

FORT BENTON COMMUNITY REVIEW PHASE II AND III

OCTOBER 29 – 30, 2019



Photo by Christopher Boyer, Kestrel Aerial Services

In Partnership with Fort Benton Chamber of Commerce, Chouteau County, City of Fort Benton, Bear Paw Development Corporation, Montana Dept. of Commerce, Central Montana Tourism, Montana West, and Montana Economic Developers Association.

A service of the Montana Economic Developers Association in partnership with Montana Department of Commerce, Montana State University Extension, the University of Idaho and the University of Wyoming.

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MEDA FORT BENTON COMMUNITY REVIEW

Phase II and III

October 29 – 30, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

Montana Economic Developers Association (MEDA), in partnership with Montana Department of Commerce and Bear Paw Development Corporation, has experienced an interactive partnership with the community of Fort Benton over the past three years.

MEDA was invited to bring a team of community and economic development professionals to Fort Benton in December 2016. The process was then called a MEDA Resource Team Assessment and consisted of: an area tour, multiple listening sessions, and a summarizing town hall meeting by the team. The team [wrote a report](#) on the issues brought up by the community which was complete with resources to assist in tackling various projects, then returned in March 2017 for a second town hall meeting to share the information and request volunteers to step up and tackle some of the issues.

The issues identified by those present included: Marketing Fort Benton; Hospital, Emergency Care; Housing; Value Added Agriculture; Fresh Food options; Day Care; Infrastructure; and Local Economy improvement, i.e., brewery. The team left Fort Benton and would be available to be called on and assist as needed.

Meanwhile, in 2018, Wyoming, Montana and Idaho were brought together by a grant written by Dr. Lorie Higgins, University of Idaho. Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho all have some sort of community assessment process; the grant brought the three states together to learn from each other and improve all aspects of a community assessment and outcomes. Each state now calls the assessment process a Community Review.

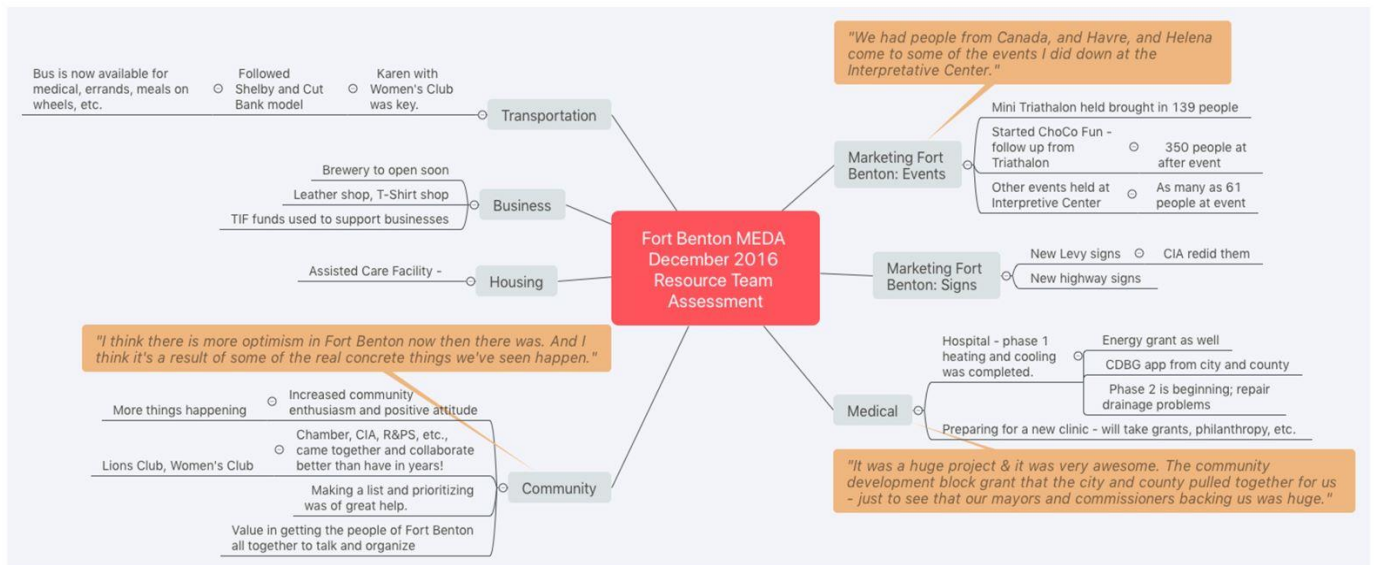
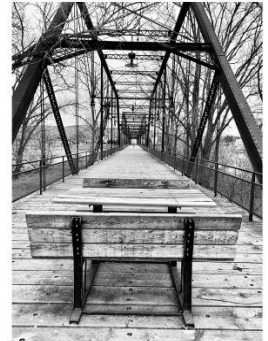
To extract best practices from previous Resource Team Assessments, the grant included visiting past assessment sites to conduct Ripple Effects Mapping (REM). Ripple Effects Mapping causes people to remember what was accomplished from a community assessment and the “ripples” that resulted from the efforts. MEDA worked with the Fort Benton Chamber of Commerce and arranged a Ripple Effects Mapping gathering in March 2019. The mapping was facilitated by Dr. Lorie Higgins.

While the messy map is pictured to the right, the computer application used allows the information to be added in a data format and is displayed below.





Fort Benton Resource Team Assessment Impacts



As Ripple Effects Mapping with Dr. Lorie Higgins was wrapping up, next steps became clear: use the expanded Community Review process and bring a team to Fort Benton to initiate Phases 2 and 3. The Fort Benton Chamber took the lead and submitted an application to the Montana Design Team.

The application was reviewed by the Montana Design Team and with the “go” from the MEDA Board as well as Bear Paw Development, plans were made and the date set for October 29 – 30, 2019.

In the application, the Fort Benton Chamber requested a Community Review Team to assist with action plans and resources on projects people could “get their arms around” and accomplish. Housing, or infrastructure, for example, are challenging issues for volunteers to make an impact. The identified topics for the Fort Benton Phase 2 and 3 Community Review included:

1. **Tourism** – Historic; developing a strategy for capitalizing on the birthplace of Montana, steamboat era, etc.;
2. **Tourism** – Off Season; bringing tourists to town in winter;

3. **Lodging** - Devise more lodging options to accommodate seasonal demands and/or desire for expanded tourism;
4. **Trail Expansion** – re-ignite and engage the community for trail projects and expansion.

Stacy Bronec, JoAnna Smith, Keith Ballantyne, Joellyn Clark, Montana Solum Fruit, and Casey Bailey agreed to work with MEDA to create an agenda, arrange food and lodging for the visiting team, advertise the event to the community and encourage community members to participate.

Gloria O’Rourke, Coordinator for MEDA, tapped shoulders of those in community and economic development that could assist with the above four named topic areas. The team for the Fort Benton Community Review included:

- Gayle Fisher, Central Montana Tourism, gfisher@bresnan.net, 406-761-5036 centralmontana.com
- Susan Joy, MT Dept. of Commerce, Made in Montana Program Manager, Susan.Joy@mt.gov, 406-841-2757
- Dorothy Meyer, Montana West, Marketing and Communications, dorothy@dobusinessinmontana.com, 406-257-7711
- Kacey Pilon, MT Dept. of Commerce, Infrastructure Program Specialist, Kacey.Pilon@mt.gov, 406-841-2708

Working with the Fort Benton Chamber, the Agenda was compiled.



FORT BENTON COMMUNITY REVIEW PHASE 2 OCTOBER 29-30, 2019

The Resource Team is back!

Let’s make progress on issues critical to Fort Benton:

Historic Tourism * Shoulder Season Tourism * Lodging Retention and Expansion * Trail Expansion

Tuesday, October 29, 2019

Community Bible Church Rec Building
1600 Main St.

Note: A tour of Fort Benton will be conducted with the visiting team from 10:15am to 11:45am.

Noon – 1:00pm Working Lunch	How we Got Here – What’s Next <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of the Fort Benton Phase 2 Community Review Team • Quick overview of how we got here Phase 1 Report and REM
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topics and Issues; Projects and Priorities from 2016/2017 • The new Community Review process • Agenda for Phase 2
1:00pm – 1:15	Break
1:15pm – 4:00pm	<p>CONCURRENT TOPIC SESSIONS</p> <p>1:15 – 1:45pm Affirm Topics and form Groups:</p> <p>Tourism – Developing a strategy for capitalizing on the birthplace of Montana, steamboat era, etc.; Tourism- Off Season – bringing tourists to town in winter; Lodging – more lodging options to accommodate seasonal demands and/or desire for expanded tourism; Trail Expansion – how to get the project moving forward.</p> <p>1:45pm – 3:30pm Identify and Prioritize issues; begin Action Plan Worksheets</p> <p>3:30pm – 3:45 Break</p> <p>3:45pm – 4:15pm Rapid Fire Report Out</p> <p>4:15pm – 5:00pm Visiting Team prepares for Social</p>
5:00pm – 6:00pm	<p>No host community social at brewery – Golden Triangle Brew Co., 1500 Front St. Community input and feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How we got here – what’s next • Action Plan report outs • Public input via chart paper notes • Invitation to join Working Groups or Steering Committee • Next Steps

Wednesday, October 30, 2019
Community Bible Church Rec Building
1600 Main St.

8:30am – 9:30am	<p>Working Breakfast</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debrief from Yesterday • Steering Committee Formation and Next Meeting(s) • Coach Selection • Mini-Grant Discussion • Next Steps: Phase 2 Report, Follow-up, etc.
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On October 29th, The team arrived in Fort Benton and experienced a tour of the area, including several incredible museums.



The team as well as community members gathered for lunch and began preparations for sorting out priorities and creating action plans. Paul Tuss, (standing in photo below) Executive Director, Bear Paw Development Corporation, gave an update on economic development activities in the area.



Participants divided into two main groups: Tourism and Trails. It was expected at some point that both groups would divide into smaller working groups to tackle specific projects.

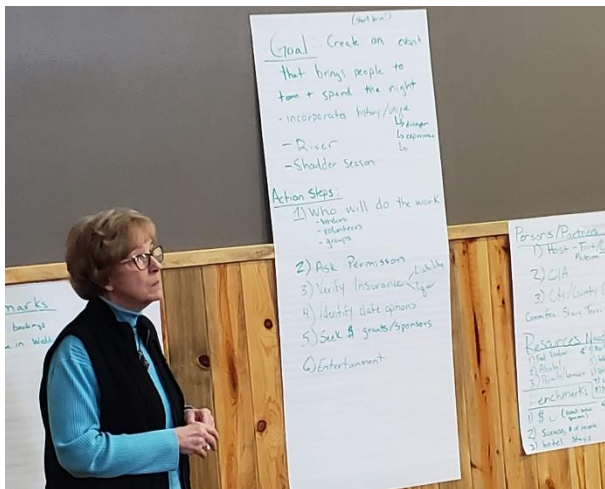
Gayle Fisher and Susan Joy facilitated the Tourism Working Group, below.



Dorothy Meyer, Kacey Pilon, and Paul Tuss facilitated the Trails Working Group, below.



After several hours of hard work, the groups reported out on the decisions made, resources needed, and created action item steps.

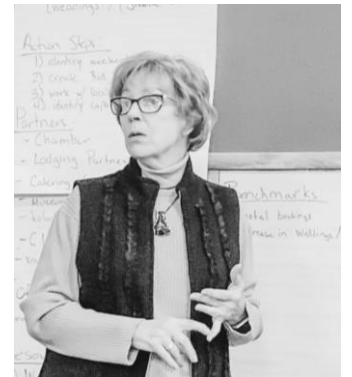


Above L to R: Gayle Fisher and JoAnna Smith report out for their Working Groups.

Rather than hold a formal town meeting to share the progress made, the working groups shared their chart paper notes during a social at the Golden Triangle Brewery. Individuals at the social were asked to join in the work by sharing contact information on Sign Me Up cards.

The morning of October 30th, the working groups gathered once again to fine-tune action plans, and take steps to launch Phase 3. In the new MEDA Community Review process, a Steering Committee is formed to serve as key leadership in keeping momentum going as outlined in the Action Plans. In addition, a Coach is selected to provide stability and support to the action teams as they begin their work together. Thanks to the three state grant project, a small stipend is available to support the coach position. Stacy Bronec agreed to serve as Coach in moving the working groups forward. Steering Committee members include Connie Jenkins, Jean Johnson, and Terri Baker.

In addition, as part of three state grant project, a mini-grant is available so that a community can accomplish a small project in a short time to build momentum and excitement for community progress. Those present were made aware of this option as well as the mini-grant that was made available from participating in the Ripple Effects Mapping process.



Visiting team members L to R: Kacey Pilon, Susan Joy, Dorothy Meyer, and Gayle Fisher.

The team members pictured above were tasked with writing a report consisting of resources and ideas reflecting the Action Plans of the Working Groups. The Action Plans and report follow. Next steps for the Fort Benton Community Review Team include providing support for the Coach and Steering Committee, following up on mini-grant projects, and delivering this report. Within a year to 18 months, the MEDA Community Review Team will return to Fort Benton and again conduct Ripple Effects Mapping to learn of all that was accomplished as a result of the Review....and celebrate Fort Benton's success.

ACTION PLANS

FORT BENTON WORKING GROUP ACTION PLAN

MEDA Community Review Phase 2 October 29 – 30, 2019

MAIN TOPIC TOURISM

ISSUE: Shoulder Season Visitor Increase – short term

Goal: Create an event that brings people to town and spend the night. The event should incorporate Fort Benton’s unique history, river, geography, dining, and experience. **Event:** TBD Triathlon, Dinner on the Bridge, or Night at the Museum

ACTION STEPS What you need to do to reach the goal	PERSONS OR PARTNERS RESPONSIBLE Who is responsible for each action step	RESOURCES NEEDED INTERNAL AND/OR EXTERNAL Resources needed to complete action steps	PROGRESS INDICATED = BENCHMARK How you know that you have made progress on each action step	COMPLETION DATE When you expect to complete each action step
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who will do the work: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Vendors b. Volunteers c. Groups – include all ages 2. Ask Permission 3. Verify Insurance – Liability and Liquor 4. Identify date options 5. Seek funding – grants and sponsors 6. Entertainment 7. Outreach – inclusive of all ages, groups, etc. 	Host - Fort/Chamber?/Museum CIA Cty/County Bridge Committee: Stacy, Terri	Food vendor Alcohol Permits/Insurance Marketing/Advertising Tables/Chairs/Décor Volunteers Entertainment Parking	Funds raised via ticket sales and sponsors Success in increased number of people Increased hotel stays Out of town attendance	Plans to be in place by March

FORT BENTON WORKING GROUP ACTION PLAN

MEDA Community Review Phase 2 October 29 – 30, 2019

MAIN TOPIC TOURISM

ISSUE: Shoulder Season Visitor Increase – long term

Goal: Improve visitation to Fort Benton in the shoulder season by appealing to small market conferences, conventions, and weddings.

ACTION STEPS What you need to do to reach the goal	PERSONS OR PARTNERS RESPONSIBLE Who is responsible for each action step	RESOURCES NEEDED INTERNAL AND/OR EXTERNAL Resources needed to complete action steps	PROGRESS INDICATED = BENCHMARK How you know that you have made progress on each action step	COMPLETION DATE When you expect to complete each action step
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify best weekends 2. Create bid sheets/event sheets 3. Work with local clubs and businesses 4. Identify capacity resources 5. Consider community calendar to share dates and events "Gather Board" – include school, hotels, businesses, etc. 6. Identify tour bus stops, if possible, prior to arriving 	<p>Chamber Lodging Partners Catering/Food/Beverages Museum/Fort</p> <p>Volunteers for booths at show – Bob</p> <p>CIA Venue related services – sound, IT, floral, tents, hair/makeup for weddings, transportation, rentals</p> <p>Officials Committee: Stacy, Connie, Jean, Terri</p> <p>Re: 5 – include school, hotels, businesses, newspaper, etc.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Welcome packet/Bid sheet - Gayle to Stacy 2. Funding to attend shows 3. Funding for marketing, postage, printing 4. Stacy's time 5. Coupon book for packets 	<p>Hotel bookings</p> <p>Increase in weddings and groups</p> <p>One new conference in 2020</p>	<p>This fall and ongoing</p>

FORT BENTON WORKING GROUP ACTION PLAN

MEDA Community Review Phase 2 October 29 – 30, 2019

MAIN TOPIC

TRAILS

ISSUE Build involvement and build trails

Goal: Re-energize and re-form the trails committee; seek answers and set action items to improve trails in and around Fort Benton.

ACTION STEPS What you need to do to reach the goal	PERSONS OR PARTNERS RESPONSIBLE Who is responsible for each action step	RESOURCES NEEDED INTERNAL AND/OR EXTERNAL Resources needed to complete action steps	PROGRESS INDICATED = BENCHMARK How you know that you have made progress on each action step	COMPLETION DATE When you expect to complete each action step
1. Form Trails Committee	Casey and Stacy	Existing list of people	Meeting takes place	Within two weeks
2. Data a. Collect data: map, information, trails resource people b. Create public document to post in brewery/coffee shop c. Donation box d. Facebook donation tab (Casey and Brandon)	Casey – Google Docs sharefile			
3. Connect a. BNSF – Maia LaSalle b. Three Forks - Gene Townsend c. National Rails to Trails Conservatory - Kevin Mills	a. Henry b. Brandon c. JoAnna	Katie Schuler (Engineer) BNSF Nat'l Rails to Trails Get Fit Great Falls Gallatin Valle Land Trust – Peter Brown	People will be contacted	Within a week
4. Online Training – Grant	Amanda	MT State Parks Rec Trails	Webinar completed and information shared	11/13/19
5. Kickoff Trails Committee meeting at Brewery	Tourism Group and Trails Group, Trail Advocates	Maia, Gene Townsend, and other important Stakeholders	Date set, people contacted	Before Thanksgiving

VISITING TEAM REPORTS

REPORT BY:

- Susan Joy, Montana Dept. of Commerce, Made in Montana Program Manager, Phone: 406.841.2757, Email: Susan.Joy@mt.gov
- Gayle Fisher, Central Montana Tourism, gfisher@bresnan.net, 406-761-5036
centralmontana.com
- Dorothy Meyer, Montana West, Marketing and Communications,
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MAIN TOPIC: TOURISM

Focus Area: Shoulder Season Visitor Increase – Short Term

Create an event that brings people to town and creates an overnight stay in a lodging property. The event should incorporate Fort Benton's unique history, river, geography, dining, and experiences.

Previous meetings identified tourism as a seasonal industry in Fort Benton and an important topic to work on in future discussions. Fort Benton has sites of interest to visitors such as Old Fort Benton, the Fort Benton Museums and Heritage Complex, Old Fort Benton Bridge, statues of Shep and the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and Missouri River Breaks Interpretive Center.

Visitors travel through Fort Benton in the summer months, with Summer Celebration a large and important summer event. Other events, such as a triathlon, museum gatherings, and concerts also increase visitation to Fort Benton in the summer.

The tourism working group discussed events and ideas to attract visitors during summer and the shoulder seasons (spring, fall), that result in an overnight stay. The working group reviewed lodging tax collections from previous years and quarters as presented by Gayle Fisher, Executive Director, Central Montana Tourism Region. This information supports the anecdotal evidence that most visitors come to Fort Benton during summer months. The group discussed events that highlight important features of Fort Benton such as the river, history, and unique experiences.

Gayle Fisher shared: If an event lasts longer in the day (possibly an evening event or 2-day event) the greater the chance is that visitors will overnight. If they spend the night they can explore the community more, possibly spending money in restaurants or retail stores. Make the event unique – one idea discussed was dinner on the bridge or dinner inside the old fort. Weather is a concern so backup plans would need to be developed. Keep it high-end and unique – a dinner could have a farm to table focus. People will pay more for something like this. The Missouri River runs through town.

Take advantage of that and consider a spartan/type event. A triathlon could be held again with something water based, biking or running. A stand up paddlefest could be considered.

Action Steps Identified:

The working group plans to create a committee to identify the event leaders, stakeholders, potential vendors, entertainment, volunteers (including youth groups), and audience. The event committee will take the lead on planning and executing the event. Two members of the working group volunteered to be the inaugural members of the event committee – Stacy Bronec, with the Fort Benton Chamber of Commerce, and Terri Baker, a member of the community and city representative.

The newly formed event committee's most challenging action step will be to identify an event that appeals to visitors and Fort Benton residents and will result in an overnight stay. Event ideas include a triathlon utilizing the Missouri River, Dinner on the Old Fort Benton Bridge, or a Night at the Museum/Old Fort Benton. The committee will select a date and in-town location during a fall or spring month that does not conflict with other planned events in the community or region and compliments the chosen event. The committee will secure the necessary permissions and permits from city or county, verify insurance (liability, special event, liquor), and seek funding (grants and sponsorship) to support the event.

Short list of suggested tasks:

- Committee formed with member roles of Vendors, Volunteers, and Groups
- Permission to hold the event from the leading entity such as: City, County, State, Business; with appropriate requirements to be done – permits, license, rental fee, etc.
- Verify Insurance for liability and liquor
- Identify different date options across the local and state level to stave off competition
- Seek different sources of funding – grants, sponsors, donations, etc.
- Entertainment
- Outreach – inclusive of all ages, groups, etc.

The committee identified additional resources necessary to make the event successful including a marketing and advertising strategy, parking options, food and alcohol (catering), volunteers, supplies, law enforcement, medical support/EMT (critical for triathlon) and tables/chairs/decorations. The committee plans to start meeting soon and will have their event plan set by March 2020.

The committee will measure success by the number of tickets sold, money raised, overnight stays compared to previous events/dates, out of town visitors, and size of attendance.

Recommended Resources to Tap:

The resources recommended varies by type of event chosen by the event committee.

1. Tourism Event Grants: The Montana Department of Commerce, Office of Tourism and Business Development offers event grants based on available funding. For information visit

<https://marketmt.com/Grants>, or contact Michele Cushman, Tourism Grants Program Manager, 406-841-2796 or mcushman2@mt.gov.

2. Central Montana – use Central Montana tourism region resources to plan a successful event that doesn't compete with other events in the region, market the event in cooperation with other events in the area. Centralmontana.com
3. Arrivallist Data – information collected from travelers to help tourism partners create and support a marketing strategy. Information available by tourism region or county. <https://marketmt.com/Programs/Marketing/TourismResearch>
4. Fort Benton community – this is the richest resource: utilize the experience in the community – work with museum, chamber, local businesses, city, volunteer groups to form a committee of experienced and excited individuals. Youth groups might be interested in helping for a small donation to their organizations.
5. Wolf Point Chamber of Commerce and Fairview Chamber of Commerce both do special events on the historic bridges in their town. Contact them for ideas and tips on how to host a dinner or special event on or near a historic bridge. <https://www.wolfpointchamber.com/>
<https://www.visitmt.com/listings/general/chamber-of-commerce/fairview-chamber-of-commerce.html>
6. City/county planners would be able to help with permits, licenses and insurances required.
7. For a river event check with BLM who conducted the other triathlon and will also have knowledge of permits. Does River Mile 1 begin at the Fort or at the launch? Would BLM be willing to assist? Involve them and their staff and volunteers.
8. Great Falls Montana Tourism (Grant funding is possible, and they have indicated in the past that they would help pay for shuttle service to and from Great Falls for different events)
9. Farmers and ranchers for locally sourced products:
Montana Department of Agriculture | <https://agr.mt.gov/Topics/Agritourism/FairsEvents>
Agritourism is where agriculture and tourism intersect. The MDA may have resources and connections to help market an agriculture-based event.

Focus Area: Shoulder Season Visitor Increase – Long Term

Improve visitation to Fort Benton in the shoulder season by appealing to small market conferences, conventions, and/or weddings.

Fort Benton holds year-round appeal with its picturesque nature and welcoming spirit - an advantage to those looking for an authentic Montana experience. Marketing to small meeting and wedding planners should be done strategically, with certain measures in place before contact such as creating itineraries for small meeting groups including scavenger hunts, local business tours, team-building exercises, etc. For weddings, highlighting and creating key spots for photographers to use as backgrounds and backdrops that capitalize on Fort Benton's history, small town charm and geography. Marketing collateral will need to be made and distributed along with a website page that is dedicated to the target markets.

The working group discussed ways to increase tourism in the shoulder season – specifically the months of September, October, April, and June. Bed tax collection information shared by Gayle Fisher, Central Montana tourism, highlighted strong bed tax collection during summer months, and low collections during the remainder of the year. Gayle Fisher noted the wedding market has proven to be somewhat successful in Fort Benton and could increase if promoted. A wedding at the Grand Union Hotel typically brings in enough guests to fill that lodging property and also spills over into other lodging in town, in addition to restaurants/bars.

Members of the group discussed event ideas, but also want ways to generate overnight stays without the stress of hosting labor intensive events. Members notice when tour buses come to town, but they don't know when those buses are coming. More businesses could be open, including the visitor center and museums, if residents knew when to expect a tour or group of people.

One idea is to intentionally invite people to Fort Benton, as opposed to waiting for a group to arrive without notice. Fort Benton is a unique location with the amenities to host small conferences and conventions or weddings.

Action Steps Identified:

The working group identified people to form a committee to work on recruiting small market meetings and weddings to Fort Benton. This new committee includes Stacy Bronec, Connie Jenkins, Jean Johnson, and Terri Baker.

Gayle Fisher will share a welcome packet/bid sheet with Stacy. Stacy will use this information to create a bid sheet relevant to Fort Benton. This bid sheet will include the number of lodging properties and rooms, catering (including alcohol) options, venue options (IT, floral, sound, tents, chairs, tables, officiants), decorators, stylists (hair, makeup, clothing), transportation, rentals, etc.

Stacy will need financial support to travel to bridal shows or tourism related shows to market Fort Benton as a destination. Stacy will also need financial support to design, print, mail, and email the bid sheets/welcome packets to prospective groups and individuals. Bob Milford volunteered to staff a booth at relevant wedding and trade shows.

The new committee will work with the chamber, school district, lodging properties and other businesses to create a community calendar and share with each other when groups come to town, and plan for increased operating hours when groups arrive or spend time in town.

Businesses will work with the chamber to create welcome packet coupon books or giveaways to encourage shopping/spending in Fort Benton. The committee will know they were successful with the booking of one new group (wedding, meeting, or conference) in 2020, a correlating increase in hotel rooms, and an increase in the number of meeting and/or wedding inquires.

Recommended Resources to Tap:

1. Google Montana Nonprofit Association, Montana Secretary of State, Montana Chamber of Commerce lists: Identify all the business associations, nonprofits, groups and chapters that have annual meetings in the state of Montana or regionally. Contact the president or secretary of those groups with a bid sheet, inviting them to Fort Benton.
2. Fort Benton community – this is the richest resource: utilize the experience in the community – work with museum, chamber, local businesses, city, volunteer groups to form a committee of experienced and excited individuals. Community members involved in the museums – perhaps the museums can open at special times to accommodate group tours (consider that they are not heated when they are closed).
3. Gayle Fisher, Central Montana tourism region. Use her as a resource of groups to contact, tips to attract a group, bid/welcome sheet, conventions/conferences to attend. gfisher@bresnan.net, 406-761-5036.
4. Potential funding partners - lodging facilities, caterers
5. City planning – any permits needed for unique venues (like weddings on the bridge or levee)
6. Photographers – wedding photos, particularly in unique venues
7. Katalin Green | 406.581.3594 | katalin@katalingreen.com | katalingreen.com Montana Bride, Poppy Bride, Katalin Green Designs Katalin Green is a premier planner with a full service event and design studio in Bozeman. Katalin travels throughout Montana, out of state and worldwide to plan weddings and other events. She owns a dress shop, is a florist, has a design studio, and is also the publisher and editor of Montana Bride – a wedding planner resource guide. Katalin has a fondness for Fort Benton and has expressed interest in holding a wedding on the Fort Benton Bridge. She

would particularly like to expand her reach into Central Montana to capture the spirit of the prairie in her planning – with emphasis on the agricultural elements found in the landscape. •

8. Great Falls Montana Tourism | 406.761.4436 The Team at Great Falls Montana Tourism would be beneficial to partner with to bring small conferences to Fort Benton, especially when overflow in Great Falls occurs. Great Falls Tourism already offers Fort Benton as a destination place in their marketing, which will make it easier to establish a referral relationship.
9. Small Market Meetings | kelly@grouptraveller.com | www.smallmarketmeetings.com An advertisement in this publication may prove fruitful. The website also has resources for planning tools and meeting ideas.
10. Small Market Meeting Conference | 800.628.0993 | <https://smmconf.com/> A national organization for small to medium sized groups that holds conferences designed to build relationships between meeting planners and destinations.
11. Gatherboard | www.gatherboard.com A customizable and monetizable online event calendar platform designed to unite & strengthen communities based out of Missoula. Used by the Flathead Beacon, Montana West Economic Development, Great Falls Montana Tourism and other organizations across Montana.



REPORT BY:

- Dorothy Meyer, Montana West, Marketing and Communications, dorothy@dobusinessinmontana.com, 406-257-7711
- Kacey Pilon, MT Dept. of Commerce, Infrastructure Program Specialist, Kacey.Pilon@mt.gov, 406-841-2708
- Gloria O'Rourke, MEDA, gloria@medamembers.org, 406.563.5259

MAIN TOPIC: TRAILS ~ BUILD INVOLVEMENT AND BUILD TRAILS

Focus Area: Re-energize and Re-focus Trails Committee; Seek Answers and Set Action Items to Build Trails in and around Fort Benton.

A group of folks in Fort Benton feel very passionately about expanding the trail system in and around town. This will have a positive impact on downtown local businesses and tourism surrounding the river front. Some preliminary actions have been taken with draft trail plans completed by a local architect.

Action Steps Identified:

The Trails Committee is on the way to being re-grouped with a few priority actions items in place. The key factor that needs to happen before involving more of the public or much more in the planning phase, is if the railroad tracks are even open to being abandoned by BNSF. If not, the trail along the railroad tracks would be a moot point to even pursue, with a reassessment needed for other opportunities. The impact of expanding the Trail in Fort Benton would be felt not just by those in tourism related industries, but in businesses throughout the community. Trail-related events would attract overnight and surrounding area visitors that would increase hotel nights, gas and food purchases, and boost retail shopping. Locals would benefit with added outdoor recreational opportunities that are family-oriented.

Initial steps in the action plan includes reaching out to a BNSF employee who would be favorable towards the Trail; and with her involvement and insider knowledge, approaching BNSF on the idea of abandoning the tracks would likely have a better chance for a positive outcome. Making connections with other trail experts and enthusiasts were added to the action plan and are being followed up on for assistance with the following:

- Explanation of the Rails to Trails process
- Engineering and design of the trail
- Available grants and funding opportunities

- Fiscal sponsorship for 501c3 status
- A designated spot for all trail-related materials and information will be placed in a prominent, public place to garner interest, with a fundraising event and updated Facebook page to elicit donations once the go-ahead on track abandonment is official. Deadline to have most of the above action plans finished or in motion is before Thanksgiving, 2019.
- Danae Giannetti, Research Engineer, Western Transportation Institute, Montana State University, is interested in putting together a team to visit Fort Benton. Phone: 406.994.7031; Email: danae.giannetti@montana.edu. Danae and colleagues were invited to attend the Community Review but were unavailable at this time.

Recommended Resources to Tap:

1. Gene Townsend | 406.580.3012 | d239gene@yahoo.com Former Mayor of Three Forks, Montana, City Councilman, Retiree and Community Volunteer. Gene was the brainchild of the Headwaters Trail System – a 12 mile, paved network of trails that runs along the former Milwaukee Railroad bed through the city of Three Forks to the Missouri Headwaters State Park. The trails cost nearly \$1,000,000 and were implemented exclusively using donations and grant funding, all instrumented by Gene Townsend’s efforts. Future plans are to extend this trail to the town of Manhattan and other parts of Gallatin Valley. In March of 2019, the Headwaters Trail received national recognition as a gateway trail for the Rails to Trails Conservancy Grand American Rail-Trail Route – one of only four trail locations nationwide. As a former Three Forks resident and friend of Gene, I contacted him on behalf of the Trail Committee and he is willing to provide his expertise and assistance in helping with the Fort Benton trail project.
2. Maia LaSalle | 406.265.0215 w | 406.399.0330 c | BNSF Manager Market Support/Ombudsman for Montana and Wyoming Maia is the suggested point-of-contact for BNSF. Having Maia on board with the project to act as a positive representative may help with having BNSF abandon the tracks needed. Maia can also be instrumental in making sure that BNSF is well-represented in all marketing and promotional materials as a strong supporter of the trail, and to provide historical information when needed.
3. Kevin Mills | kevin@railstotrails.org Vice President of Policy, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Developing a relationship with Kevin will help gain the support from the Rails-to-Trails organization with mentorship and guidance on how best to proceed with receiving an abandonment of the track from BNSF and on best practices if the abandonment comes to

fruition. Another name was provided by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks: Kevin Belanger, Trail Planner, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, 2121 Ward Ct NW, 5th Floor, Washington, DC 20037, kevinb@railstotrails.org, 202-974-5117 Contact Michelle (MT FWP, 406-444-7642) if you need assistance in reaching Kevin.

4. Get Fit Great Falls | 406.454.6950 Get Fit Great Falls is a unified community action group that promotes the benefits of healthy lifestyles to the citizens of neighboring Cascade County and city of Great Falls with approximately 24 participating partners from area schools, government agencies, non-profits, and local businesses. The group coordinates 17 hikes for National Trails Day – the largest number of National Trails Day hikes in the country. Making connections with the group and the organizations that are involved (City of Great Falls Park & Rec, Cascade County Health Department, Cascade County Extension Service, Montana State Parks, Lewis & Clark National Forest, Montana Wilderness Association, Cascade County Commissioners, Gateway Community Services, Great Falls Public School, Great Falls College, Peak Health & Wellness Center, United Way, Action for Healthy Kids, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, etc.) would be beneficial once the expanded trail project is underway for event planning and community involvement assistance.
5. Katie Schuler | 406.788.8370 Civil Engineer at Sletten Construction in Great Falls, former Construction & Planning Project Manager for the Montana Department of Administration in Helena. Katie is a Fort Benton native and keenly interested in building Fort Benton’s economy. She has indicated that she would like to be involved in community improvement projects. Katie is an outdoor recreationist whose field of expertise would be invaluable on the Trail Committee.
6. Peter Brown | peter@gvlt.org Stewardship Director at Gallatin Valley Land Trust • River’s Edge Trail Foundation | trailboss@thetrail.org The River’s Edge Trail Foundation’s mission is to provide trails for people to explore Great Falls’ outdoor opportunities and to improve the community’s quality of life. The River’s Edge Trail provides almost 60 miles along both sides of the Missouri River in Great Falls. Connecting with board members from the River’s Edge Trail Foundation to gain insight into how they worked together creating the trail and how they currently collaborate with agency partners to develop, extend, and maintain the trail will be a huge asset.

7. Cathy Costakis (costakisce@gmail.com) is eager to work with Fort Benton and would welcome a call. She is interested in forming a group to conduct a “walk audit” for the area. Cathy shared about NPS Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program which has a grant program for technical assistance to help with trails planning (particularly if there is a river involved). Their applications are due June 30 but they suggest that you contact them ahead of time to see if the project would fit. Broadus applied (after BACI) a year or so ago and got it. They come to your community and help with a variety of issues related to trails. <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/rtca/apply.htm>

8. Michelle McNamee, Recreational Trails Program Manager, MT Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, joined the Trails Committee Working Group via phone on October 29th. She welcomed any calls from Fort Benton and would be glad to share about her grant funds.
(406) 444-7642 | michelle.mcnamee@mt.gov

9. The Action Plan from the committee’s work October 29th and 30th has been shared with Danae Giannetti and Rebecca Gleason, Western Transportation Institute, MSU. They are looking forward to a call from the Fort Benton Trails Committee. Contact: Danae Giannetti, P.E., Research Engineer I, 406.994.7031 danae.giannetti@montana.edu; Rebecca Gleason, MS, P.E., Research Engineer II, 406.994.6541 Rebecca.Gleason1@montana.edu

CLOSING

While lending the Coach and Steering Committee encouragement, MEDA will also anticipate receiving a mini-grant application from the Steering Committee. As part of the MEDA Community Review, Fort Benton is eligible for up to \$1,500 to kick-start and/or support a project involved with this Review.

It was the privilege of the MEDA Fort Benton Community Review Team to spend time in your amazing community. Fort Benton has been gifted many unique attributes; with people full of passion to build a better community, there is no doubt a bright future is ahead for Fort Benton. The team looks forward to returning within 18 months to celebrate your success.

Do not hesitate to contact the MEDA office for assistance should you need it as you complete your action : 406.563.5259 or email gloria@medamembers.org. This report is made available at <https://www.medamembers.org/resources/community-reviews>. All the best to you, Fort Benton.