also need “doers” who are not necessarily leaders, but who share in the work of the community. These “doers” can be a source of future leaders, but they need the confidence to step into the role.
2. Burnout is real for community leaders because there are few people who tend to step up. (This is sometimes called the “same ten people” phenomenon.)
3. There are lots of leadership resources out there (TED Talks, YouTube, etc.) that PLN participants can help each other evaluate.



PLN Priority Topics

PLN participants in Idaho and Montana have weighed in on the topics they think are most important for the PLNs to take up. At the top of the list are many that have already been taken up, and some new ideas:

- Broadband in small towns and rural areas
- Housing — How to better understand needs + successful tools and projects
- Workforce — why businesses have problems finding employees and what to do about it
- Increasing post high school education opportunities
- Community branding and online marketing
- Childcare and support for parents and caregivers
- Eldercare and support for caregivers
- Improving local streets, sidewalks and trails — making communities safer and more enjoyable for walking and biking
- Finding new uses for empty commercial buildings
- How communities can better leverage resources and dollars
- Addressing community apathy and increasing engagement
- Sustaining volunteerism and helping volunteers become leaders

WEBINARS

Citizens' Institute on Rural Design

On-demand webinar replays on a variety of topics ranging from predevelopment and fundraising for rural design projects to creative placemaking, cooperation among rural communities, and local food economies: rural-design.org/webinars

Housing in Gateway Communities

Free webinar series on housing in gateway communities from the Gateway Natural Amenity Region Initiative (GNAR). The series started in April (replays available) and runs through early July: usu.edu/gnar/gnarlyproblems

Net Inclusion Webinars

Two more sessions left in this free virtual conference that meets every 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 (June or October) and Creative Placemaking (September) Courses

Special WeCAN discounts on two online courses for rural community leaders! 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. Or learn to use creative placemaking to leverage arts and culture to revitalize and reshape your community and allow for genuine public engagement. Use the code WECAN for a \$40 discount. Group discounts for two or more from the same community or organization. Learn more and register: harbingerconsult.com/online-courses

Other Resources

[How Four Rural Towns Are Building Vibrant Communities Through the Tools of Creative Placemaking](#) (Kim Kober-smith, The Daily Yonder, April 14, 2021). Creative Placemaking article focused on four rural communities, including the work of Mary Welcome, a self-described “artist-organizer” in the Palouse (eastern Washington) whose art focuses on community engagement.

Questions about the Peer Learning Network? Contact your state facilitator

Idaho: Melissa Hamilton mbhamilton@uidaho.edu

Montana: Gloria O'Rourke gloria@medamembers.org

Wyoming: Juliet Daniels juliet.daniels@uwyo.edu

Newsletter contributors

Michele Archie • Julie Daniels • Mellissa Hamilton • Gloria O'Rourke

Want to add something to the next newsletter? Contact Michele Archie michele@harbingerconsult.com

WeCAN collaborating organizations

Idaho Rural Partnership • Montana Economic Developers Association • Wyoming Business Council • Extension faculty at University of Idaho, Montana State University & University of Wyoming