

COMMUNITY  
**RESOURCE**  
TEAM  
ASSESSMENT  
REPORT

*for*

Laurel

*Field Assessment of July 11 – 12, 2007*

*In Partnership with Beartooth RC&D/CRDC, Big Sky EDA,  
Montana Department of Commerce, Community Matters, LLC; Eureka Rural  
Development Partners, Montana Economic Developers Association,  
Laurel Chamber of Commerce, City of Laurel, and the people of Laurel.*

## Thanks to so many from all of us.

**L**AUREL provided us a warm welcome and deep thoughts about it's future, it's challenges, and it's concerns. While some of the team have been coming to Laurel all of their lives, we learned far more than we expected to, and the team members who'd never been to Laurel were deeply impressed with what the community's achieved over the years and the potential they readily saw here. Laurel's hospitality and organization in making this process were remarkably well thought out and executed while the retired fire chief's tour quality would leave a CNN field reporter in the dust.

Before digging in to the report itself, I would like to give recognition to the terrific partnerships that made the Laurel Resource Team Assessment possible. Beartooth RC&D is the Certified Regional Development Corporation (CRDC) for Laurel. Montana Department of Commerce (MDOC) funds the CRDC program to encourage a regional approach to economic development to facilitate the efficient delivery of economic development programs. Beartooth RC&D/CRDC and Big Sky EDA have taken this mission to heart and serve the region in a true partnership. Working together, Beartooth RC&D and Big Sky EDA assisted Laurel's local leadership in making the assessment a reality.

In addition, support and training for the Resource Team Assessment process is provided by Montana Economic Developers Association (MEDA). Laurel is the 32<sup>nd</sup> community to benefit from this program.

Special thanks are due to the local leadership and volunteers in Laurel that worked with Dianne Lehm, Rebekah Wales, and Steve Zier of Big Sky EDA: Tour guide Darryl McGillen, Owl Junction Café/ Linda Frickel and Dirk Frickel, Best Western lodging, D.J.'s Palace /Shawna Gradwohl, Laurel Outlook/Milt Wester, , Laurel Ford/ Steve Solberg, Laurel Chamber / Joanne Flynn, Ace Hardware /Dean Rankin, Laurel Task Force, City of Laurel,/Mayor Ken Olson and City staff, and the Billings Gazette.

The Resource Team members each put in easily 40 hours of high-demand time (*we only recruit very busy people*) and will spend weeks catching up, but felt Laurel was worth it: James Klessens, Community Matters consulting in Joliet, Tracy McIntyre, Eureka Rural Development Partners (that's almost two days driving just to get to Laurel!) Lynn Muncy, Beartooth Resource Conservation & Development Area headquartered in Joliet; Karyl Tobel, grants administrator at the Montana Department of Commerce headquarters in Helena, and Gloria O'Rourke, the Executive Director for the Montana Economic Developers Association (as well as the Montana Ambassadors and the coordinator for the Montana BEAR/Business Expansion & Retention program.) A study like this by this caliber of folks runs a community \$30-100,000 and typically relies on far fewer interviews and much shorter tours. I've been on the hosting end of those and it's always disturbing to me when a stranger tells me talking to 4 or 5 folks, driving around for a half hour, and looking at Census data will show them what a town needs, it's character, and what it can do. I discover significant new things about my hometown and it's neighboring community every week, often every day. A pessimist tends to be very ill-informed about most things while an optimist looks further.

**You'll notice we disagree, emphasize different things, and mention different resources.** Unlike normal reports where one opinion usually determines all of the final content and positions, we've kept this reflective of each team member's own thoughts. It's

messier, but it's considerably more useful to you. Partly that's a reflection of how we put the team together, to avoid "group-think", but mostly it's a reflection of **there is no "ONE GREAT WAY to community health/economic development success"** even though folks seem to expect one and many projects pretend to be that. Looking to see where the roads have led other towns can help you choose your fate, but there will always be surprises, opportunities, and what appear to be insurmountable challenges. *The greatest danger is just drifting along (think about how well driftwood does compare to a still rooted tree, let alone an orchard...)*

**E**ach team member's contact information is provided in the following report. Please feel free to call on any of us for additional information or support; it's actually disappointing not to hear from the community on an idea or point.

**T**his report is for the people and community of Laurel to use as a resource for what they chose to do. The emphasis here is **WHAT LAUREL CHOOSES TO DO**, not what happens to Laurel or what is allowed or what's the path of least resistance. In the past few decades Laurel has been transitioning from a tightly-knit railroading and refining town to a much more diverse and fragmented place that's mistakenly called a bedroom community (there aren't many jobs or good jobs in bedroom communities, that's Laurel's difference.) *Laurel is actually in a very enviable position for most communities as it has many choices and so much in place to build on.* The whole team agreed on that after the tours, even the much disparaged city streets were admired by most of the team in comparison to their own streets back home!

The team will return to Laurel in September, 2007 to facilitate a Project and Prioritizing Town Meeting that will enable the people of Laurel to take on action items, armed with the ideas and resources provided in this report.

Laurel's fate is in it's own hands, not Billings, Yellowstone County, Montana Rail Link/BNSF, Cenex Harvest States, Wal-Mart, or the other "usual suspects." Thanks for asking what we thought and we hope this report helps the citizens of Laurel choose their future.

*Al Jones,  
Laurel Resource Team Leader  
Regional Development Officer for South Central Montana  
Montana Department of Commerce  
August, 2007*



Laurel Resource Team: from left to right: James Klessens, Al Jones, Karyl Tobel, Lynn Muncy, Gloria O'Rourke, and Tracey MacIntyre.

### **How was this report put together?**

According to Montana Department of Commerce program requirements, Resource Team Assessments are to be coordinated through the community's Certified Regional Development Corporation. Beartooth RC&D, headquartered in Joliet, fills this roll for *Yellowstone, Sweet Grass, Big Horn, Stillwater and Carbon Counties*. Al Jones, SouthCentral Regional Development Officer for the Montana Department of Commerce served as the Resource Team Leader for the project. Montana Economic Developers Association (MEDA) provided staff support for the coordination of a resource team to assist Laurel in evaluating its assets and challenges and in developing suggestions for improving the environment, social and economic future of the area.

**Joanne Flynn, Ken Olson, Shawna Gradwol, Linda Frickle, Dean Rankin, and Jerry Bauck** formed the nucleus of the Laurel host team and worked closely and creatively with **Dianne Lehm, Rebekkah Wales and Steve Zeier** of Big Sky EDA, **Chris Mehus** from Beartooth CRDC, and veteran resource team member **Al Jones** on identifying and reaching listening groups to represent the community broadly and deeply, agenda development, logistics, budgeting and publicity for the assessment were arranged. Resource team members were hand-picked and then recruited to fit their personal expertise's to Laurel issues already broadly identified (housing, infrastructure, business, dealing with big neighboring cities) to visit, interview citizens, businesses and community leaders to develop options for projects for Laurel.

The Resource Team interviewed over 50 people during hour-long listening sessions and received written comments from over 150 people. All notes from all listening sessions as well as a summary of those submitted via email or handwritten are included in this report.

The team was available for listening to the following groups: *Youth and School, Educators and Seniors, CHS, MRL, Unions and Utilities, Business, Retail, Consultants, Services, Artists and Cottage Industries, First Responders, Banking, Government Services, City Council, Planning Board, Medical and Agriculture, Manufacturing and Chamber of Commerce, Church and Civic Organizations, Realtors* and the community at large.

Each participant was asked to respond to three questions designed to begin communication and discussion and to serve as a basis for developing recommendations in this report.

The three questions everyone was asked were:

- ❖ **What do you think are the major strengths and assets in Laurel?**
- ❖ **What do you think are the major problems and challenges in Laurel?**
- ❖ **What projects would you like to see completed in two, five, ten and twenty years in Laurel?**

Upon completion of the interviews, extensive tours, and reading the written responses of another 150 folks (thanks to the blazing keyboarding of Rebekkah Wales) The team then looked for what big themes and patterns had emerged already and gave a quick preview of their analysis to about 60 folks who gathered at DJ's on July 12 to hear how it'd went.

Following the oral report, this formal written report was prepared and is presented to the people of Laurel. Copies will be made available in print and electronically.

**The report is available on the MEDA website at <http://www.medamembers.org/resourceteams.php>**

A Town Hall Meeting is planned for early September to review the report with the people of Laurel and to identify projects and set priorities for action.

**Want to contact us?**  
**the Laurel RESOURCE TEAM**  
**with questions, comments, ideas, projects, etc.**

Team Leader: Al Jones  
Title: Regional Development Officer  
Agency: Montana Dept. of Commerce  
Address: 2004 Miles Ave.  
City/State/Zip: Billings, MT 59102  
Phone: 406.655.1696 Fax: 406.655.0899  
Email: [aljonesrdo@bresnan.net](mailto:aljonesrdo@bresnan.net)  
Web: <http://www.commerce.mt.gov>

Team Member: James Klessens  
Title: Owner  
Agency: Community Matters, LLC.  
Address: P.O. Box 289  
City/State/Zip: Joliet, MT 59041  
Phone: 406.962.3484 Fax: 406.962.3483  
Email: [jdklessens@aol.com](mailto:jdklessens@aol.com)

Team Member: Tracy McIntyre  
Title: Program Administrator  
Agency: Eureka Rural Development Partners  
Address: P.O. Box 1951  
City/State/Zip: Eureka, MT 59917  
Phone: 406.297.7374  
Email: [tracy@eurekardp.net](mailto:tracy@eurekardp.net)  
Web: <http://www.eurekardp.net>

Team Member: Lynn Muncy  
Title: Coordinator  
Agency: Beartooth RC&D  
Address: P.O. Box 180  
City/State/Zip: Joliet, MT 59041  
Phone: 406.962.3914 Fax: 406.962.3647  
Email: [lynn.muncy@mt.usda.gov](mailto:lynn.muncy@mt.usda.gov)  
Web: <http://www.beartooth.org>

Team Member: Karyl Tobel  
Title: Section Manager  
Agency: Commerical Loan Fund/MDOC  
Address: P.O. Box 200505  
City/State/Zip: Helena, MT 59620-0505  
Phone: 406.841.2733 Fax: 406.841.2731  
Email: [karyl@mt.gov](mailto:karyl@mt.gov)  
Web: <http://www.commerce.mt.gov>

Process Facilitator: Gloria O'Rourke  
Title: Coordinator  
Agency: MEDA  
Address: 118 E. Seventh St., Suite 2A  
City/State/Zip: Anaconda, MT 59711  
Phone: 406.563.5259 Fax: 406.563.5476  
Email: [gloria@medamembers.org](mailto:gloria@medamembers.org)  
Web: <http://www.medamembers.org>

## Laurel Community Assessment Schedule

**Wednesday, July 11, 2007**

<u>Group</u>	<u>Location</u>
7:30 – 9:00 a.m.	Team Orientation/Breakfast
9:30 – 12:00 p.m.	Tour of Town
12:00 p.m. – 1:00 pm	Lunch
1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.	Listening Session
	Youth Groups and School Groups
2:45 – 3:45 p.m.	Listening Session
	Educators and Seniors
4:15 p.m. – 5:15 p.m.	Listening Session
	CHS, MRL, Union Groups, Utilities
5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.	Listening Session
	Business Sector, Retail, Consultants/Services, Artists and Cottage Industry
6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.	Dinner for Team
8:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.	Listening Session
	Fire Department, First Responders

**Thursday, July 12, 2007**

7:30 a.m. – 8:00 a.m.	Breakfast	City Hall
8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.	Listening Session	City Hall
	Banking	
9:15 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.	Listening Session	City Hall
	Government Services, City Council, Planning Board	
10:45 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.	Listening Session	City Hall
	Medical and Agriculture	
12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.	Lunch	Owl
1:15 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.	Listening Session	City Hall
	Manufacturing , Chamber Of Commerce	
2:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.	Listening Session	City Hall
	Church Organizations Civic Organizations Realtors and Community at Large	
3:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.	Prepare for Town Meeting	City Hall
5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.	Working Dinner	DJ's
7:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.	Town Meeting	DJ's Palace

# The Most Obvious Main Issues

The following list is a summary of main topics and issues that result from the Laurel Resource Team listening to the community of Laurel address strengths, challenges and their vision for Laurel and then very quickly drawing major themes so don't consider this a comprehensive list and ones that surprise you may be reflective of just a few people bringing it up during the listening sessions.

## **MAIN TOPIC: BUSINESS EXPANSION AND RETENTION**

### **ISSUES:**

- **Marketing program**
  - **Niche marketing**
- **Rail**
- **Airport Business relocation**
- **Refinery and manufacturing**
- **Consumer services**
- **Hospitality**

## **MAIN TOPIC: INFRASTRUCTURE**

### **ISSUES:**

- **Water**
- **Wastewater**
- **Storm Water**
- **Airport**
- **Streets**
- **Sidewalks**

## **MAIN TOPIC: ANNEXATION**

### **ISSUES:**

- **Planned growth**
- **Contiguous lands**
- **Zoning**

## **MAIN TOPIC: AMENITIES**

### **ISSUES:**

- **Community Center/Recreational Opportunities**
  - **Youth**
  - **Swimming**
  - **Skateboard**
  - **Gathering place**
  - **Indoor Movie Theater**
- **Fund raising opportunities**
- **Wellness program (emerging resource locally.)**
- **Emergency Services: Fire, Police, Ambulance**

## **MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY**

### **ISSUES:**

- **Pride of community**
- **Community Focus**
- **Volunteer development**



- County relations
- Communications
- Leadership development

#### **MAIN TOPIC: HISTORICAL PRESERVATION/TOURISM**

##### **ISSUES:**

- Signage
- Events
- Historical buildings
  - Tax credits
- Cultural tourism development
  - Museum?
- Destination marketing/Branding

#### **MAIN TOPIC: DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT**

##### **ISSUES:**

- Business Climate
- Entry ways
- Streetscape
- Traffic
  - Alternative routes/access
  - Vision

# LAUREL RESOURCE TEAM

## What did each team member come up with?

### REPORT BY:

**KARYL TOBEL**

**Karyl Tobel, Section Manager  
Montana Department of  
Commerce/Business Resources  
Division**

**P.O. Box 200505**

**Helena, MT 59620-0505**

**Ph: 406.841.2733 Fx: 406.841.2731**

**Email: [karylt@mt.gov](mailto:karylt@mt.gov)**

**<http://businessresources.mt.gov/>**

### INTRODUCTION:

It was a pleasure to have the opportunity to experience the many assets of the City of Laurel. Laurel has a population of very caring people and great civic pride. The community is thriving and experiencing economic and residential growth. The close proximity to Billings is a mixed blessing, and is affecting the type of growth that Laurel is experiencing.

Laurel has found a niche that makes it unique – the 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks display, which brings in visitors numbering 3-4 times the City's population! The team was told that beautiful Christmas displays also draw crowds in December. It is a clear observation from driving around Laurel, that citizens are proud of their properties and community parks – and Laurel has a lot to be proud of!

### ***MAIN TOPIC: INFRASTRUCTURE***

#### **1) ISSUE: STREETS**

With the construction of a WalMart Super Center, continued housing growth, and new businesses, Laurel is

experiencing traffic congestion. Upon completion of the new WalMart, the City will have a heavy stream of traffic to and from the freeway entrance which could bottleneck with the outlay of the existing road infrastructure. Even with the addition of a 3<sup>rd</sup> traffic light in Laurel, the City is going to suffer traffic jams and an increase in auto-related accidents.

Many comments were made regarding the condition of the City's roads, that there were large pot holes and repairs needed. With increased traffic there will be an increased need for maintenance and repairs, and a need for more funding to keep Laurel's road infrastructure in top shape.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

The City could apply for a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) planning grant to hire a consultant to complete a road infrastructure study that would inventory the City's roads, conditions, and traffic patterns. The study could determine a course of action to address the additional traffic flows and need for road improvements and construction. With the same planning grant, the City could consider completing a Capital Improvements Plan (CIP) to set-up a schedule for traffic flow improvements, road repair, for construction of additional routes – or update an existing infrastructure CIP – and identify funding resources to complete improvements.

Once planning is completed and a project is identified, the City can apply

for public facilities funding to complete a project to address increased traffic flow, make road improvements, build alternative routes and related transportation issues.

**RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following person/program for information on annual competitions for planning grants and funding for public facilities projects. Visit the programs' website for additional information:

Gus Byrom, Program Manager  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
Public Facilities and Housing  
301 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2777  
Email: [gbyrom@mt.gov](mailto:gbyrom@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://comdev.mt.gov/>

technical assistance grant to hire a consultant to complete a sidewalk and lighting inventory. This study could address existing sidewalks and lighting, determine the need for upgrading, new installation, pedestrian traffic, accessibility, styling, and costs. If the City does not have a CIP for sidewalk and lighting, a planning grant can help pay for an installation and maintenance schedule, or update an existing infrastructure CIP.

Once planning is completed, the City can apply for funding to make the improvements to sidewalks and street lighting.

**2) ISSUE: SIDEWALKS AND STREET LIGHTING**

Residents and business owners gave concerns about the condition, or absence of the City's sidewalks and street lighting, especially in the downtown business district. With an increase in pedestrian traffic and cars through Laurel there will be a greater need for the City to attract and retain business activity downtown. Not only are sidewalks and adequate lighting safety factors, they also provide visitors with an attractive and welcoming downtown. Improvements, such as period lighting, can enhance the "flavor" of the business district and help attract new retail opportunities.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The City could apply for a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)

**RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following people/programs for information on annual planning grant competitions, and project financing. Visit their websites for additional program information:

Gus Byrom, Program Manager  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
Public Facilities and Housing  
301 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2777  
Email: [gbyrom@mt.gov](mailto:gbyrom@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://comdev.mt.gov/>

Karyl Tobel, Section Manager  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
Economic Development  
Commerce Loan Fund  
310 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2733  
Email: [karylt@mt.gov](mailto:karylt@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://businessresources.mt.gov/BRD/CDBG.asp>

Ross Tervo  
Community Transportation  
Enhancement Program  
Montana Department of  
Transportation  
2701 Prospect Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-444-9209  
Email: [rtervo@mt.gov](mailto:rtervo@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://www.mdt.mt.gov/business/ctep/default.shtml>

**3) ISSUE: AIRPORT**

Laurel is proud of its airport, a well maintained facility in a scenic

location, that can store and service small aircraft that would otherwise fly to Billings. The airport needs a reliable water source before it can consider an expansion, or create an industrial park with related businesses in a cluster development project. Currently, the airport uses well water which does not have adequate flow for fire protection, and could not support any type of industrial growth.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The City could apply for a CDBG planning grant to hire a consultant to complete a preliminary engineering report (PER) to address the extension of water and/or sewer service to the airport property. A PER would provide detail on flow requirements, system impacts, user fees, cost of construction, and annexation (if applicable). If the City desires to explore the possibility of facilitating an industrial park with related businesses at the airport property, a feasibility study can be performed with a CDBG planning grant also. An airport with satisfactory water flow can attract related and support businesses that would enhance the service ability of the airport, and provide a stronger tax base for the City.

If the City secures a commitment from a business that wants to locate to the airport property and can create jobs, financing for water and sewer extensions can be financed by the CDBG program.

**RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following person for information on annual competitions for planning grants and public facilities financing related to economic development projects. Visit the

programs' website for additional information:

Karyl Tobel, Section Manager  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
Economic Development  
Commerce Loan Fund  
310 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2733  
Email: [karylt@mt.gov](mailto:karylt@mt.gov)  
Website:  
<http://businessresources.mt.gov/BRD/CDBG.asp>

### ***MAIN TOPIC: ANNEXATION***

#### **ISSUE: PLANNED GROWTH, ZONING**

While touring Laurel, it is clear that new houses are being built and many more people are moving to the City and its surrounding areas. Laurel is finding additional challenges providing public services such as police and fire protection to developments that are not annexed into the City. New County subdivisions have community water systems or individual well and septic systems. Although these systems may work satisfactorily when new, aging systems are going to need replacement and maintenance, sooner if contamination occurs.

New subdivisions use City-owned streets, send their kids to public schools, utilize the public library, and need public services. While this brings increased business to local vendors, many of the people building the new homes don't work in Laurel. This type of growth development edges the City into a 'bedroom' community for Billings. While the

new construction enhances the attractiveness of the City, it also poses some social problems for residents, such as, a need for more continuity and sense of community for those living on the outskirts of town.

The police and fire departments expressed a need for increased funding to support current services, and the challenge to provide adequate services to a growing community. With increased population the City is experiencing more crime, more accidents, and additional areas needing fire protection. Laurel has an intelligent and dedicated emergency force that clearly expressed a genuine concern for providing the best service possible to their community – with limited resources.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

The City could consider applying for a planning grant to hire a consultant to complete a plan for the annexation of outlying subdivisions and the airport property (if applicable). The City does have an existing growth policy which addresses annexation – this would take the growth policy further and create a plan of action. The City should also contact the Community Technical Assistance Program for information on subdivision planning and zoning. The program has many publications available related to community planning. Annexation of outlying areas would increase the revenue to the City that would support increased services.

#### **RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following people/programs for information on annual planning grant competitions, and visit their websites for additional program information:

Gus Byrom, Program Manager  
Community Development Block Grant  
Program  
Public Facilities and Housing  
301 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2777  
Email: [gbyrom@mt.gov](mailto:gbyrom@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://comdev.mt.gov/>

Dave Cole  
Community Technical Assistance  
Program  
Community Development Division  
301 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-8421-2776  
Email: [dcole@mt.gov](mailto:dcole@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://comdev.mt.gov/>

***MAIN TOPIC: DOWNTOWN  
REDEVELOPMENT AND  
TOURISM***

**1) ISSUES: ENTRYWAYS,  
STREETSCAPES**

Laurel citizens expressed concern over the appearance of their downtown business district. Sidewalks need to be repaired, lights need to be added, store fronts need work, and better signage would enhance the appearance of the streets, and make finding businesses more user-friendly.

Several people stated that the City does not have 'Welcome to Laurel' sign(s) in location(s) to give a good first impression of the City. Attractive signs would provide an incentive for travelers to stay a while, and allow for the anticipation of the great things Laurel has to offer. Attractive, well made welcome signs set the tone for a traveler's visit.

It was stated more than once that Laurel is a much used 'hub' for traffic traveling to Yellowstone. One person stated that Laurel receives more traffic at its interchange than any other interchange in Montana. Mainstreet Laurel has good restaurants and businesses. With the construction of WalMart, there will be even more people stopping in Laurel to patronize local businesses. There needs to be an incentive for cars to drive through downtown to stop, gas-up, have lunch, and shop before leaving the City.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Laurel should concentrate on revamping its business district with new facades, sidewalk repair, attractive lighting, and landscaping. Laurel has the ability to really shine and attract new business entities – maybe even a movie theater again. Being adjacent to a larger City does not necessarily mean a smaller City can't attract retail dollars (i.e. Whitefish). It takes planning and more than all else, follow-through with planning efforts.

Having well made, attractive welcome signs at freeway entrances will set Laurel apart and showcase its uniqueness. Signage could show that Yellowstone Park is not far away, historic battlefields are close, and that there are places to stop at and things to do while in town. Colorful signs should direct people to various community assets and entice them into getting out of their cars and walking around Laurel.

Does Laurel have a bike path? More than one person expressed the need for a museum. What does Laurel want to be known for – what would be the City's theme? A current

downtown business redevelopment study should be done that explores these issues, sets a plan, identifies funding, and has a schedule for completion. Planning is only good if there is follow-through.

The City could apply for a CDBG planning grant to hire a consultant to complete a downtown redevelopment study and plan of action. Once planning is in place, the City could apply for funding to upgrade building facades, sidewalks, lights, and signage.

**RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following people/programs for information on annual planning grant competitions, and project financing. Visit their websites for additional program information:

Karyl Tobel, Section Manager  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
Economic Development  
Commerce Loan Fund  
310 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2733  
Email: [karylt@mt.gov](mailto:karylt@mt.gov)  
Website:  
<http://businessresources.mt.gov/BRD/CDBG.asp>

Ross Tervo  
Community Transportation  
Enhancement Program  
Montana Department of  
Transportation  
2701 Prospect Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-444-9209  
Email: [rtervo@mt.gov](mailto:rtervo@mt.gov)  
Website:  
<http://www.mdt.mt.gov/business/ctep/default.shtml>

**2) ISSUE: TOURISM**

Attendants at the community listening sessions expressed the desire for a museum that would not only catalog historical items for the community, but also be a draw for visitors. Laurel is a railroad town, but there is no outward focus to make a connection between the railroad and the City.

Laurel has demonstrated that it can quadruple its population on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Citizens are proud that the City can draw that many people to come see a spectacular fireworks display (put on by a dedicated all-volunteer fire department). It was expressed that the City draws large crowds during the holiday season to view Christmas displays.

As an ‘outsider’, hearing that a town can draw this many people for events, it is a wonder why vendors don’t capitalize on the opportunity to make potentially great revenue from visitors that have needs (food, drink, shade, clothing, souvenirs).

**RECOMMENDATION:**

In an effort to draw more people to downtown, the City should explore funding for a museum. Residents and industries have many items to donate or lend to a museum, with many stories to share. The public schools and library can be of assistance enlisting the collection, cataloging, and displaying of artifacts. Maybe the railroad or refinery could donate a piece of property to the City for this purpose. An existing building can be moved and renovated to house the museum. This would be an undertaking, but well worth it. Some of the smallest towns have beautiful

museums reflecting a collective effort to showcase a proud history (i.e. Fort Benton and Deer Lodge).

There are public and private funds available for museums, sources can be obtained from the Grant Service Center, MSU Billings. Fundraising efforts can raise money for building renovations or display cases. The town can hold ice cream socials, craft sales, chili feeds, anything to raise money for this effort. The key to fundraising is saturating the media with announcements about fundraising events, distributing posters, word of mouth.

In preparation of community events such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, vendors should be prepared and fully stocked to sell items visitors need and have cash-in-hand to buy, such as water bottles, ice cream, visors. The Team was told that you couldn't even buy a water bottle on the 4<sup>th</sup> as most of the businesses were closed. Here's an opportunity to have open doors, sidewalk sales, street vendors, you name it. Does the parade go down the main street? Time the shop hours with the parade – the customers are there already there and have money to spend.

Christmas displays bring people to town? Have a well publicized, Christmas Stroll downtown with open businesses, vendors selling cider, special sales, coupons and giveaways that bring people into each vendor's business, period dressing for local merchants. Laurel can do this. With Billings only 10 miles away, there are over 100,000 potential customers waiting for a chance to enjoy a day in a town where they can make memories for their children and families.

The City should seek funding and technical assistance for community promotion can be obtained from the Montana Department of Commerce.

#### **RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following people/programs for information on annual planning grant competitions, and visit their websites for additional program information:

For potential museum funding, contact:

MSU Billings  
Grant Service Center  
1500 N. 30<sup>th</sup> Street  
Billings, MT 59101-0298  
Phone: 406-657-2266

For information on tourism promotion, contact:

Betsy Baumgart, Division  
Administrator  
Travel Montana  
Montana Promotion-Tourism  
301 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2870  
Email: [bbaumgart@mt.gov](mailto:bbaumgart@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://travelmontana.mt.gov/>

#### ***MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY***

##### **1) ISSUE: LEADERSHIP**

Citizens expressed repeatedly the need for better communication between local leadership, citizens, volunteer groups, and civic organizations. Community development projects become a reality and dreams to fruition when there is strong leadership and communication. Leadership occurs at all levels and is needed among volunteer groups, local



government officials, and citizens. Laurel can turn its community into showplace with thriving businesses, healthy families, job opportunities, and a solid future with strong leadership.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The City can consider sending one or more people to attend a Heartland Center for Leadership Development, Helping Small Towns Succeed training. This training focuses on how to help small towns thrive, focus on the assets it has, and plan ways to capitalize on local talent. Heartland has many success stories for communities under a thousand people. The same principles can be applied to communities the size of Laurel.

**RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following person/program for information on leadership training:

Milan Wall  
Heartland Center for Leadership Development  
Phone: 800-927-1115 or 402-474-7667.  
Email: [info@heartlandcenter.info](mailto:info@heartlandcenter.info)  
Website: <http://www.heartlandcenter.info/institutes.htm>

***MAIN TOPIC: AMENITIES***

**1) ISSUE: COMMUNITY CENTER**

Many comments were made about the need for a community center, a gathering place. Laurel has many children that need activities during the summer months and there is no youth center to house them after school, or to provide them with activities during the summer months.

Laurel does not have a Boy's and Girl's Club or Big Brother/Big Sister program.

The medical community expressed a desire to connect better with the City – wanted more wellness programs and involvement with Laurel citizens.

Many people said they missed their indoor movie theater, which burned down a few years ago – and has never been rebuilt.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The City could consider applying for planning grant assistance to complete a preliminary architectural report (PAR) for a community center. A community center would help bring citizens together, provide a safe place for children to gather and enjoy educational programs. Community centers can access public funding better if they are multi-purpose types of facilities, in other words, that are not only for weddings and parties, but provide real services to the community. Head Start program can utilize the center at specified times. Youth groups can have movie night and be used for summer youth programs. The medical community can sponsor flu shots, diabetes clinics, and health and wellness awareness programs for all Laurel citizens.

The City could also consider applying for grant assistance to fund the construction of a new community center, or renovation of an existing building to house the community center.

**RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following person/program for information on

planning grant assistance and project funding for community centers:

Gus Byrom, Program Manager  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
Public Facilities and Housing  
301 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2777  
Email: [gbyrom@mt.gov](mailto:gbyrom@mt.gov)  
Website: <http://comdev.mt.gov/>

**REPORT BY: TRACY McINTYRE**  
**Tracy McIntyre, Project Administrator**  
**Eureka Rural Development Partners**  
**PO Box 1951**  
**Eureka, MT 59917**  
**Ph: 406-297-2374 Fx: 406-841-2731**  
**Email: [tracy@eurekardp.net](mailto:tracy@eurekardp.net)**  
**<http://www.eurekardp.net>**

**2) ISSUE: SWIMMING POOL**

Citizens explained that the Laurel public pool is crowded and filled to capacity with eager children most summer days. With an increase in the number of children and residents moving to Laurel, there is an increased need for a larger pool.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

If the City wants to build a larger pool, it should focus on fundraising efforts and seek additional financing from a private foundation or endowment. The small town of Geraldine (population 200) built a stainless steel pool and pool house from fundraising efforts. Swimmers pay \$1.00 to swim in Geraldine, which goes to pool maintenance.

**RESOURCES:**

Please contact the following office for information on private and public organizations that provide funding for swimming pools:

MSU Billings  
Grant Service Center  
1500 N. 30<sup>th</sup> Street  
Billings, MT 59101-0298  
Phone: 406-657-2266

**INTRODUCTION**

First, let me start by thanking you for opening your community to me. I truly enjoyed the experience and was deeply impressed by the hospitality and friendliness of the community. The Laurel community is rich with pride and is a great community to visit and live.

***MAIN TOPIC: BUSINESS EXPANSION AND RETENTION***

**1) ISSUE: BUSINESS RETENTION**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Laurel should tap into the very successful BEAR program that the Big Sky EDA is operating. Through interviews and information gathered during the BEAR process Laurel should be able to determine what the true business climate and needs are outside of the refinery. Through this process they may also be able to redevelop their down town and complete the future impact of having the Wal-Mart addition in their community.

You may also want to explore bringing in educational programs that address

-----

workforce retention, e-commerce development, cash flows, and other programs. The Flathead Job Service partnered with the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce to develop a Brown Bag Seminar program. The Brown Bag Seminars are usually once a month over the lunch hour and cover a variety of business topics related to business retention.

Other sources that the Laurel community should invite to assist them with expanding and retaining businesses are the SCORE-Small Business Councilors of America and the local Small Business Development Center. One of our strongest partners in the Lincoln County BEAR program is the MSU Extension Service.

**RESOURCES:**

Mora McCarthy  
Flathead Job Service  
406-758-6241  
[mmccarthy@mt.gov](mailto:mmccarthy@mt.gov)

Rebecca Helvik  
Business Advisor, Billings  
SBDC

222 N. 32<sup>nd</sup> Street  
Billings, MT 59101  
406-254-6014 ext. 223  
[helvik@bigskyveda.org](mailto:helvik@bigskyveda.org)

SCORE-Billings Chapter  
815 S. 27<sup>th</sup> Street  
Billings, MT 59101  
406-245-4111  
Web: [www.montanascor.org](http://www.montanascor.org)

Yellowstone County MSU  
Extension  
217 North 27th St., Room 106,  
Courthouse  
P.O. Box 35021  
Billings, MT-59107-5021  
(406) 256-2828

**2) ISSUE: BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/TOURISM**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

For those businesses that are more dependent on retail and tourism the community may want to look into developing a Laurel website that could have different pages. I recently attended the Northwest Economic Development Course in Washington State and one of the ideas presented to us is to have a community e-bay type web site. The website would have three pages each with a different focus; 1<sup>st</sup>: would be the “mall” page catering to businesses selling wares, 2<sup>nd</sup> would be the “community garage sale” for residents whom are not operating a licensed business and finally 3<sup>rd</sup> would be an “auction” site for not-for-profits to auction off donated items from the community as fundraisers. This would also be a great opportunity to entice visitors to view the shops and community in real life. Plus, if one organization in the community would take this program on, then not all the individual business owners would have to take courses to learn e-commerce trading.

**RESOURCE:**

Jim Mooney, President  
DeSCo  
2553 Calaveras Drive, Suite  
165  
Valparaiso, IN 46385  
219-548-9999  
[jmooney@descosolutions.com](mailto:jmooney@descosolutions.com)

*\*\*\* please note: I am not sure if Jim will charge for his services or not. You may want to do a web search first to see if you can find similar community websites.*

information regarding the WASACT training.

## **MAIN TOPIC: INFRASTRUCTURE**

### **1) ISSUE:**

#### **WASTEWATER/WATER**

A number of residents talked about their roads and how bad they are.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Though I saw some areas that could use improvement, my recommendation would be to focus on getting the infrastructure under the roads improved, expanded and upgraded first. Though they are making some major upgrades to their water system, they have not looked beyond the interior of the city limits and may want to start planning for future water and wastewater expansion projects. Given how long it takes to obtain funding for the planning, then the planning, followed by obtaining funding for construction and finally the construction itself, it is never too early to start planning for expansion. A number of residents mentioned wanting to have a water tower north of town to serve the new growth areas and the potential development at the airport. If this is truly needed then they need to get someone to the WASACT training and start the planning process. I recommend that the Town of Laurel contact Gus Byrom and discuss their water and wastewater needs with him as well as someone within the Montana DEQ in order to determine where their actual environmental concerns are. Gus was very helpful when the Town of Eureka began their planning process. He arranged for us to visit him in Helena and brought in all the other agencies that would be involved including TSEP and Montana DEQ. He also will be able to get you

### **RESOURCE:**

Gus Byrom, Program Manger  
Community Development Block  
Grant Program  
Public Facilities and Housing  
301 S. Park Ave.  
406-841-2777  
[gbyrom@mt.gov](mailto:gbyrom@mt.gov)  
web: <http://comdev.mt.gov>

Lisa Huff, Administrative  
Assistance  
Treasure State Endowment  
Program  
PO Box 200523  
Helena, MT 59620-0523  
406-841-2790  
[lhuff@mt.gov](mailto:lhuff@mt.gov)

Bob Fisher  
Montana DNRC  
Resource Development Bureau  
1625 11<sup>th</sup> Ave.  
PO Box 201601  
Helena, MT 59620-1601  
[rfisher@mt.gov](mailto:rfisher@mt.gov)

Billing's USDA RD offices may also be a valuable source of information regarding the water/wastewater upgrades, expansion project.

### **2) ISSUE: AIRPORT**

I think that expansion of their airport would be a great boom for the Laurel community as long as the development of it is what the residents want. I am a little concerned because the airport is pretty close to the community as is, and what I saw was that the growth of Laurel was continuing to move north towards the airport. This could cause a problem as residential growth expands to the area with noise and

safety needs that come with airport expansion.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

With that said, I think they should determine if they have a true need for the potential business park and if they could attract maybe aerospace/air companies. It might be worth contacting the Montana Aerospace Development Association and get their opinion on expanding the Laurel airport and also see if the business park can become more air technology based, which would bring in uniqueness to marketing their potential business park. I would recommend that they talk with their County Commissioners to find out if there is a chance to develop a tax increment district around the airport in order to obtain some capital financing for growth and expansion of services.

**RESOURCES:**

Tax Increment Financing: Mae Nan Ellingson  
and Whitney LLP  
Office  
Street  
MT 59802-4451  
6025

[Missoula@dorsey.com](mailto:Missoula@dorsey.com)

Airport Expansion/Business Park:  
Mike Drewski

USDA Business Cooperative  
Programs

Rural Business Enterprise  
Grant or Opportunity Grant

PO Box 850

Bozeman, MT 59917

406-585-2554

[Michael.Drewiske@mt.usda.gov](mailto:Michael.Drewiske@mt.usda.gov)

John Rogers

Economic Development  
Administration

406-449-5380

[jrogers@eda.doc.gov](mailto:jrogers@eda.doc.gov)

Kelly Schmitt

Community Development Block  
Grant

Economic Development

310 S. Park Ave

Helena, MT 59620

406-841-2735

[kschmitt@mt.gov](mailto:kschmitt@mt.gov)

Angela Nelson, Program  
Manager

Big Sky Economic Development Trust  
Fund

406-841-2792

Web:

<http://businessresources.mt.gov/BRDTrustfund.asp>

***MAIN TOPIC: ANNEXATION***

**ISSUE: PREPARING FOR ANNEXATION**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Any time a community looks at Annexation, it is bound to cause conflict. However, without annexation the City of Laurel is limiting their ability to expand and improve their services including funding for much needed and used services like the Fire Department and the Police.

I found it very interested that the entire time we were there was very little (if any) discussion on how interaction of County and City. Again, I recommend that the City of Laurel (or a local development organization) talk with Gus Byrom about planning and annexation. They should also talk with a lawyer before beginning any process as well as develop a plan for why they are annexing, what would the increase in costs to the residents outside of City Limits and how they would provide services to those areas.

I think they should at least get their own water system into the Town limits as well as getting the refinery into the community for a larger tax base. If that is going to cause a problem then maybe there is a way to work out an agreement with the County to receive some of the taxes received from the refinery. I think that if they could at least annex in portions so the Town has clearly defined town limits as it would

eliminate confusion and better the overall community togetherness.

**RESOURCE:**

Gus Byrom, Program Manger  
Community Development Block  
Grant Program  
Public Facilities and Housing  
301 S. Park Ave.  
406-841-2777  
[gbyrom@mt.gov](mailto:gbyrom@mt.gov)  
web: <http://comdev.mt.gov>

***MAIN TOPIC: AMENITIES***

**1) ISSUE: POOL/RECREATION CENTER**

There was a lot of discussion and mention of needing a new swimming pool.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

On a personal note I think that type of an amenity should not overshadow other needs like a new fire department or dispatch/police center. If the community really wants to explore a new rec/swimming pool facility I would recommend that they research other communities that have experienced building such a facility. MEDA recently was in Cody, WY where they have a wonderful community recreational facility. I would strongly recommend that the residents that are really wanting a swimming facility determine who needs to come together, determine who would build and (the key here) manage such a facility, who covers the liabilities, who will use it, fee structures etc. I think a lot of people claimed they wanted it but I have to ask, who is willing to put in the work and the funding to get one?

**RESOURCES:**

Paul Stock Aquatic and Recreation  
Center  
1402 Heart Mountain Street, P.O. Box  
2200 Cody, Wyoming 82414  
Telephone: 307.587.0400 Fax:  
307.587.2565  
[codycity@cityofcody.com](mailto:codycity@cityofcody.com) or  
[rob@cityofcody.com](mailto:rob@cityofcody.com)

**2) ISSUE: FIRE  
DEPARTMENT/EMERGENCY  
SERVICES**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

I recommend the Town of Laurel connects to the State delegation offices in that area and begin working on funding opportunities for emergency services. I know that both Sen. Baucus and Rep. Rehberg have people on staff that can help find funding opportunities. I think the Fire Department has a strong volunteer crew but will need to consider planning for the future and determine how they will convert to a combo (paid/volunteer) department and how to continue recruiting volunteers while others are paid.

I actually think that the conference coming up in Great Falls, the Heartland Center, may be of help in how to attract the youth into the community, retaining workforce and that should help them in recruiting volunteers and possibly paid firefighters. At such a conference they should be able to network and find out how other communities have made the transaction. Also, I think the Fire Department should contact Mike Drewski with the State USDA office directly and discuss the Communities Facilities Grant and Loan program with him.

**RESOURCE:**

Mike Drewski  
USDA Business Cooperative  
Programs  
PO Box 850  
Bozeman, MT 59917  
406-585-2554  
[Michael.Drewiske@mt.usda.gov](mailto:Michael.Drewiske@mt.usda.gov)

**3) ISSUE: YOUTH  
CENTER/INVOLVEMENT**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

I think that there is a strong need to build on youth activities and help develop a Youth recreational center, perhaps something in conjunction with the Summer Recreation program or YMCA. I think the one student we visited with (who said there is plenty to do) was not a fair representation of the community and think there are a number of ways to engage youth. The City of Laurel has a strong JR. Chamber; perhaps they can act as a connection to the youth and get them involved. Through the process I think the Community would be able to determine what the youth would like to see and support, I would be interested in seeing if the swimming pool is really a priority for the youth or if they would prefer to see efforts elsewhere.

As for resources for youth development I would recommend that the community sign up to receive funding notices by the Grants.gov and the Foundation Center. The Foundation Center has an education watch that will send email notifications once someone in the Laurel Community signs up to it. I would recommend that either the JC's or the YMCA (or both) get on the Foundation Center's email listserve.

**RESOURCES:**

Foundation Center

Web:

<http://foundationcenter.org/>

Grants.gov

Web: <http://www.grants.gov/>

**4) ISSUE:  
ENTERTAINMENT/WORKFORCE  
ATTRACTION**

One of the largest components to keeping youth in a community is having entertainment value in the community.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Time and time again during our visits we heard that the City of Laurel is lacking a movie theatre. A number of residents remembered the old theater and made mention how they would like one back. Though to my knowledge most theatres remain a for profit endeavor, there may be organizations that could manage a theater or at least showing of older movies. A number of communities during the summer have “movies on the wall” or “movies at night” playing once a week.

As a potential idea, if an organization was interested (if there is an artistic group) they may be able to obtain funding from foundations (see the grant book information following) that may invest into equipment to do outdoor theatres. The idea would be to use that lovely park where the old theatre once stood and turn it into a community outdoor space. Utilizing what you have, if the City allowed, maybe set up some type of vending (other organizations could do so as fundraisers selling popcorn, cotton candy etc). Hopefully the Chamber

could help promote as would the downtown merchants by keeping stores open longer on the nights of the showing, which would help increase the Laurel downtown vibrancy.

**RESOURCE:**

Montana Foundation Directory  
Montana State University-  
Billings Library

1500 University Drive  
Billings, MT 59101-0298  
406-657-2262

[kperusich@msubillings.edu](mailto:kperusich@msubillings.edu)

Costs: \$25.00 (updated every two years)

***MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY***

**ISSUE: COMMUNICATIONS**

The City of Laurel has a lot of potential and is a vibrant community. It is very noticeable how proud residents are of their community and they are willing to work to maintain their quality of life. However, one of the largest obstacles I noticed was that no one is communicating with each other.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

One of the things that we have done here in the Tobacco Valley is to develop an annual “all organization meeting”. The Tobacco Valley Community Development Council hosts ours but it could be something that the Laurel Chamber or any other active organization hosts. The idea is to invite all the different organizations (including the High School groups) to a round table discussion. Each organization gets a set amount of time to share their current projects. This allows for organizations to learn what others are doing, sets the tone for



cooperation and partnerships and provides a strong sense of community in the City. We started by invited Dan Clark with the MSU Extension Service to Eureka to host our first community discussion. From there we have formed an active committee who plans every January the all organization meeting. At our last one we had over 30 organizations attend. They can run a little long so make sure you have a strong facilitator who will keep the conversations moving.

**RESOURCES:**

MSU Extension - Community Development  
Montana State University  
P.O. Box 172240  
Bozeman, MT 59717-2240

Community Development Specialist:  
Paul Lachapelle  
Tel: (406) 994-3620  
Fax: (406) 994-1905  
Location: Wilson Hall 1-156

***MAIN TOPIC: HISTORICAL PRESERVATION AND TOURISM***

**1) ISSUE: HISTORICAL PRESERVATION**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The City of Laurel is rich in history but has very little movement to preserve it. From the unique architectural buildings under distress to the lack of a museum, the Laurel community is watching their heritage disappear. It is evident that there is a lot of desire to move forward with this. There are a number of programs from Save America's Treasures for the

buildings to partnering with the MSU College of Letters and Sciences/History Program to have interns work on the exhibit development. I am still a little unsure if there is a building for the museum or not but the Dean of History at MSU Bozeman may be a great source for having students help build a start up museum.

**RESOURCE:**

SAVE AMERICA'S TREASURES  
National Trust for Historic Preservation  
1785 Massachusetts Avenue,  
N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
<mailto:saveamericastreasures@nthp.org>

[nhttp.org](http://www.saveamericastreasures.org/contact.htm)

Web:

<http://www.saveamericastreasures.org/contact.htm>

Robert Rydell  
Professor-PhD  
History & Philosophy; WN  
2101  
406-994-7929  
[rwrydell@montana.edu](mailto:rwrydell@montana.edu)

Museum of the Rockies  
600 West Kagy Boulevard  
Bozeman, MT 59717  
406.994.DINO  
[wwwmor@montana.edu](mailto:wwwmor@montana.edu)

Montana State Historical Society

**2) ISSUE: HISTORICAL TOURISM**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

I found it fascinating that Laurel has a connection to Chief Joseph. One of my ideas is to connect other

Towns/Cities in Montana and maybe even in Oregon, Idaho and Washington to develop a Chief Joseph trail. Trails seem to be a successful way to attract and promote communities. This may be another project that the MSU History Program or Museum of the Rockies would be interested in partnering on as may the Travel Montana Program and the Montana Indian Affairs office. As an example of a successful trail program someone may want to contact the Montana Dinosaur Trail program to learn how their developed cooperative agreements. Another source of information may be the Montana Cooperative Development Center as the project may be larger than one community can lead and a cooperative might be the organizational structure needed

**RESOURCES:**

Robert Rydell  
Professor-PhD  
History & Philosophy; WN  
2101  
406-994-7929  
[rwrydell@montana.edu](mailto:rwrydell@montana.edu)

Museum of the Rockies  
600 West Kagy Boulevard  
Bozeman, MT 59717  
406.994.DINO  
[wwwmor@montana.edu](mailto:wwwmor@montana.edu)

Victor Bjornberg, Tourism  
Development Coord.  
Travel Montana, MT Dept of  
Commerce  
Helena, MT 59620-0533  
406-841-2795  
[victor@visitmt.com](mailto:victor@visitmt.com)  
<http://visitmt.com> or <http://travelmontana.com>

Office of Indian Affairs  
PO Box 200801

Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-444-3702  
Fax: 406-444-1350

Nez Perce Tribe  
Web:

<http://www.nezperce.org/content/>

MT Dinosaur Trail  
Web:

<http://www.mtdinotrail.org/>

Brian Gion  
MT Cooperative Development  
Center  
Web: [www.mcfdc.coop](http://www.mcfdc.coop)

**3) ISSUE: TOURISM**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The largest obstacle I see in Laurel's tourism is lack of an image. What is the community? And how do you promote it? If funding is available I would recommend contacting Roger Brooks to help the Laurel community identify their "lure". Then build from there. There is a clear need for better gateway and wayfinding signage. As a main entry point to the Glacier Park and Red Lodge area Laurel should be capturing tourism dollars. Again, communication among the different organizations would be helpful here so projects can gain momentum through funding sources and partnerships/volunteerism.

**RESOURCES:**

Roger Brooks, Principal  
Destination Development, Inc.  
Riverview Plaza Suite 310  
16000 Christensen Road  
Seattle, WA 98188  
206-241-4770  
[rbrooks@destinationdevelopment.com](mailto:rbrooks@destinationdevelopment.com)

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

Victor Bjornberg, Tourism  
Development Coord.  
Travel Montana, MT Dept of  
Commerce  
Helena, MT 59620-0533  
406-841-2795  
[victor@visitmt.com](mailto:victor@visitmt.com)  
web: <http://visitmt.com> or  
<http://travelmontana.com>

***MAIN ISSUE: DOWNTOWN  
REDEVELOPMENT***

**1) ISSUE: MAIN STREET**

The Laurel Downtown is very attractive and I think has a lot of potential. However, a number of the retail businesses have left the downtown area and are being replaced with non retail entities (ie: churches) or nothing has replaced them and empty buildings are left.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

I think that Laurel may want to look into doing a Main Street Program through the state of Montana. That should help them restructure the downtown. Above I mentioned Roger Brooks, who can also help with development of a downtown area. I do not know how expensive Roger is to work with but he is very knowledgeable and may have some insight to the situation.

**RESOURCES:**

Montana Main Street  
Coordinator  
406-841-2756

Roger Brooks, Principal  
Destination Development, Inc.

Riverview Plaza Suite 310  
16000 Christensen Road  
Seattle, WA 98188  
206-241-4770  
[rbrooks@destinationdevelopment.com](mailto:rbrooks@destinationdevelopment.com)

**2) ISSUE: TRAFFIC FLOW**

One of the obstacles with developing the downtown is the traffic into the Downtown area.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Coming off of the Highway and traveling through the maze of gas stations and crossing under the railroad, a traveler could get mixed up or think it isn't worth the hassle. A number of residents agree that the entrance into the Downtown Core is hard to navigate. I would recommend that the City of Laurel (and/or partnering organization) look into obtaining funds to do a traffic study including flow, congestions and controls. I would recommend discussing the project with the Big Sky Economic Development Authority and/or the Beartooth RC&D. Another source of information for this type of study may be the MT Dept of Commerce's CDBG program for Public Facilities.

**RESOURCE:**

Linda Beck  
Big Sky Economic Development  
Authority  
Billings, MT 59101-1948  
406-256-6871  
[beck@bigskyeda.org](mailto:beck@bigskyeda.org)  
web: <http://www.bigskyeda.org>

Beartooth RC&D  
Joliet, MT 59041  
406-962-3914  
Web: <http://www.beartooth.org>

Gus Byrom, Program Manger  
Community Development Block  
Grant Program  
Public Facilities and Housing  
301 S. Park Ave.  
406-841-2777  
[gbyrom@mt.gov](mailto:gbyrom@mt.gov)  
web: <http://comdev.mt.gov>

**REPORT BY: JAMES KLESSENS,  
OWNER  
Community Matters, LLC  
(Private Community and  
Economic Development  
Consulting)  
110 East Central, PO Box 289  
Joliet, MT 59041  
(406)962-3484**

## **INTRODUCTION**

First and foremost, thank you to the citizens of Laurel for your candid answers to what may initially appear as easy questions. It was obvious that people gave these questions a good bit of reflection before submitting oral or written input.

This process is critical for your community as it is designed to get the ball rolling on the key issues which are brought forth by the residents. The ball is now rolling ... you've identified what is important and needed, it now is incumbent of the community to keep these issues rolling. Our team can provide ideas, resources and perhaps motivation. The job of taking these ideas to action is yours.

I greatly appreciated the hospitality of your community and wish to thank our hosts for their generous support of this effort.

### ***MAIN TOPIC : BUSINESS EXPANSION AND RETENTION***

**1) ISSUE: PLANNING FOR  
BUSINESS PARK =  
OPPORTUNITY FOR  
MANUFACTURING, INDUSTRIAL**

## **PROCESSING AND WAREHOUSING**

I will limit my discussion to a one key area which I believe Laurel has a true competitive advantage. Laurel is uniquely positioned to develop a business park(s) with opportunities for manufacturing, industrial processing and warehousing.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Many residents have correctly identified Laurel as a transportation hub, specifically in the world of rail transport. It also has opportunities due to its proximity to the Interstate and north - south collectors. The Chamber indicates that the refinery interchange is the busiest interchange in the state of Montana. While some may discount this stating that there is really only one exchange, you can bet the Wal-Mart development team saw the opportunity. You should too.

As you are witnessing now, the interstate commercial property in the Entertainment Park subdivision is rapidly being purchased and developed. This is a positive for the entire community, but not without the need for some strategic planning. To most, this new belt of commercial development is a logical move, justified by the increased traffic of the box store. This strip was originally intended to become a hotel/ recreation corridor. Later planning efforts envisioned it as a warehousing and manufacturing district related to rail activity. Plum Building Systems was the result of that push in development. Planning is critical to ensure that new uses are compatible and do not create traffic / user conflicts. Obviously, those now

developing the land adjacent to the Interstate are taking advantage of the visibility and access. A few bullet thoughts which may guide planning:

- Continue to promote interstate commercial in the viewshed of the interstate.
- Rail related businesses could be developed adjacent to the rail on MRL/BNSF properties.
- It will be necessary to direct businesses who require “big truck” traffic to areas away from the high traffic zones near the Wal Mart.
- Transportation planning related to delivery truck traffic, shoppers and residents need to be looked at closely. A couple of key questions might include:
  - How do we increase utilization of the East Laurel interchange?
  - Could an additional rail crossing to the east which would create a loop for traffic and relieve pressure on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, and if so, where would it go (Alder, Yard Office Road)?
  - How could the frontage road (by the Greenhouse and MRL yard be improved as a truck route for delivery and overflow traffic?
  - Obviously, Railroad Street

and its interface with 1<sup>st</sup> will need road improvement and traffic control.

- Could an improvement of Railroad Street to the west of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue help improve traffic flow by diverting some volume to the 8<sup>th</sup> street crossing?
- Manufacturing businesses need good access, but not highway frontage. Is there an opportunity to look across the interstate along Bernhart Road or up at the Airport for an industrial park site? Both have definite possibilities if the traffic infrastructure is in place.
- How can the new (planned) west interchange alleviate pressure for residential access to the interstate and perhaps opportunities to construct warehouse/distribution facilities on both sides of the interstate?
- Do not forget the BNSF spur which leaves the main tract at Mossmain and heads north. Spurs from this could reach the Airport or development could occur adjacent to the track. Some is occurring now. Planning may create a zone for industrial development along the corridor before too many conflicting land uses encroach upon this area.
- Try to envision Laurel/Billings 20 years from now. It is apparent that the two cities

will have more interconnection as each year goes by. How can the transportation development as it related to business development complement the west Billings activity? It would be very easy to let development occur in a happenstance fashion which, over the long haul will cost the community millions in revisions to infrastructure. Consider the bottleneck on Main near the Metra in Billings. In my rear view windshield mode of planning, I'd have to ask, "Why wasn't increased traffic taken into account during this design phase. This area was problem before MetraPark ...now it's even worse. Last I heard is that the solution is in the 10's of millions.

As I think about business development in Laurel, my first concern becomes these types of bottlenecks in traffic. Even though the city is a transportation hub, a natural and sustainable traffic flow does not exist. When Wal-Mart opens, I doubt that you'll be able to exit Jan's IGA parking lot heading south. In the listening sessions, many people felt the same way. How then, can I convince a company, who's supply and delivery chain relies on 53 foot vans, that access is good? The key to the transportation study will be to consider these uses and their impact on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.

You must do this study and soon. As you will see in this report, there will be a lot of suggestions for CDBG Planning Grants. This is a great tool and applicable here as well. Karyl's report lays out the details of this program. However, my first

contact for this effort would be the Statewide and Urban Planning Division of the Montana Department of Transportation. This division heads planning processes across the state. These folks could provide great guidance in answering the above questions and possibly locate a funding source.

**RESOURCE:**

Contact:  
Lynn Zanto, Supervisor  
Montana Department of  
Transportation  
2701 Prospect Avenue  
PO Box 201001  
Helena, MT 59620-1001  
406-444-34445  
[lzanto@mt.gov](mailto:lzanto@mt.gov)

**2) ISSUE: PLANNING  
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

As the transportation component is coming together, these natural areas for business development need to be studied. You should consider clustering “like” businesses in the same areas. This helps hold infrastructure costs down (no need for heavy haul streets in a retail area) and also allows business interaction. It’s surprising how many times a business goes out of state to outsource a process or part, when that same item can be obtained locally. I’ve suggested that the area by the west interchange could be warehouse and distribution. This is a no brainer as it’s already there in Helena Chemical. You’ll recall Air Liquide served a similar function out there.

The natural areas for manufacturing would again be at the

airport or along the south side of the rail by the MRL yard. Areas south of the interstate (east and west exchanges) could also be considered.

As these are considered, keep in mind that a bare, raw piece of land is not, repeat, NOT, an industrial park. Companies seeking to relocate will not be interested in waiting for you to provide sewer and water. You have a single opportunity to sell a business on your community. You need to be ready to respond. Easily said, easy to plan but hard to pay for! This is why planning is critical. I’ve suggested five potential development areas which would take millions in infrastructure to be fully ready. Here’s how I’d approach it.

1. Generally outline the proposed areas.
2. Locate existing sewer, water, power, fiber, and transportation
3. Develop cost estimates of the installed cost of utilities (The public works guys can provide a rough estimate.)
4. Consider other impacts of the installed infrastructure. (Could it tie in other uses or development such as a water/ sewer line which could serve residential as well?)
5. Determine which project(s) is the most feasible to develop.
6. Devise and action plan for funding and move forward.

On the proposed areas, two key funding tools can be used to kick off the development, the Economic

Development Administration and the use of a Tax Increment District. EDA has funded the infrastructure costs including streets for many industrial parks in Montana (ie: TransTech, SYSCO expansion, Hardin, Port of Butte). They have changed venue a bit (toward high tech projects) and might need some encouragement due to the low unemployment in Yellowstone County. A lead project would be needed that provides significant jobs. EDA likes to see bang for their buck, so the lower the cost per job is, the better. Many projects would leverage \$10,000 per job or less, meaning you'd need to create 100 jobs to get a million dollars. You must involve the regional EDA District administered by Beartooth RC&D to access these funds.

Tax Increment Districts are becoming a popular tool across the state. A TIFID (technically, Tax Increment Finance Industrial District) is a physical area which has been legally established by the local government. The taxes paid on the lands in the District are channeled to the local government for purposes of paying for improvements within the District. Consider the following example as a means to explain the concept. Suppose the City of Laurel created a 200 acre TIFID by the airport today. On January 1, 2008, the base level of taxes paid on the entire property would be fixed. These funds continue to be allocated to the schools, the county and the city. As the land develops, the additional tax base created (the increment) is channeled to the City's TIFID. These funds can be used to pay off bonds for the development of infrastructure for the TIFID area. Basically, the District obtains a secure revenue stream as a return on the investment made in the

water, sewer and streets developed. As said before, bare land is not an industrial park and BUT FOR, the development of the infrastructure, the project would likely not occur. The infrastructure investment is made with the expectation of tax revenues for repayment.

Expect to need to explain this procedure to the public many times. It will take a few tries for them to realize that this really is a common sense tool.

One thought that occurred to me during our tour of the town is that, if the CENEX Refinery was in a TIFID before the addition of the coker, the additional or incremental taxes made available could have been substantial. Bonds could have been sold from this revenue stream to assist in the infrastructure side (such as water treatment) of the CENEX project. Remaining funds could augment your local economic development efforts. Too late for this project now, but perhaps food for thought for the future.

(As a side note, you will observe people bragging about the tax breaks that are offered in the name of economic development. Folks, economic development is about building tax base. It's been a hard thing for me to understand giving profitable corporations a big property tax break for a project they planned to do anyway. Naturally, the company will gladly accept such a gift, but it's one we can ill afford. Montana has several programs that allow the offset of income tax or reduce the property tax for job creation or securing equipment. They are not direct reductions in the tax base, in fact, they are designed to increase the tax



base. As your community grows, the demands on public infrastructure do as well. The only way to pay for these increased costs is through the tax base ... don't make the mistake of jumping to a tax abatement as a primary recruitment tool. There are a multitude of other programs which achieve similar results without losing local government revenues.)

The section of the Montana Code Annotated which spells out tax increment is MCA 7-15-4299. The best reference person in Montana for TIFID's is

Mae Nan Ellingson  
Dorsey Whitney Law Firm  
Missoula, MT 598 ----  
(406) 329-5565  
[ellingson.mae.nan@dorsey.com](mailto:ellingson.mae.nan@dorsey.com)

Al Jones and myself were involved in the development of a TIFID in Hardin and could share additional information as your concepts move forward.

***MAIN TOPIC:  
INFRASTRUCTURE***

**ISSUE: AIRPORT**

Other team members will talk about the sidewalks, water and sewer more effectively than I can. I would, however, like to focus a bit on the airport and the development of the adjacent areas.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Laurel Airport represents one of the greatest assets of the community. While I understand that Rocky has moved the flight school from Laurel, it would seem that similar opportunities may be

available. The security issues related to international airports will not be relaxed in the near term and as such, open the doors for nearby airfields. Kudos to the group that carried out the redesign and construction of the runways. They truly had their eyes on the future.

The configuration of the runways, the location and its proximity to ground transportation lend themselves to become a location for air freight and charter services, in addition to the private aviation activity. The shortcoming for the airport and adjacent areas is the availability of water and sewer. Fortunately, water and sewer are not tremendously far away. In our tour, we saw the water tank on Beartooth Drive and also noted the availability of wastewater as well. We were informed that at one point a project was proposed to extend city water up the hill and past the cemetery. It may be appropriate to dust off that set of plans and look to funding this extension. Bear in mind that extensions serving housing and economic development purposes may be viewed favorably. In addition, you are adding more users to the system, spreading the overall system cost over more people. This will be a significant benefit for those hauling water now.

The Airport Road and its connector to the highway via Sietz Ronan Road is a good road, though the entire road could use improvement. Note that a shorter connection, Yard Office Road is present as well. It is also in need of improvement. During the public meeting I suggested that perhaps a cross over the tracks at Alder would be beneficial. I'd like to add to that comment and suggest that an overpass be considered at Yard Office as well. In both locations, the

tracks are split requiring a large overpass, creating significant logistical issues. I would however offer that the City of Billings had an opportunity to move the BN switchyard out of town years ago and didn't. Now they have a huge bottleneck that quite possibly cannot be resolved. It's akin to having a huge river through your town, where the traffic has to be strategically funneled through corridors. At this point, Laurel has the ability to shape that traffic flow, albeit is not a cheap (or even possible) proposal.

Because I'm close by, I've had occasion to drive Railroad, Main, Alder, 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> to get a feel for how traffic could flow. While logistically really tough, I'd really look at a cross over at Yard Office Road. Alder was suggested as well, but issues with the Big Ditch and the hillside may be insurmountable. Yard Office already intersects Maryland, Ridge, Airport Road and most of the development Northeast of town. It also provides a straight line connection to Strauch Road (the overpass for the Interstate) providing good access to both sides of the highway. Improvement to East Railroad Street, (the street directly south of the tracks and behind Wal-Mart) would provide a second access to the Interstate commercial belt and an access for the many developments on the hill east of town. Improvement to Yard Office should be considered as a major collector.

This probably seems like a bunch of yammering without talking much about the Airport. In a nutshell, the business development around the airport will be driven by the infrastructure available. With water, sewer and a network of suitable roads, you can bet that airport related business will take note.

As one looks at a map of Laurel and considers the activity within the 2 mile square bounded by 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Laurel Airport Road, Yard Office Road and Railroad Street, you will see most of the development is occurring in the north and east, outside of city limits. It would be logical to push an effort to provide transportation infrastructure and consider annexation of large parts of this area. Your job as community members demands that you begin guiding development so that today's activity doesn't stall future projects.

### ***MAIN TOPIC: ANNEXATION***

### **ISSUE: ANNEXATION FOR LAUREL**

Our team was a bit taken aback at the number of times we drove in and out of the city in the north part of Laurel. At two meetings, we were advised that the city has not expanded its boundaries in 30 years. Whether that is true or not is not as important as the problem it creates for the future of the city. Obviously, the city will grow to the north and east. You see lots of development there. While initially, the idea of no city water and sewer bill is appealing, over time the clean out costs or failed septic systems cost have a way of making people change their mind. Not to mention the weekly bills for the water hauling service needed for some areas.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Point blank – It does not make a lot of sense for the residents of the city to pay for street, police and fire protection which ultimately is a benefit to non-residents of the city. I

recall a situation in Hardin where a home about 100 feet outside the city limits burned to the ground because the City Department would not respond (they wouldn't because of liability insurance issues). You are fortunate that the rural and city department are the same or you'd see similar a reoccurrence of this same story. More important is the fact that these are needed services and that over time these unincorporated areas will be surrounded by the city. When that happens, the city can force annex these properties and require the residents to hook up to public utilities. I think we all know the outcry which would be raised if this were to happen. The best bet is to work solutions which add these adjacent areas to the city without undue hardship to the residents. It will cost them more, make no mistake about it.

Your community is growing rapidly at the fringes creating a mish mash of streets and roads with no rhyme or reason. The window for making these new developments "fit" within the city is closing fast. You've all driven I communities with one street that leads to 20 lanes. It's hard to find an address when you are not in a hurry ... what would you do if you were in a fire truck or ambulance? Good planning takes storm water, public utilities and little things like weed and animal control into account for the benefit of those in the development and those affected by it.

I looked at the MCA's for reference to annexation to municipalities. There are many citations and I am not an attorney, but MCA7-2-4201 reads very clearly that municipalities can add contiguous lands and in 7-2-4205 that services must be provided to the annexed area.

This is usually where the discussion stops. Most assume that adding additional services would be cost prohibitive. What I would offer is that if you don't take action soon you'll get the Midas muffler treatment ... pay me now or pay me later ... and later is definitely not better. As the development of multi-acre lots continue, the amount of infrastructure necessary per lot goes up exponentially. Obviously, the greater the density of development, the cheaper the cost of services will be. Again, try to picture Laurel 20 years from now. In the current development pattern the land area of the city will be huge, but the population will not grow proportionately. The other pressing issue becomes that of a logical pattern for streets in the city. Annexing now provides the city the opportunity to tie subdivision roads to a transportation plan. We saw one development on our tour where there is only one road in and out. Bad planning!

MCA 7-2-4732 gives the city the authority to annex lands and put in place a plan for the provision of services to these outlying areas. In this manner, the city can work with existing property owners and future developers to plan the best possible arrangement of roads, sewer and water. To many this may seem an infringement on their personal property rights. It is unfortunate it would be viewed this way, but expect it. In the long term scheme of things, this provides the greatest benefit in terms of services and future property value. I would recommend that the city immediately look to funding a planning study which would consider the incorporation of the area directly north and east of the city from the rail to the airport. CDBG Planning

Grants are available for up to \$15,000 to match (50/50) local funds to this end. Expect this type of study to run upwards of \$50,000 so local match is key.

**RESOURCES:**

For information on the CDBG program contact your friendly team member:

Karyl Tobel, Section Manager  
Community Development Block Grant Program  
Economic Development  
Commerce Loan Fund  
310 S. Park Ave.  
Helena, MT 59620  
Phone: 406-841-2733

***MAIN TOPIC: AMENITIES***

**ISSUE: FUNDING AMENITIES**

A number of projects were raised as needed (maybe wanted is a better term) for the community. These included a community center, an indoor pool, a skate park and an indoor movie theatre. I'm sure the list could be considerably longer as I'm certain it is.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Key to a community the size of Laurel is the division of community effort. It is immensely easy to see one project that you want to get done and be so focused on that one effort that you fail to see anything else. I believe most Laurelites can think of recent examples of this phenomenon. While some projects get done this way, they do not get achieved without leaving some hard feelings within the community. I think you can relate to this as well. One great value of the resource assessment is the ability to declare the priorities of the

community. At the prioritization session, your community can validate the project of highest need and essentially get license to move forward. The key is making sure that the effort is validated. Otherwise, people spend more time on peripheral arguments rather than dealing with the important questions at hand. So how do we get the projects done ...

In Laurel, the three "community projects" of the community center, the pool or the skate park can all be funded in the same way. There may even be opportunities to combine these into one project. The key becomes gaining the broad based support for these community projects. You should know there is a reason they are called community projects ... it implies that they are for the whole community, not just a certain group. Believe me, if you spend the time gaining the buy-in from the community it will reap benefits long in to the future. When you have prioritized what you want to do, here's how I'd look to fund the effort(s).

- Local planning – Use you local paper, the school paper, the radio and the other media available to you to get the word out about the "planning" you are doing. Host local design charettes to include as much public comment into the design process as possible. The more input the better. Develop your concept, perhaps even a schematic of the proposed layout and a ball park idea of cost. If you can bring in some

pro bono architectural assistance, that's all the better.

- Local Fundraising Campaign – Everyone wants to ask for grants to begin with but actually it's a secondary source, or should be considered as such. Most funding entities will want to see what you've done yourselves first and then follow with a grant. The more local "buy-in" the better their response. I have had tremendous success with a combination of news articles in conjunction with a solicitation letter mailed to each home. The letter will ask for a contribution today and an annual pledge. Just prior to the mailing, hit every possible group function and activity preparing people to see the mailing and respond is important. The letter should have a sense of urgency instilled in its message. Use the local media to announce the weekly progress of the campaign. This motivates others to step up as well. If you have permission to use donor's names, do so. That can be the greatest motivator. If you have enough volunteers, you may even try a phone – a-thon on a Saturday.

These are tough to manage, but effective.

- Do big public fundraisers such as dinners or auctions. These draw a lot of people who may attend just to see what you are up to. Be prepared to tell your story over and over. Have pledge cards available but also be prepared to recruit volunteers. I've found this is the best place to find people who are interested but are afraid to come to meetings. It's a great time to get them engaged. Publicize like crazy, before and after. Remember that your goal is for everyone in town to hear your message. (When we were doing the Community Center in Joliet, we actually incubated a small newspaper for this purpose ...it actually did quite well for a while ... but definitely served to get our message out.)
- Now look at Grants - You have a few big names who would likely make significant grants for community supported effort. Obviously those are: BNSF, MRL and Cenex. Historically they have given to Laurel projects would likely again. I'd also look to your local

business community for an opportunity to make gifts which could be individually recognized. You have some very generous businesses in the Laurel community. As you move the project forward, the BSEDA or Beartooth folks have current addresses for these foundations and can advise you on the application process.

- Loans - Do not overlook the ability to use long term financing as a means to cover capital construction. USDA has a Community Facilities program which could term out remaining debt. Last I knew communities under 15,000 in population could do low interest, long term (up to 40 years) capital projects. In addition, RD provides grants of up to \$50,000 toward the project. These are subject to funds available so a discussion with the program people is in order. Contact:  
Shad Weber  
USDA Rural  
Development  
Billings Office  
657-6527 Extension 125

***MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY***

**ISSUE: COMMUNITY  
LEADERSHIP**

It was wonderful to hear so many people with such high regard for their fellow community members. Each listening session had at least one person list the people of Laurel as an asset, typically followed by a vigorous shaking of heads in affirmation. Anyone who's witnessed the fireworks or the lighting events can see the sense of community pride is high.

As someone who's been close to the activity of Laurel for some time, I do see one thing that should become a priority issue. During my years with Beartooth RC&D, we worked with the Chamber, the Downtown Revitalization committee, the Economic Development Corporation, Solid Foundations, the Y, the Soccer folks, the pool groups the City and many others on a host of projects. I always sensed that the groups were designed due to a few people's passion and their ability to attract a legitimizing group of people. Most efforts achieved critical mass and were completed (or are still moving forward).

My point is that while you've got great people, I question whether there has ever been an effort to define who's doing what and why. One issue that did come up was a declining pool of leadership and the need to groom more young people. Do you know that several of these groups were not represented in the listening sessions? (Although they may have submitted written comment.) While this is a common issue in many communities, I believe it speaks more to our inability to effectively lead now as opposed to our inability to recruit new people. I have come to believe that often we focus on the project and not the process leading to the project. I

would offer that the various groups in Laurel need to become very clear about their mission and how it relates to the people of the community ... not just the personal wishes of those on the current committee. Is there any long term plan and if so, does the community know where your group is heading. If not, then we can't blame people for not becoming involved, rather we should blame ourselves for failing to reach out and explain our purpose. As busy as most people are these days, people will not spend time in meetings if they can't see the bigger picture.

Therefore, I recommend that the various groups spend time reviewing the basic questions of who, what and why about their groups. I would then offer that these groups should meet in a facilitated meeting (I would help with this effort) to clarify roles and responsibilities.

As an example of the value of talking to other groups I'd provide this example. The community of Roundup used to do a monthly lunch meeting called Talk About Town (the TAT group). Each month one or two groups were asked to talk about what they were doing. Representatives from the groups explained to anyone who wanted to show up, what was going on. Over time it became the premier information source for community residents to catch wind of what was going on. In doing so, they increased volunteerism and membership in their community groups. Again we focus on the project, not the process. Part of the process is outreach, acceptance and recruitment.

I would suggest that the meeting of groups occur soon after the prioritization meeting. Perhaps a

Talk About Town regular forum could be facilitated following that meeting.

**REPORT BY: LYNN MUNCY**  
Beartooth Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc Coordinator  
Beartooth Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc  
604 West Front Street, PO Box 180  
Joliet, MT 59041  
Ph: (406) 962-3914 Fax: (406)962-3647  
Email: [lynn.muncy@mt.usda.gov](mailto:lynn.muncy@mt.usda.gov)  
Web: <http://www.beartooth.org>

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

Working with the Laurel Resource Team was a great experience. Working with the people of Laurel was a positive eye-opening experience. My background is working with individuals and communities in financing their operations and working on what issues might be working against the bottom line and what might work to improve the productivity of their specific departments and/or the organization. I'm anxious to experience the same kind of success while working with a town that has elected leaders.

The "Laurelites" as individuals and as groups are open, warm, caring and energetic individuals who are

passionate about their beliefs and philosophies. I believe if they are able to agree on common goals and prioritize them with some action planning, they have a great opportunity to improve their bottom line by whatever number they choose. The strong community spirit was the prevailing theme from each of the groups we interviewed – an invaluable resource.

***MAIN TOPIC: BUSINESS  
EXPANSION AND RETENTION***

**ISSUES: Marketing program, Niche Marketing, Rail, Airport, Business Relocation, Refinery and Manufacturing, Consumer Services and Hospitality.**

**RECOMMENDATION:** The need for Laurel to sell itself is evident in the general appearance of the downtown area and as soon as you exit the interstate. First impression of Laurel is critical to develop a marketing program and to entice niche markets to the town.

**RESOURCES:**

With the use of USDA Rural Developments infrastructure programs such as the Community Facilities Loan and Grant Program, Laurel could improve business expansion and retention.

USDA Rural Development  
Billings Area Office  
Building A  
1629 Avenue D  
Billings, MT 59102  
406-657-6297, ext. 4  
FAX: 406-657-6294

The Montana Department of Commerce Business Resources Division is to assist the businesses

and communities of Montana in achieving economic prosperity.

Director: Anthony J. Preite  
301 South Park Ave.  
PO Box 200505  
Helena, MT 59620-0505  
<http://www.businessresources.mt.gov>  
<http://www.mtfinanceonline.com>  
<http://www.business.mt.gov>

***MAIN TOPIC: INFRASTRUCTURE***

**ISSUES:**

- **Water:** Without water a community cannot grow or meet the demands of its citizens for fire protection and beatification of its homes and businesses.
- **Wastewater:** Has to be controlled and directed to the proper area for safety of the community residents, their property and health.
- **Storm Water:** Has to be controlled and directed to the proper area for safety of the community residents, their property and health.
- **Airport:** Need for growth and development.
- **Streets:** Are lacking in repair and access to both sides of the railroad, north and south.
- **Sidewalks:** They are not conducive to downtown business development due to lack of structure and inadequate flow of foot traffic

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Planning is the key to develop all of the projects needed to grow Laurel to the level that is desired by its citizens. The infrastructure planning can be



and orderly process if approached in the right way.

**RESOURCES:**

The USDA Rural Development Rural Utilities Program (RUS) would be a perfect vehicle to implement these programs.

USDA Rural Development  
Billings Area Office  
Building A  
1629 Avenue D  
Billings, MT 59102  
406-657-6297, ext. 4  
FAX: 406-657-6294

The Montana Department of Commerce Business Resources Division is to assist the businesses and communities of Montana in achieving economic prosperity.

Director: Anthony J. Preite  
301 South Park Ave.  
PO Box 200505  
Helena, MT 59620-0505  
<http://www.businessresources.mt.gov>  
<http://www.mtfinanceonline.com>  
<http://www.business.mt.gov>

***MAIN TOPIC: ANNEXATION***

**ISSUES: PLANNED GROWTH, CONTIGUOUS LANDS AND ZONING**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Without planned growth the town of Laurel will not be able to sustain growth in and orderly fashion. But to achieve growth, it requires funding from all sources. The use of annexation and zoning could be a powerful tool in the process of paying for planned growth.

**RESOURCES:**

**Montana's Growth Policy Resource Book**, is intended to assist people involved with county and municipal planning in Montana. This publication describes and interprets the requirements of 76-1-601, MCA, Montana's Growth Policy law enacted by the 1999 legislature.

The best approach for preparing a community growth policy is a topic that can spark strong debate among professional planners and citizen planning board members. Ultimately, each community will have to decide on the approach that works best for them.

The staff of the Montana Department of Commerce, Community Development Division, Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP) originally prepared this book in 2003. Participants in the project included Richard Weddle, Division Attorney; Gavin Anderson, CTAP Program Manager; Kelly Shields, CTAP Planner IV, and Mary Vandebosch, Resource Policy Analyst with the Legislative Services Division.

Director: Anthony J. Preite  
301 South Park Ave.  
PO Box 200505  
Helena, MT 59620-0505  
[www.businessresources.mt.gov](http://www.businessresources.mt.gov)  
[www.mtfinanceonline.com](http://www.mtfinanceonline.com)  
[www.business.mt.gov](http://www.business.mt.gov)

***MAIN TOPIC: AMENITIES***

**ISSUES: COMMUNITY CENTER/RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, YOUTH, SWIMMING, SKATEBOARD PARK, GATHERING PLACE, INDOOR MOVIE THEATER**  
**RECOMMENDATION:**

Community Centers and recreational opportunities are important to community longevity. One study said that retirees who migrate tend to be healthier, wealthier, and better educated. A lot of these people want to be located in small towns. While quality of life is part of the attraction, lower cost housing is also a major draw. Some of these “immigrant retirees” are actually native Montanans who spent their working careers elsewhere and who now have the time and resources to be able to return to Montana.

**RESOURCES:**

One organization, “The Come Home Montana Project” has organized a statewide effort to encourage former Montanans to return and, hopefully, to bring their businesses and jobs with them. If people aren't from Montana, but would enjoy Montana’s lifestyle, they are encouraged to come, too. The group is working to get all Montana communities to participate. Contact information is available at <http://www.comehomemontana.org>

**ISSUES: EMERGENCY SERVICES: FIRE, POLICE, AND AMBULANCE**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

These programs are the foundation of any community that intends to sustain it’s self and look at any type of growth.

**RESOURCES:**

The USDA Rural Development Community Facilities Program (CF) would be a perfect vehicle to assist with implementation of these programs.

USDA Rural Development  
Billings Area Office  
Building A  
1629 Avenue D  
Billings, MT 59102

**MAIN TOPIC: HISTORICAL PRESERVATION/TOURISM**

**ISSUES: SIGNAGE**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

The Montana Department of Commerce would be a good contact for this type of need.

Director: Anthony J. Preite  
301 South Park Ave.  
PO Box 200505  
Helena, MT 59620-0505  
<http://www.businessresources.mt.gov>  
<http://www.mtfinanceonline.com>  
<http://www.business.mt.gov>

**REPORT BY: GLORIA O’ROURKE**

**Coordinator for Montana Economic Developers Association**

118 E. Seventh St.; Suite 2A  
Anaconda, MT 59711

Phone: 406.563.5259 Fax: 406.563.5476

Email: [gloria@medamembers.org](mailto:gloria@medamembers.org)

Web: <http://www.medamembers.org>

**INTRODUCTION:**

It was a privilege to spend time in your community and become acquainted with all that Laurel has to offer. From the tour of the area to the listening sessions to meeting the people that define your community, it became obvious that Laurel is a great place to live, work and play.

**MAIN TOPIC: BUSINESS  
EXPANSION AND RETENTION**

**1) ISSUE: BUSINESS  
RETENTION – Keeping and  
growing the best of Laurel**

While communities may dream of recruiting the next Microsoft or Boeing, it is far less expensive and can be far more beneficial to focus on nurturing and supporting the businesses that are already operating in Laurel.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Laurel is so fortunate because one of the best business expansion and retention programs is thriving in your area: the Billings Area BEAR Team. BEAR stands for Business Expansion and Retention and is a dynamic partnership of multiple agencies and programs that provide assistance to local businesses. The two key partners that made the Laurel Resource Team Assessment possible, Big Sky EDA and Beartooth RC&D are also key to the success of the BEAR program....and they serve your region! I understand several businesses in Laurel have already benefited from the BEAR program, but more participation would truly make a difference to the economy of Laurel. In addition, local businesses that feel appreciated and know where to find resources are the best recruitment tools an area has to offer.

What is BEAR? Briefly, trained outreach specialists visit a business and:

- Say “Thank You” to existing businesses and build relationships

between key business owners/managers and community service providers.

- Build a database that is useful in the aggregate to influence local and state policies/procedures/legislation.
- Identify specific business red flags and help develop strategies or suggest resources to help businesses overcome obstacles preventing their ability to grow or operate to the best of their ability.

**RESOURCES:**

It is quite simple to become a participant in the BEAR program or request a presentation. Contact: Linda Beck, Director of Business and Recruitment and Outreach  
Big Sky Economic Development Authority  
222 N. 32<sup>nd</sup> St.; Suite 200  
Billings, MT 59101-1948  
Ph: 406.256.6871 x 118  
Email: [beck@bigskyeda.org](mailto:beck@bigskyeda.org)  
<http://www.bigskyeda.org>

**2) ISSUE: MARKETING  
PROGRAM AND NICHE  
MARKETING**

It seems that most communities struggle with “leakage” or....dealing with consumers that do not shop locally. With the opening of WalMart, it may be a great opportunity for Laurel businesses to retain more of its shoppers.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

It is becoming more common for local business owners to band together and create a “shop local” campaign. The campaign usually consists of a catchy slogan and points out the benefit of circling local dollars around the community instead of spending dollars outside the community. A campaign would also emphasize the availability of local service and the benefits of local support.

A great example of a successful program is Buy Local Moscow. The mission of Buy Local Moscow is “*to showcase and to support the locally-owned independent businesses of our community. The owners of these member businesses have chosen to live in our community, and Moscow has settled in their hearts. Moscow continues to be a vibrant community because these businesses reinvest their profits locally, donate consistently to local programs, maintain diverse product choices, and strengthen Moscow’s unique character.*” For full details, visit the website listed below.

**RESOURCES:**

Visit <http://www.buylocalmoscow.com> to learn all about the Buy Local Moscow campaign.

**MAIN TOPIC: INFRASTRUCTURE****ISSUES: WATER AND WASTEWATER**

Infrastructure challenges come hand-in-hand with community growth. Fortunately, Montana has a unique group to assist communities deal with infrastructure.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Become acquainted with W2ASACT – Montana’s Water, Wastewater and Solid Waste Action Coordinating Team. In 1982, a group of professionals from state, federal, and non-profit organizations that finance, regulate, or provide technical assistance for community water and wastewater systems, decided to start meeting in order to coordinate and enhance their efforts. W2ASACT meets several times a year to find ways to improve our state's environmental infrastructure. One of the group’s goals is to ease the process by which communities apply for infrastructure funding.

During one of the Laurel Listening Sessions, I handed out a cd W2ASACT produces that gives a summary of what they do. If you would like additional copies of this excellent resource, contact Anna Miller (information is below.) In addition, visit the W2ASACT website in the spring and fall to see when an informational workshop is coming to your area.

**RESOURCES:**

W2ASACT Website:  
<http://dnrc.mt.gov/cardd/ResDevBureau/wasact/>

To receive a cd or video contact:  
Anna Miller, DNRC  
Loan and Financial Management  
Bureau  
PO Box 201601  
Helena, MT 59620-1601  
Ph: 406-444-6689  
Email: [annam@mt.gov](mailto:annam@mt.gov)

**MAIN TOPIC: AMENITIES**

## **ISSUE: FUND RAISING FOR MULTIPLE AMENITIES**

Throughout the Laurel Listening Sessions, a “wish list” began to form of some of the amenities the people of Laurel would like to have in the community: community center, swimming pool, skateboard park, indoor movie theater, improved emergency services, etc.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Experts in the field of community development are realizing that a key component to a community’s success is to build a local and/or regional community foundation.

A foundation is a nonprofit organization that supports charitable activities in order to serve the common good. Foundations are often created with endowments—money given by individuals, families or corporations. They generally make grants or operate programs with the income earned from investing the endowments.

Community and other public foundations are publicly supported foundations operated by, and for the benefit of, a specific community or geographic region. They receive their funds from a variety of individual donors, and provide a vehicle for donors to establish endowed funds without incurring the costs of starting a foundation. Community/public foundations are administered by a governing body or distribution committee representative of community interests.

With a never before seen amount of money to be transferred to the next generation as baby boomers retire and pass on their estates, communities need to provide a mechanism for giving.

Laurel is unique in that it has several major companies operating in the area that could be approached to provide seed money for a community foundation. Large corporations often do not like to be approached over and over for contributions, so why not approach BNSF (which has its own foundation), the refinery and Montana Rail Link for a one-time start-up gift. These funds, as well as others contributed by the community, would begin to build so that Laurel would have its very own grant source for funds.

### **RESOURCES:**

The Montana Community Foundation stands ready to assist with the start-up and even management of Laurel’s Community Foundation:

Catherine Cooney  
Program Director  
Montana Community Foundation  
17 2nd Street East, Suite 210  
Kalispell, MT 59901  
p 406-755-4525  
f 406-755-4525  
[ccooney@mtcf.org](mailto:ccooney@mtcf.org)  
[www.mtcf.org](http://www.mtcf.org)

## **MAIN TOPIC: COMMUNITY**

### **ISSUE: VOLUNTEERISM**

It seems that most communities struggle with recruiting new volunteers and/or volunteer burnout.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

In our fast-paced times we must change the way we solicit for volunteers. Today’s volunteers need to be:

- Approached to volunteer by another volunteer that is enthused about a project or task

- Given a timeline as to when their volunteerism will begin....and end
- A clear purpose as to what they will be doing, costs involved, strategic plan, etc.
- Provided a What-Is-In-It-For-Me (WIIFM) whether it be a celebration at the end of the project, a community's appreciation, media recognition, etc.

As part of the Resource Team Process, there is a Volunteer Inventory Sheet that will assist you in creating a database of volunteers for Laurel. In Big Sandy, for example, as a part of the Resource Team process, this form was distributed and even placed on the internet using Survey Monkey to collect data. So many assets and volunteers were discovered that two people were assigned to coordinate all volunteer efforts in Big Sandy.

**RESOURCES:**

Community Volunteer Inventory Sheet is available at <http://www.medamembers.org/resources/eteams.php>

SurveyMonkey: <http://www.surveymonkey.com>

**MAIN TOPIC: HISTORICAL PRESERVATION/TOURISM**

**1) ISSUE: HISTORICAL BUILDINGS**

It seems that every community has one or more large historical buildings that are either empty, under utilized or in various forms of decay.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

My community of Anaconda knows first hand the importance of utilizing key historical buildings. Anaconda knows the lethargy and community depression that filters in if large visual buildings are left empty for too long. Anaconda also knows of the amazing revitalization of community spirit that revives when a building is restored and open for business once again.

It is often hard to know where to begin. A new publication that is extremely helpful is titled "Bringing Buildings Back" which tackles the entire cycle of abandonment from prevention through taking control of properties to fostering productive reuse.

I would also recommend getting in touch with Rolene Schliesman to learn of what groups are already active in the region, addressing historical preservation.

**RESOURCES:**

"Bringing Buildings Back" (cost is \$32.95 plus shipping) available to order at <https://www.DowntownDevelopment.com/oab.php>

Rolene Schliesman,  
State Historic Preservation Office  
406-444-7742  
Email: [rschliesman@mt.gov](mailto:rschliesman@mt.gov)

**2) ISSUE: DESTINATION MARKETING/BRANDING**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

I recently participated in a conference call in which a consultant who specializes in community branding spoke with the group. He said something I had not thought of before,

and that is that if you do not create a brand for your community it will be created for you – and you may not like it. For example, what picture comes to your mind when you think of Detroit? Having never been there, I think of pollution, manufacturing, tough crowds, terrible traffic and crime. Again, using my own community of Anaconda, if we do not actively build a brand for our community, people might picture a ghost town, piles of slag, a smokeless smoke stack and superfund sites. Just like Laurel, Anaconda has so much to offer....but unless you build the image of what you want people to see, they will build their own image. And it may not be the image you want. Branding is something that must be done...the sooner the better!

**RESOURCES:**

To better understand what is meant by “branding” and all that goes into it, please view a powerpoint to get you started. The MEDA Tourism Working Group received permission from Roger Brooks of Destination Development, Inc., to post his material on our website. Visit <http://www.medamembers.org/Montana Keynote.pdf>

**Report by Al Jones, Team Leader**  
Regional Development Officer for  
South Central Montana (the guy in  
Billings)  
Montana Dept. of Commerce  
655-1696 aljonesrdo@bresnan.net

**Warning & Disclaimer:** While this draws on my professional experiences and training, **it is entirely based on**

**my personal opinions and conclusions**, formed if anything more by direct observation over 40 years of coming to Laurel, reading about it in the Billings Gazette over the same period, long talks with many friends, coworkers, clients, and acquaintances who live and work in Laurel, serving many Laurel businesses in varying capacities since the early 1980’s, advising projects there, and wondering about Laurel’s future for most of the 40 years (I’m the son of a location analyst so I’d hear Dad wondering about it from the mid-1960’s forward and he was right about most places.) This is blunt and informal, to make it quick to read and interesting, rather than vague and formal. Where I offend, it’s not intentional and hopefully provokes reconsidering some of the things we all assume, most of this stuff surprised the heck out of me when I finally stumbled across research that both fit the facts and contradicted what I’d been often told. *In other words, my words here in no way reflect the official policies and positions of any part of state government, other than a desire for Laurel to be healthy, happy, and safe.*

## Possible Future Scenarios:

uturist Peter Schwartz, author of thought-provoking books like *"Inevitable Surprises"* starting working with Royal Dutch Shell Oil 20+ years ago in looking forward like science fiction authors do, imagining some trends going forward, others stalling, and some big changes often long on the horizon.

It's usually helpful for a community, thinking about WHERE they want to be rather than just the most obvious road ahead since if you don't know where you want to go, any road will take you there. **With a destination, we can make choices and allocate resources to get there, often far faster than anyone expected.**

So here's a few quick scenarios of Laurel in 2020 based on trends and expectations we heard or saw. Remember that the most obvious future is rarely the one that actually unfolds (i.e. the energy crises, global warming, each war, overpopulation becomes below-replacement population.) From the gloomy perspective of 20 years ago in 1987 here, the demise of the railroad and oil refinery were realistic predictions, the Boise Cascade plant had recently closed, Costco had just opened in Billings while Rimrock Mall was losing anchor stores, the housing and construction markets were devastated and not expected to improve, the stock market had a major drop signaling the economic boom was over, unemployment was closer to 10 than 5% in the county, empty commercial buildings and houses were quite common, Shotgun Willie's was the best known new business in Laurel...it was a bleak time and how we could grow again was a frustrating puzzle. Since then Yellowstone County has grown by 40,000 people, built over \$2 billion worth of new businesses and houses, doubled the number of businesses as well as growing many small firms into medium and large ones, overcome quite a few "impossible"

problem... so take these as guesses couched in what's obvious now.

## Future Scenario #1 : City of Laurel As A Doughnut Hole

Laurel remains surrounded by unannexed development of all kinds. This is easy as it's happened in so many places over the past 50 years. The businesses in the Hole continue to struggle, shrink, and change because their customer base continually erodes and their bad roads, empty neighbors, weeds, crime etc. make it harder to attract customers. The logical thought of incorporating the surrounding donut into the taxbase and using the broader taxbase to support the donut hole's central services and amenities rarely happens for lack of political will and the surrounding developments dodging any commitments or fealty. Only very creative reinvestment, generally led by non-locals remaking over the old areas over several decades works in revitalization and that often doesn't happen or fizzles out.

The cautionary tale is Pittsburgh where the surrounding suburbs have filled with people who love to use the city for work, services, and play but who pay the bulk of their taxes out in the county while Pittsburgh has focused on building untaxed amenities (sports stadiums, hospitals, campuses, museums, etc.) a strategy of higher costs with lower taxbase that while popular has crippled the city at this point (a 2006 article in *Governing* magazine available in their archives at [www.governing.com](http://www.governing.com)) to where one of the few ways to raise revenue in the city was parking space fees...so a monthly spot in a city parking garage topped \$450/month in 2006. Would Laurel have to resort to automated toll roads or selling day passes into the city (sounds silly but the first automated toll roads have been installed in the U.S. in the past few years, see also *Governing* magazine's archives!) Where the donut approach has kind of worked like Portland, it dramatic-ally increased land and building prices within the donut so one could



get a mortgage and redevelop affordable buildings into pricey new ones which works well if you're a high income household and means a 20-50 mile commute if you're not able to afford the inflated costs and instead get to pray a multi-billion dollar, multi-decade light rail commuter train system gets put in place.

**Future Scenario #2: Greater Laurel as just Billings' Affordable Bedroom Community, somewhere between Billings Heights and Lockwood in affordability and amenities (and status.)**

To be a bedroom community means Laurel gets all the public services expectations of homes, that's \$2.40-\$3.40 in demanded services for every \$1.00 in actual taxes paid a study that MSU-Bozeman did in analyzing Gallatin and Broadwater Counties a while back. In other words, if you settle for being a bedroom community, ***there's never enough tax dollars to support the kind of community you want to live in*** (of course we could raise residential property taxes 300% I suppose, most voters would certainly be happy to do that wouldn't they?) . So without continually strengthening and refreshing your business and industrial taxpayers (they consume 30-45 cents worth of public services for every \$1 they consume, subsidizing the homeowners who think they're the ones being overtaxed) the traditional model of property-tax-based public services falls apart. Expanding Laurel's manufacturing sectors and capturing it's local industry, Montana Rail Link's vast yards and the Cenex Harvest States oil refinery into the city tax base are probably critical to surviving as a bedroom community! The flip side of this coin that Laurel isn't seeing as much as it should, perhaps with Wal-mart serving as a positive "tipping point" in getting the local residents' as local customers. The upside of a residential household is that they need a lot of inputs from a wide range of businesses (just look at your checkbook, charge card, and phone numbers you keep)...plumbers, postal

workers, physical therapists, physicians, pharmacists, produce clerks, party supply stores, painters and paint stores, pre-schools, park maintenance workers, police, paramedics, pediatricians, psychiatrists, psychologists, fine arts painters and photographers, patio and porch builders, etc...just from the "p's". If you think about all of the businesses your own household relies on in the course of a decade (so home repair and improvements, appliance repair, home furnishings, etc. don't get forgotten) it's astounding how many you need for a simple middle class life in a decent house and everyone reasonable healthy.

The study I've cited on why bedroom communities don't bring in enough taxes to cover the services they demand is found on through the Montana League of Cities & Town's website <http://www.montana.edu/wwwlgc/publications.html> (it was done by MSU-Bozeman's Political Economy research faculty). Similar studies elsewhere in the U.S. can be found through Governing magazine with varying dollars, but always far in excess of what's paid. So the folks who complain the most bitterly about their tax burden turn out to be getting a heavily subsidized sweetheart deal! **Montana Policy Review: October 1997: "Fiscal Impacts of Alternative Development Patterns: Broadwater and Gallatin Counties, MT"**, by Mark Haggerty. Paper details two county fiscal impact studies in Southwest Montana. In both studies the findings are clear: farmland and open space provide local governments with a surplus of revenue from property taxes and other revenue sources while residential development drains local government coffers.

Choosing a future of being a St. Paul to Billings as St. Paul is the twin city to Minneapolis, instead of just an incorporated suburb near Billings?

### Future Scenario #3 Laurel comes back out from the shadows of Billings

**That's a lot more ambitious than settling for bedroom community or the affordable small town.**

The only real difference would Laurel would become more ambitious for it's future and institutions, rather than be a default bedroom community steadily conceding amenities, resources, and responsibilities to Billings and the County. But the town would look at things different and ask itself "**How does Laurel grow to 25,000 people** (Billings' population in the 1950's), enough to sustain the public services, amenities, and businesses we'd like close to home?"

***Laurel would look for gaps and opportunities that Billings couldn't or wouldn't fill (and that were worth doing rather than just hideously unrewarding and expensive.)***

Here's some ways to get there building on what you have now:

- Maybe that's **building on the excellent park system** and developing the others, like the impressive artificial lake that could develop considerably further (think of many truckloads of sand for deep social-sized beeches and lots of trees for shade.)
- Maybe it's building the **large water reservoir/lake out past the cemetery** that's been talked about for 30 years and that would provide water service to a huge area of land, potentially growing Laurel's population to 15-20,000 people and stopping Billings' endless expansion West.
- Maybe it's **magnet schools** like the excellent high school and impressive new middle school with wildly ambitious and impossible events like Laurel Aviation & Technology Week which is of course far beyond the capacity of a town this size to ever do

(good thing Jack Bayne never realized that-!)"

- Maybe it's **recruiting branch campuses of private higher education** providers (campuses are turning out to one of the most significant economic development tools for communities, but often for the overlooked reasons like improving the variety of dining and entertainment, attracting young adults, and providing substantial employment in their own right.
- **It's probably NOT a convention center, sports arena/complex, downtown historic district, general landscaping, or a big recreation amenity as many communities chase those** and those that get there rarely find them to be the solution they hoped for to other ills.
- Part of this scenario is probably building some **suburban office parks** (1-2 story office buildings with lots of parking and landscaping modeled on a college campus) both to diversify the economic base and workforce as well as reduce the need to commute to Billings for many types of jobs. The housing for such workers has been being built around Laurel for 20 years now and major fiber optic lines run along Interstate 90 and the railroad so this is an easier thing than one would think.
- The **railyards** offer a lot of development possibilities and as the largest intersection/switching point for a vast distance, it's already a unique feature with real advantages and great potential.
- While it wouldn't make the town more unique, it can be the center of more good jobs and enabling new businesses dependent on rail inputs/outputs to be here.
- **Entertainment and dining** are surprising effective differentiators for

a community, more so than obvious amenities. Laurel already has a surprising mix of regionally competitive and interesting dining that just need more marketing but already have the food, mgt., facilities, etc. in place (I eat out a lot and Laurel is a lot better than most of Billings realizes.) The drive-in theater, the massive fireworks show, the old Herbsfest, and the new downtown street festivals are examples of entertainment that differentiates the community while say a multiplex movie theater just repeats it and a live theater venue is probably a ways off.

- **Laurel's airport** is a special strength that can be leveraged a lot further, probably as the general aviation hub for this part of the state as it's just a heckuva lot bigger and has a lot more aviation services of all types already on site. Growing it to a manned control tower, a hundred plus rental hangars, more flight school space, larger repair and refit buildings, additional runways and taxiing areas, and air freight dependent businesses makes a lot of sense but has very tricky economics (boy is it easy to lose money and capital in any aspect of aviation since it's inception.) The airport board's done an exceptional job (I've worked with a lot of airports, Laurel is very lucky or more accurately has made a lot of it's own luck and avoided a lot of common mistakes in airport development.)
- **Tourism** is defined by tourism expert Hal Rothman in his excellent history of the development of Western tourism, "Devil's Bargains, Tourism in the New American West" **as the economic development strategy of places that never developed a strategy and found tourism by default.** Most tourism communities in the West are mining towns that went bust as international commodity

markets changed and resulted in a lot of bargain-priced buildings and infrastructure connected to a major city (Red Lodge, Livingston-Gardiner (also coal-miners' towns), Vail, Aspen, Sun Valley, Deadwood, Helena (gold, silver), Chico Hot Springs (gold), etc..)

- As Laurel doesn't have a big array of attractive old buildings available for a song and lots of cheap old Victorian homes AND lacks a skiable mountain, a big lake, or really unusual wilderness habitat, ***it would have to invest many tens of millions into creative competitive attractions*** (i.e. really big dinosaur museum, really big water park, really big shopping mall, big hospital (since 1 in 3 Billings visitors come there for medical services, specialized medical facilities appear to be a more reliable and valuable draw than any entertainment or sight-seeing venue, with a lot better direct job creation too (surgical nurses make more than hotel maids.))
- Tourism's a very expensive thing to develop as it involves a lot of investment (attractions, lodging, dining, entertainment, transportation, landscaping, etc.) that only gets intermittent use that varies which makes paying for it devilishly hard and bankruptcies a reliable event. Investing the same money and effort in less obvious strategies consistently pays off. Some useful criteria are:
  - Is it yearround or seasonal?
  - What'll it take to make it competitive, not just present?
  - What are the annual operating costs and where do they come from?
  - How much of the ancillary spending is the town really set up to capture and how profitable are those purchases?
  - What land, infrastructure, workforce, public services, **donations/volunteers**, and

investment does this tie up and is that the best use of them?

- Often tourism projects are akin to your teenage demanding a new and exciting sports car (all costs to be borne by you) rather than further education. Like sports cars, tourism attractions and experiences fall in and out of favor far more than is generally realized (and require regular infusions of increasing investment and marketing.) Operating budgets for all tourist attractions can be very challenging while the cost of periodically refreshing them (new displays at a museum, new critters at a zoo, new rides at a theme park/water park, new runs at a ski hill, new stories at a historical site, multimedia instead of a glass display case) is a huge challenge to any site.
- Recruiting population. Rather than wait for people to discover Laurel, there are actually quite a few things that be done proactively and many of these tactics are how the railroads quickly settled their right of ways.
- Encourage sprawl but annex it all. Subsidizing public infrastructure of roads, sewer & water, etc. like America did until the past 20 years or so when we suddenly decided everyone who came in after us to a town would have to pay the full bill for their own infrastructure. There's a strong, reliable hunger for suburban house lots near schools, commuting routes, parks, etc. and Laurel has a lot to offer to families. The more homes that are built in a town, the more the economy booms as each homebuilding dollar can turn over as much as 24 times (compared to 1-2 times for retail, tourism, hospitality or 8-9 times for manufacturing) so it drives a lot of small business (subcontractors) growth while building hundred-year taxbase. Billings has been building

300-400 new houses a year for about 17 years now which barely keeps up with 1-2% population growth while it's cost of house lots with infrastructure has been over \$50,000 for many years now. Using public infrastructure to incentivize and drop the cost of building starter homes, family homes, and middle class neighborhoods has considerable benefit all around while using it to build neighborhoods of 5,000 square foot homes occupied by a couple in their 50's & 60's doesn't do much.

**The difference on this choice is focusing on Laurel as a place to work as well as live**, a place with amenities that are a magnet rather than commonplace or sparse, a place residents brag about and a bustling center of vitality that looks long-term.

#### **Future Scenario #4 Annexation to Billings, Laurel becomes Billings' *far West End***

This would be more of a reflection of a Laurel City Council giving up on providing public services, perhaps during a particularly long brutal budget period with diminished tax revenues and escalating operating costs (oh, most years.) As a Billings resident most of my life, there'd probably be no real efficiencies or cost savings while the really, really West End as Laurel would blur into would continue to see residential subdivisions, probably a new school or two, and a greater load on the employee-based fire department. Law enforcement would be centralized in Billings so local knowledge would be lost so crime would likely go up in reality. The library would be kept as a branch or closed in a cost-cutting move. The parks are considerably more developed than Billings which has far too many undeveloped parks so the current conditions would fossilize and the pool would likely never be improved as there's too much park infrastructure for the money and staff now.

Laurel has a considerably better parks system than more populous sections of Billings.

The staff for various functions at the city are far fewer than people think so most of the services would involve giving one or two staffers 5-10% more people and land to serve in the same 40 hours but not the additional tax income to increase staffing.

The road department function would have more people and resources under Billings but considerably more roads and a lot of new roads in between Billings and Laurel would mean roads would likely improve somewhat over a decade, snow removal probably the most.

Taxes look like they'd stay the same or go down a little (spreading the services over a broader tax base) as Laurel residents pay slightly more (\$1,511) than Billings residents (\$1,372) do for an equal-value home according to a 2005 analysis for the City/County Planning Dept..

Housing prices would likely go up somewhat as part of the city.

The landfill issue would be resolved for more folks as city garbage collection and the Billings landfill would be the overwhelming solution.

If there was a local option sales tax passed that Billings participated in, that might increase real revenues somewhat but the pent-up demands on public services and infrastructure after a long period, the 1980's, of postponed and avoided costs would easily absorb that.

So while the imminent merging with Laurel into a greater Billings has been something I've heard about since my dad talking about it in the late 60's as we'd drive to the Laurel fireworks display, it still looks about 10-20 years away from a seamless flow of residential housing from West Billings to East Laurel and in Greater Los Angeles, it's just a small sign on the road that tells you the rest of the buildings on the block are in another incorporated city.

There are probably some advantages to a merger that would really happen but it

probably wouldn't be the obvious ones like more efficient government or more public services. As we've seen with the repeated considerations of annexing Lockwood into Billings the past 30 years, the annexed areas have typically been upscale residential developments with newish infrastructure and politically-potent residents. So if the pattern continues, Billings would eventually annex (2017-2027) the nice developments surrounding Laurel while leaving most of their real burden of public services on the unannexed City of Laurel. It may not make much sense, but it's the way I'd bet.

### **Future Scenario #5 Annexation of Surrounding Neighborhoods so greater Laurel truly becomes the City of Laurel.**

As we were repeatedly told (but don't know if it's true), the city hasn't been annexing adjacent developments for perhaps 30 years so a dense doughnut of development has surrounded the city defacto using all city services but direct water/sewer connections, solid waste, and police (so yes to using roads, schools, library, parks...akin to me of a self-invited guest camping out for years in a spare bedroom but claiming rent/utilities sharing wasn't fair because they didn't have a space in the garage for their car.)

As these neighborhoods that make logical sense seemed clearly known during our tours and visits, the next steps would be:

As you can see, it's a fairly simple process of identifying the area, coming up with a plan, contacting the property owners affected, and a series of votes by the property owners and city council.

#### Montana Codes Annotated:

**7-2-4311. Annexation of contiguous land by cities or towns.** Any tracts or parcels of land that have been or may be platted into lots or blocks, streets, and alleys or platted for parks, the map or plat of which is filed in the office of the county clerk and recorder of the county in which the tracts or parcels of land are situated, or any unplatted land that has been surveyed and for which a

certificate of survey has been filed, as provided by law, if the platted or unplatted land is contiguous to any incorporated city or town, may be embraced within the corporate limits of the city or town, and the boundaries of the city or town may be extended to include the platted or unplatted land in the manner provided in [7-2-4312](#) through [7-2-4314](#) and [7-2-4325](#).

**History:** En. Sec. 1, Ch. 30, L. 1905; re-en. Sec. 3214, Rev. C. 1907; re-en. Sec. 4978, R.C.M. 1921; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 52, L. 1925; re-en. Sec. 4978, R.C.M. 1935; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 239, L. 1957; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 238, L. 1959; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 217, L. 1961; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 281, L. 1967; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 510, L. 1977; R.C.M. 1947, 11-403(part); amd. Sec. 2, Ch. 485, L. 1997.

**The sticking point for Laurel to do the annexations becomes apparent here in the state law 7-2-4723, a plan and financing for bringing the infrastructure up.**

This is where the City of Billings discussion about annexing Lockwood in 2007 ran quickly aground when an internal public works dept. study found bringing the infrastructure up to city standards there might cost more than \$80 million.

However this statute assumes that communities have realistic plans in place to finance and improve the infrastructure within their existing city boundaries, rarely the case unless you consider realistic plans ending with “and then a bunch of grant money will appear from the federal government somehow somewhere and it’ll get done.” This caliber of planning is like a teenager from a large family assuming their parents will buy them cars, houses, health care, college educations, vacations, etc. just because they need it and ask for it a lot. The City of Laurel already has a Capital Improvements Plan that appears to have a lot of thought and research already into it, as well as a pretty good understanding of the surrounding external area’s infrastructure, in

other words such a plan could be internally generated pretty quickly.

The infrastructure of the areas surrounding Laurel appeared to have pretty decent infrastructure in place already and while delaying water extension pretends it’ll get cheaper and easier the more built-up an area gets (or that people will no longer use water at home I guess so it’s just a passing fad) so working out the garbage service, extending the police coverage (hopefully by adding an officer or two with the new taxbase), fire already serves them as do the schools...it just doesn’t look that difficult once one gets past the fantasy that a city needs tens of millions of dollars in hand to start infrastructure improvements right after annexation. The other fantasy is of course that I can live just outside a city and enjoy all of it’s investments without paying one’s fair share towards them.

**7-2-4732. Contents of plan for extension of services.** (1) Specifically, the plans for the extension of services shall provide a long-range plan for extension of services and the acquisition of properties outside the corporate limits. This plan must show anticipated development a minimum of 5 years into the future, showing on a yearly basis how the municipality plans to extend services, develop and add sections to the city.

(2) The plans shall:

(a) provide for extending police protection, fire protection, garbage collection, and streets and street maintenance services to the area to be annexed on substantially the same basis and in the same manner as such services are provided within the rest of the municipality prior to annexation;

(b) provide for future extension of streets and of major trunk water mains, sewer outfall lines, and other utility services into the area to be annexed, so that when such streets and utility lines become necessary and are constructed, property owners in the area to be annexed will be able to secure such services, according to the policies in effect in such municipality for extending such services

to individual lots or subdivisions;

(c) if extension of streets and water, sewer, or other utility lines into the area to be annexed is necessary, set forth a proposed timetable for construction of such streets and utility lines.

(3) A method must be set forth by which the municipality plans to finance extension of services into the area to be annexed. If the area is serviced currently by adequate water and sewage services, streets, curbs, and gutters and no capital improvements are needed to provide adequate services stipulated by this section and [7-2-4731](#), the municipality must provide the area to be annexed with a plan of how they plan to finance other services to be included within the district--mainly, police protection, fire protection, garbage collection, street, and street maintenance services, as well as continued utility service.

(4) In this annexation plan, it must be clearly stated that the entire municipality tends to share the tax burden for these services, and if so, the area may be annexed without a bond issue under the provisions of this part.

**History:** En. 11-518 by Sec. 5, Ch. 364, L. 1974; R.C.M. 1947, 11-518(part).

### **Future Scenario 5.5: Going beyond just annexing housing, and annexing major industry sites as part of that.**

One of the most surprising things about the City of Laurel was that it's two biggest taxpayers **aren't**. The oil refinery and railyards pay their property taxes to the county while obviously having most of their impact on the city. One can look at those under "Tax & Assessment" at the county website <http://www.co.yellowstone.mt.us/>. In a quick sloppy look, I couldn't find what Montana Rail Link or Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad pay for the Laurel rail yards while the Cenex Harvest States oil refinery looks like it pays around \$3.2 million in property taxes annually. The railyards

are going to be far less in tax yield as there are few buildings, not a lot of new equipment, and most of the taxable assets are long-depreciated. At least half of the property taxes would be captured by the school district, about an eighth would go to the state, the county would still get a share, so it could be 10-15% of the total property taxes from those sites would flow to Laurel with annexation.

That could still be about \$500,000/yr, which'd be significant for the city budget (one could probably add the two professional fire dept. staff soon to be required and add 3 police officers or service \$8-12 million in bond-funded public infrastructure projects, all things we heard consistently as needs.)

State statutes currently make it strangely difficult for a city to annex an adjacent industrial facility, however if larger annexations of the surrounding areas including much of the outlying residential happened to include these sites, it's considerably more doable under current state laws:

It would appear from section 2 here in the current state law that the Montana Rail Link yards (transportation) or the Cenex Harvest States oil refinery (refining) or other manufacturing sites could be annexed at all, but the critical phrase is the last, that only under that part of the annexation codes is it prohibited (there are other parts and paths, the local government can choose which route to use between sections 42-47, this is only 45 and 46 here blocking it, see [MCA 7-2-4304.](#))

**MCA 7-2-4608. Restrictions on annexation power.** (1) No territory which, at the time such petition for such proposed annexation is presented to such council or legislative body, forms any part of any incorporated city or town shall be annexed under the provisions of this part.

(2) No parcel of land which, at the time such petition for such proposed annexation is presented to such council or legislative body, is used in whole or in part for agricultural, mining, smelting, refining, transportation, or

any industrial or manufacturing purpose or any purpose incident thereto shall be annexed under the provisions of this part.

**History:** En. Secs. 3, 4, Ch. 168, L. 1945; R.C.M. 1947, 11-508, 11-509.

**7-2-4303. Restrictions on annexation power.** Except as provided in [7-2-4314](#)(1)(d), land used for industrial, railroad, or manufacturing purposes may not be included in a city or town under the provisions of [7-2-4311](#) through [7-2-4314](#) and [7-2-4325](#) without the written consent of the owners of the land.

**History:** En. Sec. 1, Ch. 30, L. 1905; re-en. Sec. 3214, Rev. C. 1907; re-en. Sec. 4978, R.C.M. 1921; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 52, L. 1925; re-en. Sec. 4978, R.C.M. 1935; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 239, L. 1957; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 238, L. 1959; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 217, L. 1961; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 281, L. 1967; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 510, L. 1977; R.C.M. 1947, 11-403(part); amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 485, L. 1997.

So here's the exception, [MCA 7-2-4314](#), in that if the annexation is a lot more than just an industrial site and the procedures are followed properly, it just takes 51% majority of property owners (each gets 1 vote) to approve the annexation. So if Laurel annexed out past Yardmaster Road and across the Yellowstone River to cover the current actual reach of most of it's public services and where water and roads would further stimulate development, it'd pick up considerable more tax base that didn't consume more public services than it paid for (like purely residential annexation would, although since the outlying residential neighborhoods already consume most of the public services, it's questionable to leave them with the extra subsidy).

**7-2-4314. Hearing on question of annexation -- vote on question of annexation -- resolution of annexation.**

(1) (a) The city or town clerk shall, at the next regular meeting of the city or town council

after the expiration of the 20-day period provided for in [7-2-4313](#), forward all written communication received by the clerk for the city or town council's consideration.

(b) Except as provided in subsection (1)(d), if the city or town council, after considering all written communication, adopts a resolution approving the annexation, the implementation of the resolution must be approved by the vote of the registered voters residing in the area proposed for annexation. The resolution must state the date on which the proposed annexation is intended to take effect.

(c) Within 45 days of adopting the resolution for annexation, the city or town council shall submit the question of approving the resolution to the registered voters residing in the area proposed for annexation. A notice of election must be mailed to all registered voters residing in the area proposed for annexation.

(d) If the area to be annexed contains less than 300 recorded parcels, the city or town council, after considering all written communication, may adopt a resolution approving the annexation and the boundaries of the city or town must be extended to include the platted tracts or parcels of land or unplatted land for which a certificate of survey has been filed. An area annexed pursuant to this subsection may include land used for railroad purposes. A city or town council may not annex by resolution an area containing less than 300 recorded parcels if the resolution is disapproved in writing by a majority of real property owners of the area proposed to be annexed. If the resolution is disapproved by a majority of the landowners, the city or town council may not on its own initiative propose further resolutions relating to the annexation of the area or any portion of the area, without petition, for a period of 1 year.

(2) Except as provided in subsection (1)(d), further resolutions relating to the annexation of the area or any portion of the area may not be considered or acted upon by the council on its own initiative, without petition, for a



period of 5 years from the date of disapproval by the voters as provided in subsection (1).

**History:** En. Sec. 1, Ch. 30, L. 1905; re-en. Sec. 3214, Rev. C. 1907; re-en. Sec. 4978, R.C.M. 1921; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 52, L. 1925; re-en. Sec. 4978, R.C.M. 1935; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 239, L. 1957; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 238, L. 1959; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 217, L. 1961; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 281, L. 1967; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 510, L. 1977; R.C.M. 1947, 11-403(part); amd. Sec. 4, Ch. 66, L. 1995; amd. Sec. 5, Ch. 485, L. 1997.

I've gone into this in greater depth than usual as it kept coming up throughout the assessment and I'd never thought about it before here, while working on annexations in Hardin, Livingston, and incorporation questions at Lockwood, Gardiner, and Absarokee. When we annexed 700 acres in Hardin a few years ago to create an industrial park and allow more water distribution infrastructure, there was already a Cenex Harvest States asphalt plant in the middle of the site and while they weren't enthused about it, the majority vote was and now the asphalt plant is served by a massive new paved city street with full infrastructure available along the street for connection. The Livingston annexation was almost 2 miles West of the city limits, taking \$1.5 million to extend the sewer and water to the West Interchange which we covered with a Tax Increment Financed Industrial District (a useful tool that could be applied at a number of sites in Laurel as Klessens mentioned earlier in this report.)...

The greatest resistance to this would likely come from County Government as they'd lose part of two large taxpayers for whom they don't have to provide much service to ("cash cows" we call 'em) and I'm sure I'll catch holy heck from at least one of them for even showing how it could be and has been done. If MRL and CHS Harvest States see that their tax bills won't go up much if at all (remember the coker upgrade was already granted a declining 50% tax break by the commissioners already),

something the Montana Dept. of Revenue appraisal staff in Billings can readily calculate to see what it is, that'd leave the greatest resistance from the County, ask for Sheri or Georgeane at Revenue.

### **Future Scenario 6: Wal-mart's Impact**

I've been thinking about this and doing some research since the new Laurel Wal-mart was announced. There's a lot written but only Charles Fishman's 2006 book "The Wal-Mart Effect" appeared to draw on lots of deep research where much else was anecdotal or fuzzy.

Fundamentally whatever damage Wal-mart did to Laurel has been over the past 15 or so years there's been a Wal-mart on the far west end of Billings, gradually joined by the array of "big box stores" or "category-killers" such as Home Depot, Lowes, Best Buy, Petsmart, Officemax, Costco, as well as megacardealerships. These resulted in Laurel collapsing and blowing away with the last residents fleeing the town sometime in the early 1990's, right?

It does reflect the demise of the J.C. Penny's store (Wal-mart now sells more clothing than any other retailer and it's particularly devastating to men's and boy's clothing sellers the Iowa Wal-Mart studies found.) Retail clothing stores will be tough to add or revive in Laurel, but that's a very tough category (women's independent clothing boutiques have SBA's highest failure history with 97% failure in the first 5 years-the average for small businesses is about 50% don't make the first 5 years.)

It also cuts an average of about 30% into local grocery store sales, the primary reason Ricci's have reinvented themselves as a convenience store instead of remaining a full-service grocery store. How will Jan's IGA compete against that kind of loss in a high volume, low-margin business (grocery retailing has among the lowest profit margins of any retailer while huge discount stores

have excellent profit margins, *source Risk Management Association's Annual Financial Statement Studies.*) Jan's IGA is luckily a very well run store in a superb location and of a competitive size. Focusing on fresh meat quality, fresh produce selection and quality, fresh bakery, deli and prepared take home meals quality, and other high margin departments that Wal-mart doesn't do very well or is crippled by it's distance to it's distribution centers (Jan's are in Billings, Wal-marts are in Cheyenne and N. Colorado) or it's exclusive relationship with Tyson/IBP for it's meat. The danger zone for Jan's would be competing on national brands of packaged goods as Wal-mart is 15% or more of those company's sales and able to extract unmatched discounts as a result. Costco demonstrates how a quality focus instead of just price pays off as it's stores are doing about double the sales of the Sam's Clubs.

The upside of Wal-mart for Jan's is that many of the regional customers from Carbon, Stillwater and Sweetgrass County will likely come to Laurel instead of Billings now to beat the traffic. That should create considerable new sales for Jan's and Ace Hardware, as well as additional business for the restaurants.

The most pressured remaining Laurel businesses I think will be the pharmacies as Wal-mart's been turning it's attention to that (recent article in Fortune magazine) to use it's market power to restructure pricing.

The surprising beneficiaries of Wal-mart will likely be Laurel Ford and Fichtner Chevrolet as the huge increase in traffic going past their vehicle lots should increase walk-in traffic and test-drives as well as turnover in both used and new. 10-20 good paying jobs added at the dealerships over the next 5 years wouldn't be unrealistic and car dealership jobs are considerably better ones than they used to be with the new generation of auto mechanics at dealerships making \$30-100,000/yr (source, MADA & NADA 2005.)

## **Laurel's Water Distribution and Sewer System Challenges**

The glib answer is that Laurel needs more taxpayers sharing the load for the water/wastewater treatment plants and lifting stations that pump the water uphill. The nuanced answer is that the distribution pipes for water, especially tearing through existing streets and sidewalks are painfully expensive. Ultimately a comprehensive water distribution system looks to be needed for Greater Laurel and is probably about 10-20 years behind the curve now. There are some external funding sources for water development, far less than people assume or were there up until the early 1980's when communities really did get 50-75% of their infrastructure costs in federal grants. Now it's what the area's ability and appetite for long-term bond debt to pay for the infrastructure. The only advantage is that doing it now is considerably less expensive than doing it later, given the dramatic and steady cost increases in all of the materials of water infrastructure, particularly Portland Cement and PVC pipe. Laurel just received \$750,000 through my agency from the last legislature towards water projects and obviously knows how to find us.

## **MAIN TOPIC: BUSINESS EXPANSION AND RETENTION**

### **ISSUES:**

**Marketing program** - After 30 years in marketing, I still get lost when communities talk about a marketing program. To who? For What? What offers? How far and how often is the message to go out? How do we pay for it? The planning steps would be to identify what's expected:

- a) More retail and dining customers?
- b) More tourists for retail, dining, lodging, gas...?
- c) More regional customers for all of the above plus services like car repair, medical, haircuts, etc?

- d) More profitable customers for underutilized services, i.e. nice dinners at area restaurants, antique shopping, art sales, luxury vehicle buyers, private pilots, intermodal shippers, long-haul truck drivers, commercial travelers, ...
- e) People to move to Laurel-seniors, families with school-age children, workers, immigrants, Californians, Coloradans, Minnesotans...
- f) Businesses to move to Laurel from elsewhere in the area
- g) Businesses to relocate or build branches in Laurel
- h) Government agencies to locate branches in Laurel
- i) Greater Laurel residents who don't utilize Laurel businesses much.
- j) Parents of students competing in events held in Laurel
- k) Major events here like Aviation Week, Fireworks, Herbsfest, etc.
- l) Attracting external investment (manufacturing, motels, franchised restaurants, store chains, etc.)

All of these have been the targets of organized and disorganized marketing efforts by communities over the past hundred years. "Shop Local" campaigns seem to be the most consistently unsuccessful while targeted recruitment of government offices (it's not chance that the regional BLM, Bureau of Reclamation, BIA, Indian Health Service, etc. ended up in Billings or Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls) is probably the most significant and long-term successful.) So of course most efforts focus on what rarely works, just like distant business recruitment instead of local business expansion.

The focal point for this would be the Laurel Chamber working closely with Big Sky Economic Development Authority, the county-funded and staffed organization that deals with a lot of these issues continually. The Billings Area Chamber of Commerce's new head John Brewer is considerably more

expansive in his thinking and would be a strong and smart ally as well.

For the more business-focused marketing goals like specific customers, there are two routes with generally both pursued. The business markets itself to those audiences and then also collaborates with complementary businesses in joint promotions, joint ads, or simply linking each other's websites to tap each others' customer flows.

Excellent resources for thinking about that include Jay Conrad Levinson's classics "Guerrilla Marketing", "Guerilla Advertising" as well as books on retail promotions by Jeff Slutsky and Jeffrey Davidson. "How to Drive Your Competition Crazy" by Guy Kawasaki, "How We Buy" by Paco Underhill, and "Being the Customer" by Gumpert are quite helpful too.

- **Rail** I've had periodic discussions with Montana Rail Link about developing the railyards into more of a rail-served manufacturing and distribution business park as the importance of rail has grown again for so many businesses. MRL's been quite receptive, up to being willing to erect buildings to rent to suitable tenants with heavy rail needs, but the patchwork of tracks, MRL or BNSF-owned land, and land owned by a range of other folks makes it a complex design. City water & sewer already come up to the edge of the railyards and creating a Tax Increment Financed Industrial District there to extend the city infrastructure into the site is a tool the City's already been willing to explore. Ideally it would add more family-wage jobs and diverse economic activity to Laurel while further strengthening the viability/activity of the railyards.
- When the city wants to explore that, the city could apply for a total of probably \$40,000 in grants from the

Montana Dept. of Commerce CDBG-ED planning grants and Big Sky Economic Development Trust Fund to fund the engineering and legal work, with match potentially from MRL. Since I'd be the contact on those applications and project, call me.

- 
- **Airport** years of investment have created another very unusual resource in a state with thousands of private planes, many who want pilot training, and growing charter services, while convenient to a very land-locked regional airport. The airport board knows well the primary funding tool, 90-95% Federal Aviation Administration Grants and I've worked with them on the few other tools. Essentially more rental hangars owned by the airport and rented to private planes is probably the key, but hangar rents I number-crunched didn't look like they'd pay the debt service on building new ones so it won't be easy. Building the airport to have the expensive but significant tools like a manned air control tower could be a step to getting air freight shipping operations there (the next logical customer base after private pilots and charters.) The considerable pasture land close to the airport hold obvious development possibilities but it all waits on the extension of water infrastructure to the area (and then additional streets) but over the next 10-20 years as Laurel grows East and Billings grows West, the new residential infill may be enough to pull the infrastructure out there.
- **Business relocation** *Laurel has benefited with lots of available land near infrastructure, a desirable workforce, and a receptive attitude. Examples of past successes include Wood's Power Grip, Helena Chemical,*

*Brenntag Chemical, Diamond Recovery Systems, Plum Building Trusses (now gone), Fox Lumber in the former Boise Cascade manufactured home complex, Wal-mart supercenter, Movie Gallery...that's a record* communities considerably larger envy as it's mostly manufacturers with distant markets bringing new dollars into the local economy. There are site opportunities for businesses in every direction from Laurel and impressive combinations of transportation and infrastructure. BSEDA already proposes some Laurel sites to inquiries coming in to the area (I've been on those presentations.) The better the information available on empty sites or buildings, the easier this is while the place that no one knows who owns it, the past uses, the infrastructure it has or lacks, etc. become the sites overlooked or skipped in the always bizarrely short time to respond to most inquiries. Informing Linda Beck at BSEDA of available sites you have at [lbeck@bigskyeda.org](mailto:lbeck@bigskyeda.org) is the smart step with as much information on the site as you can put together rather than just a size and desired price.

- **Refinery and manufacturing** The increasing flow of Canadian tar-sands oils as well as Williston Basin crude oil indicate a rosy future for Laurel's oil refinery and almost certain continued upgrades and capacity expansions over the coming decades like the current \$350 million coker project, suggesting a third generation of Laurel residents will work there as the second generation approaches retirement. If coal to fuels catches on around here, a coal gasification plant converting the coal into the crude oil for the Cenex refinery to turn into diesel, gasoline, and aviation gas isn't a crazy idea, particularly given

Laurel's rail capacity for coal trains. A coal gasification plant to feed the current capacity of the Cenex refinery would require around 3 million tons of coal a year, not release the usual coal emissions no one likes, and add several billion dollars worth of taxbase to the city. There's far more going on in actually building these around the world and the U.S. than is generally realized so this isn't a crazy possibility by 2020. I work on these.

- The diverse manufacturing in Laurel from Curt's 9 Finger Mustard to Wood's suction systems for moving glass or granite all have considerable expansion potential as well as opportunities for suppliers, collaborators, customers, etc. Most are already using the public resources available to them but any manufacturer is welcome to contact me and we'll go over the full array of tools that might help them, i.e. workforce training grants, trade show assistance, exporting and foreign market help, marketing and financial analysis, productivity and quality training, research funding, recruiting strategies, location and energy-usage help, etc.
- 
- **Consumer services** This is the most undeveloped opportunity in Laurel we noticed with far fewer providers than a community of 10-15,000 can support. Convenience and familiarity/word-of-mouth is key in these businesses while they're often home-based or fill up Main Street former retail buildings and office space quite nicely. Many more of these may already be present in Laurel than we realize, being home-based so signage and advertising are minimal. Making it easier to run and develop home-based businesses like allowing a small sign on the house

or in the front yard (Billings doesn't) would be powerful and simply a matter of city ordinances. An MSU Extension Service phone survey back in the early 1990's found every Montana home they called (thousands I think) had some sort of part-time or full-time business operating out of it (even babysitting and mowing lawns is a business.) The more small businesses a community has and the more they grow, the more they create demand for other businesses (accountants, lawyers, web-developers, computer support, deliveries, graphic designers, consultants, insurance agents, builders, architects, etc.) But can home-based service businesses grow into anything significant? Nearly all businesses start in the founder's house or garage, even today, i.e. Ford, Kitchenaid, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Sun, Dell, Gateway, Playboy, Yahoo, Google, Goodyear, Sierra, etc. so you never know who you're encouraging or discouraging.

- People who want to explore starting a service business should start at the library. Barnes and Noble's has quite a few "how-to" books for specific service businesses as does Entrepreneur Magazine for a surprising array. Entrepreneur magazine's January issue lists the top 500 franchises in the U.S., many of which are service businesses with varying degrees of brand names and support (from great to disappointing.)

The next step is working with SCORE or the SBA Small Business Development Center at BSEDA (ask for Rebecca Helvik at 256-6871 and register for the next pre-business workshop, a requirement before free one-on-one counseling is available.)

**Main Topic:**

- **Emergency Services: Fire, Police, Ambulance**

This is probably where expanding the current taxbase through annexation has the greatest impact in providing more support for the Laurel Police Dept. while the Fire Department already serves a vast area. The police officers had 7,000 calls for service last year which with 7 officers and many calls requiring 2 officers (any time there's the potential for violence.)

Adding a K9 unit would dramatically increase the anti-drug work as well as allow tracking of criminals if done quickly enough (the criminal leaves a fear-based pheromone trail from the crime scene back to their vehicle or home, if a sensitive enough dog gets there soon enough they can track them) but that would be about a \$100,000 (many weeks of training the officer with the dog, the dogs are \$5-10,000, and adapting a police car so the dog can ride safely is also pricey, the sheriff's drug dogs have been my neighbors the past 10 years.)

Adding one to two more detectives is the most effective way to decrease crime as patrol response is generally after a crime has occurred and since criminals typically commit hundreds of large and small crimes in a year (often 2-3 a day), investigation leading to conviction of a single criminal can reduce overall crime 10-20% in a community this size (in Billings it takes about a dozen to reach that.) Increasing street patrols don't appear to significantly decrease crime or make people safer, but they're very expensive in time and vehicle costs. There's a shelf's worth of the U.S. Dept. of Justice's in-depth studies on crime and crime prevention/investigation in the government documents section (US DoJ shelves) in the MSU-Billings campus library...a great source of data for smart fund-raising/grantwriting.

Beyond annexing more taxbase in to support the ongoing costs of the police department, quick fixes for issues like equipment can come from:

The Montana Board of Crime Control at the Montana Dept. of Justice which mostly disperses federal grants to communities with interesting ideas and compelling applications.

The Montana Coal Board, part of the Montana Dept. of Commerce, has funded many law enforcement resources across the counties impacted by coal and Laurel would be eligible to apply. They can contact me for assistance on that. The Coal Board meets usually in Billings and it's an easy application to write.

Businesses can be supportive of specific targets like drug dogs (the City of Billings and Yellowstone County's original dogs were funded with business and service club donations considerably and quickly), car-based video, etc.. Wal-mart donates by the way.

The other fundamental resource is enlisting the rest of the community which Laurel has worked to do but every community could do better. Neighborhood Watch is considerably more effective when members are taught how to notice, observe, and record drug distribution activity instead of pretending they'll notice a burglary in progress. The trick there is to record all of the license plates of the vehicles visiting the suspected drug house instead of just calling in a guess (they might be selling Avon or Amway out of the house.) Police running 20-30 license plates visiting a particular house will generally turn up quite a few familiar names, giving them probable cause for a search warrant as well as inside witnesses (parole violators especially.) The U.S. Dept. of Justice publications provide a lot of good stuff for such training while just about everything on television about crime is more fantasy-based than the monster movies so it gets people looking for the wrong things (like teaching novice Montana deer hunters about Bengal Tigers in rural India a thousand years ago and ascribing Tyrannosaurus Rex capacities to the tigers to make the story better.)

The city can also send an array of inspectors (building inspector, fire inspector,

sanitarian) to suspected drug houses, find violations, and close the house to human occupancy until it's brought up to code. While drug dealers are used to using lawyers for criminal charges, they're pretty helpless in the face of building code enforcement. Chief Reuben Greenberg used this very effectively in Charleston, South Carolina and his book is in the Billings Public Library. An array of expensive repairs also tends to get landlords considering who they rent to more carefully.

The cheapest way to get a handle on 7,000 calls is steadily better and deeper use of information like the Compstat system pioneered in New York City by Chief William Braaton. Diana Walker is the crime analyst for the Billings Police Department and would have a lot of good advice. Geographically tracking and analyzing the crimes helps (property criminals tend to act within 6 blocks of where they live) as well as other pattern information like what's stolen, victim chosen, entry points, behavior during the crime, etc...the creator of the FBI's criminal profiling unit John Douglas has written a series of very useful guides to looking for patterns at crime scenes as has his colleague Robert Ressler (you can find them in the library and Barnes & Noble's crime section, the Laurel Police Dept. had a copy at one point too.)

The most significant crime in terms of public impact in Laurel is probably drug distribution from what the officers told us. The most significant economic crime is probably shoplifting. The average retail business loses 3+% of gross sales to a combination of shoplifting, employee pilferage, vendor theft, and clerical errors...that's the same as the net profit for these businesses or more so it's a significant loss. In Billings that would be about \$60 million in shoplifting losses annually vs. about \$2-3 million in burglary losses and generally less than \$10-20,000 in armed robbery losses. The best resources on getting a handle on this come from the University of Florida's Criminology Dept's Annual Retail

Loss Survey, you can order it over the web for around \$30 and it's outstandingly helpful. The American Society for Industrial Security's website bookstore, [www.ASISonline.org](http://www.ASISonline.org) has a number of very good books on retail loss prevention written by savvy veterans. Shoplifter's Anonymous website has very good information and it's also a program that we ran for awhile in Billings that provides useful options in getting people out of the shoplifting addiction (they become addicted to the adrenaline rush from the theft.)

## **MAIN TOPIC: HISTORICAL PRESERVATION/TOURISM ISSUES:**

### **Historical buildings**

The long empty buildings along Main Street came up repeatedly and we walked around a number of them for a closer look. A little acknowledged issue is that decrepit empty buildings decrease the property values of the neighboring buildings and discourage customer traffic, in other words shifting real costs onto neighboring businesses and local government. More importantly empty buildings have considerably greater risks to a block:

1. If you look at fire research, the worst fires often start in unoccupied buildings. That's primarily because there's no one to notice them (or alarm/sprinkler systems) so the fire isn't detected until it blows out the windows or penetrates the roof, threatening adjacent structures before the fire department's even been alerted. It's a good way to lose half or more of a city block in a single night. Getting them shaped up can be at the behest of the state or local fire marshal in some cases, simply by identifying and declaring them a fire hazard.
2. Empty buildings attract crime ranging from serving as illegal drug markets, hideouts, illegal drug use, gang bases,

stolen goods dispersal or storage, underage drinking parties or temporary underage nightclubs/raves, as well as more mundane shelter for homeless and runaways where assaults are common. Ask the Laurel Police as well as area teenagers and the benign old building or its alley, parking lots, roof, etc. often take on a very different perspective.

3. Empty buildings are also ideal nesting and breeding places for rats, mice, bats, feral cats, insects, pigeons, etc. which can then plague a neighborhood, one reason County Sanitarians can get them cleaned up under Public Nuisance or Urban Renewal state laws.
4. The County has enacted its own ordinances to enforce the state's Community Decay law which can be a very effective tool to get empty buildings addressed before they're a complete ruin or pile of ashes, regardless of how irresponsible the owner is.

In other words for the worst buildings, the city attorney working with the local, county, and state inspectors at the behest of the city council actually have quite a range of tools that can work relatively quickly.

Most of the empty buildings looked structurally sound from the street (but I'm not a structural engineer) and worth rehabbing, often with relatively modest investment. That suggests either there's a lack of tenants/owners or the current owners haven't been marketing them effectively (often times that means they've been sort of waiting for a tenant who'll pay for shaping the building up too.) The Chamber or City could contact each of the vacant building owners to see what their plans are for the building and to gather enough information so if someone did become interested, they could be quickly

told enough to whet their curiosity. We found when we asked about specific buildings, no one knew much about them including who or where the current owners were. That disconnect on information misses a lot of opportunities and we find that in every community when we look for unutilized or underutilized buildings and empty lots.

**Tax credits** (These are feasible on any building on the National Historic Register or that was built before 1936 and are often the key to making the renovation of a building feasible, i.e. Montana Avenue in Billings was rehabbed with these. The best guidelines on using these are Donovan Rypkema's how-to books available through the National Main Street Center's online bookstore <https://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=3478&site=6>) (you'll notice their new feature title is on Commercial District Restoration.) The State's Historic Preservation Officer Rolene Schliesman is very knowledgeable [rschliesman@mt.gov](mailto:rschliesman@mt.gov) on these tools as well.

### **What could the empty downtown buildings be used for?**

There's a very good book for helping figure this out, "*Real Estate Market Analysis*" by Schmitt & Bretz through the Urban Land Institute's bookstore online <http://www.uli.org//AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home>

A considerably older book by the country's leading retail location analyst, "*The Selection of Retail Locations*" by Richard Paul Nelson makes the point that a downtown retailer is dependent on who works downtown and their shopping during their lunch hour. The buildings along Laurel's Main Street predate supermarkets (1930's) so their lack of parking for high volume use (even though it's easy to park in downtown Laurel these days) and more importantly their shortage of retail display space (the more square feet you have the better it is almost infinitely...Rimrock Mall has 2.5 million square feet under one



roof!) So the retailer has to be high value, high margin, high ticket items to survive (notice your pharmacies are still there), other examples would be art galleries, jewelers, shoe stores, antique stores, etc. and they'll struggle too. Since the 1920's, downtown retail locations have been very difficult, explaining why most downtowns have relatively few buildings after that date except for office buildings, banks, and hotels.

So what could work on Laurel's Main Street if not most retailers? Filling it in with consumer and business services businesses has been the most reliable and has been happening slowly for years in Laurel too (insurance agents, hair salons, real estate offices, financial services, accountants, lawyers, etc.) , it's odd it hasn't happened more in downtown Laurel given the customer base there which is what makes me think potential tenants/owners are having a hard time coming to terms on the empty buildings.

An interesting angle would be to focus on developing even more destination restaurants there and **marketing Laurel's Main Street as the place to go when you're hungry**, tapping into the King Avenue West shoppers who couldn't get into Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Applebees, Famous Dave's, IHOP, etc. or were just tired of them. Red Lodge already gets more of it's visitor dollars spent on dining than anything else (and you thought it was a ski town or park entrance!)

Getting a meal somewhere different than their hometown options has been listed as the top reason in past surveys of shoppers coming to Billings from the vast region. Laurel already has very strong and interesting dining (I've eaten at all of your places and they all do an unusually good job with the Owl, DJ's, and Mabel's especially drawing me back. Filling in a few more Main Street storefronts probably with specific ethnic cuisines that are hard to find but gaining in popularity as well as classics so missing ones are probably several more pizza places, Asian but not classic Chinese (Thai,

Vietnamese, Laotian, Korean, and East Indian all have some offerings in Billings and are growing nationally), Spanish (not to be confused with Mexican), Brazilian, Jamaican, German, French (5% of many of the surrounding communities residents identify themselves as mostly French so it may be an untapped market), Cajun, Diner & comfort foods, American Southern...a good place to identify these trends is in Nation's Restaurant News or Food Processing magazine.

This could be a jointly funded billboard campaign along this stretch of Interstate 90, "Hungry? Bored? You can always eat great in Laurel. 12 (?) to chose from!" Lamar Advertising handles most of the billboards in the area and has a Billings office where LaShelle Meidinger's very effective help.

## **MAIN TOPIC: DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT ISSUES:**

- **Business Climate**

It's interesting as from looking at Main Street you'd think Laurel's business climate was in steep decline when the reality is in general it's booming. But if the casual look isn't encouraging, most investment doesn't happen...it's based a lot more on what everyone else seems to be doing than hard research I continue to find so if there's a hum of activity and construction, others show up. Getting the vacant storefronts back into some kind of business use and cleaned up is thus disproportionately impactful in the same odd way that people assume a school with a winning team must be strong in academic value too or that a school with a new exterior is better than a hundred year old school as though it's the bricks, not the teachers, who do the instruction. Even putting up "For Sale or Lease" signs in all of the vacant buildings would help, when it's closed, empty, and there's not even an attempt to market it, it's quite a discouraging site.

- **Entry ways**

While large and modest landscaping has been discussed at the highway entrances, it's a vast area that'd be difficult to care for, let alone sprinkle from new wells drilled in there. Planting them with something robust and low maintenance like juniper bushes, Russian olives, would quickly impair drivers' sight lines and create a very combustible pile of tinder surrounded by triggers so nasty little fires surrounded by highway or messier car accidents would be a real possibility.

I've been puzzling on that one since hearing about the issue at a Laurel Revitalization League meeting during planning for the downtown plaza and still haven't come up with something that still makes sense when you think through maintenance.

This isn't quite at the actual entryways but further beautification of the existing lake on the Western edge of Interstate 90 coming into Laurel probably would do the most for changing impressions of the Laurel. There's not much you can do about the rest of the highway side of Laurel's looks as it's all too big and vast for some shrubbery to conceal.

### **Streetscape**

Upgrading Laurel's Main Street is probably a 3 year project, but not an overwhelming one.

Montana RailLink is already underway in removing the worst buildings which'll take the strip down to soil and weeds mostly. Having the city meet with MRL's real estate managers, either Howard Nash for MRL or Joe Genti for Washington Corp, to work out some plan as opposed to just bare ground and weeds after the buildings are gone would be prudent. Rather than demand expensive improvements that really don't benefit the railroad, a modest plan of converting the area to grassy lawn with a mix of evergreen trees and bushes to absorb sound and dust as well as provide shade and

obscure the view of the tracks would be inexpensive, especially if done as a railroader park by the MRL employees. Add a few benches, trash cans, and some streetlights and it'd be a basic greenbelt that if an opportunity to build on it came up, would be easy to do. Given the shape of the land there, especially it's shallowness and proximity to the tracks, it's hard to think of what kind of building one would put up there now, especially on leased land. So chances seem good it'll remain empty for the foreseeable future. Grass, shade, benches, and heavy bushes as a walking barrier to the track (more effective than a fence in most cases) would make that stretch an accent to anything on Main Street rather than the sad sight it is now.

The landscape architect who did the Billings downtown streetscapes and Laurel's concept sketches as seen currently in Rock Creek Books' front window is Sandra Fischer who now lives in Seattle. A landscape architect who worked for her and now does a lot of the work in the region out of Billings, Jolene Rieck contacted Sandy at my request and they'd be quite interested in reviving the project.

>

> Jolene Rieck

> Peaks to Plains Design, P.C.

[Jolene@peakstoplains.com](mailto:Jolene@peakstoplains.com)

Billings

> [www.peakstoplains.com](http://www.peakstoplains.com)

406-294-9499

Funding a streetscape can come from the city applying for motor-fuel-tax-derived grants under the Montana Dept. of Transportation's Community Transportation Enhancement Program and the city's used that tool before. Another source is creating a Business Improvement District where the property owners along the street vote an additional fee or tax on themselves for things like streetscapes, street lights, flower baskets, special signage, the central plaza, snow shoveling, etc. The Downtown Billings Partnership has recently created a BID there,

Greg Krueger 294-3050 led that and the steps to forming a Business Improvement District can be found in the Montana Codes Annotated on the state website. Grants for downtown streetscapes are unusual, about like hen's teeth.

Volunteer labor could do a lot of it given the landscaping skills evident in the yards of Laurel's homes (your residential areas are exceptionally attractive and there's a lot of design talent out there from the hundreds of Laurel yards that impressed me. It's tricky to use volunteer labor with CTEP dollars which means doing it in phases and writing the CTEP application carefully to avoid involving volunteers in that phase.

The Yellowstone County Extension Agent (in the courthouse) has extensive information on what kinds of plants would be likely to survive in a streetscape environment here and their help is both free and expert.

### Laurel's Streets

The single most common complaint heard and read during our visit was the condition of Laurel's streets.

None of us live in Laurel so we compared the roads to our homes and Laurels are better than many, worse than some, and the streets look like they missed a few repair cycles over their hundred years.

Every community has deep dissatisfaction with some or most of their roads, in fact a multi-year study in New England small towns culminating in the classic 1947 book "*Small Town in Mass Society*" by Vidich & Bensman found that the most reliable way to get elected to local government was to promise to do something about the roads and then focus on improving the some visible roads where key supporters lived since there was never enough money to fix or improve more than a small share of the roads!

We were also told that unresolved questions about when water system improvements or extensions would go through left the roads above the water distribution lines steadily deteriorating extra

years, waiting for solutions to the water infrastructure repairs and extensions.

So it suggests that working out the water plan and how to fund it would then drive the road repair plan beyond what's currently done and it sounded like that planning was underway.

An obvious issue is the thousands of residents just outside of Laurel's city limits who obviously use the roads every day as well as the traffic from the also outside-the-limits railyard and oil refinery.

Their property and fuel taxes go to Yellowstone County to be spread across the entire county's projects and 1500+ miles of roads. Assuming that the only reason for annexation is sewer **and water extension, but not the considerably more expensive roads and schools, is a common trap that's allow outlying residents a** perceived bargain for a long time. Changing that condition of many users and few supporters is probably the only fundamental way to bring in lots of new dollars for Laurel's roads.

In 2005 according to Montana Dept. of Transportation fuel records, Laurel's gas and diesel sales came to \$7.5 million in taxes collected. Like the overwhelming majority of motor fuel taxes collected in Yellow-stone County, that mostly goes to highway projects across the state, but a portion of the motor fuel taxes do come back to the city government.

Working to increase that percentage would be the obvious albeit long and painful route (this would take changing the current allocation formula for motor fuel taxes in state law during a legislative session.) That would have the greatest impact on roads money (the city of Laurel gets a share of the motor fuel taxes) as well as greatly accelerating the progress towards the long proposed new highway interchange West of Laurel. Many folks brought that up as a major growth trigger as well as creating a new cluster of commercial tax base, but without a financing plan reliant on Congressional earmarks, it could be another

20-50 years before it was built...perhaps just in time for Laurel's bicentennial.

Any Montana county's voters can also vote in a local 2 cent gasoline tax, a local option selective sales tax, since the 1987 legislature allowed for that. None have. In 2005 that could have added \$380,000 to Laurel's street and bridge budget with much of that paid by outlying residents, commuters, and tourists. The current Yellowstone County Commissioners were very opposed to this tool and it requires a county-wide election, so it remains a dim possibility, but as the burden of road repair costs continue to mount that may change.

### **What else can you do about the roads?**

Decide what's important on a per road basis to the people who live along it as well as drive it.

Rough roads work better than anything else in getting drivers to slow down so Laurel should have fewer car, pedestrian, and pet collisions and property damage than smooth wide streets that encourage speeding 10-25 miles an hour above posted limits.

[www.governing.com/archives](http://www.governing.com/archives)

That's current thinking among Traffic Engineers, *in fact Laurel's residential streets reflect a lot of the best practices they're trying to get communities to*, so maybe you declare this an advantage for parents who worry about their kids, bicyclists, dogs and cats, motorcycle riders, drivers with poor vision, etc. ...and of course it's good for local tire shops, alignment shops, muffler shops, brake shops, and auto-body repair shops so there's a business stimulus too!

**Okay, so your street isn't quaint, it's a menace.**

If enough neighbors agree, a block or several blocks can create a Special Improvement District and assess themselves enough to pay all or most of the cost to bring that road up to the quality they want, i.e. sidewalks, stormwater, lighting, etc.. Going to a city street repair planning meeting as the

road with money to do it already attached is far more likely to draw the rest of the investment from the city budget than roads where the residents only care enough about it to believe other people should pay to fix their road. Some cash in hand always gets a warmer audience.

### **Weed Control**

Weeds are so fast, sneaky, and pervasive that assuming someone else will take care of any weeds one sees is not the way to bet. A community wide anti-weed campaign each summer, enlisting kids who have better eyes (backs and knees too) and seniors who have a lifetime of weed wars to draw on would make the most sense. Contacting the county weed superintendent for training in spotting and dealing with the most common weeds (MSU Extension Service in the county courthouse and other agencies have a lot of resources on this) makes sense not only to get an expert involved but with Laurel's absolutely intermingled county and city borders, it's not like the weeds respect property lines. Helena Chemical Company in Laurel and Brenntag at Moss Main would also be likely to have some expert advice since they mix ag chemicals for herbicide applications among other activities...might even be willing to sponsor a "Weed War". Could take a page out of varmint control and aluminum recycling by offering a bounty based on per pound of weeds brought in to a central site for burning, that'd keep the motivation going for kids and spry seniors.

Wherever you live, the flaws generally get easier to see and the good things easier to overlook as the years go by. Laurel's a fine place with a bright future and almost endless possibilities built on a tremendous range of assets already in place, it just needs to recognize that more and act with greater confidence, in my humble opinion. Thanks and I look forward to continuing to assist Laurel

**SUMMARY OF WRITTEN RESPONSES TO  
THE QUESTION:  
WHAT ARE LAUREL'S STRENGTHS &  
ASSETS?**

- Our major strengths in Laurel is our sense of community, the friendly people, and involved populace (lots of folks willing to volunteer and contribute to the community). **[43 comments]**
- Community support of schools and sports teams **[6 comments]**
- Community events such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Aviation week, etc. **[11 comments]**
- Most of the businesses have fresh paint and are keeping them clean.
- School system is excellent. **[10 comments]**
- Golf Course
- Yellowstone River.
- Proximity to Billings. **[2 comments]**
- Small-town friendly. **[11 comments]**
- Excellent park system and maintenance **[13 comments]**
- Small bedroom community. **[3 comments]**
- Great 911 service response time and responders. **[2 comments]**
- WALMART coming to service population. **[7 comments]**
- Clean air
- Our drive-in theater
- Our churches **[3 comments]**
- Our volunteer fire department and police department are great. **[9 comments]**
- Growth **[2 comments]**
- Local businesses and business owners **[20 comments]**
- The refinery and railroad provide high wage level jobs for locals. **[9 comments]**
- Location in regards to tourism to Red Lodge, Beartooth Pass, Yellowstone,

- Wyoming, Billings, etc. **[14 comments]**
- Patriotism of local residents. **[2 comments]**
- The medical clinics. **[6 comments]**
- Chief of Police.
- Local government **[2 comments]**
- Laurel has a rich history with the railroads **[2 comments]**
- The license office w/ good hours.
- Laurel is small enough to not feel lost in and still large enough to provide most services people need and want.
- Billings and its growth.
- Local manufacturers i.e. Woods Power Grip, Thomae Lumber, Fox, etc. **[2 comments]**
- First Avenue North & East Maryland.
- Friendly, safe neighborhoods **[2 comments]**
- Laurel has a super person in the Chamber. She makes things happen – don't lose her!
- Laurel is still young enough to take a slower approach to how it wants to grow. There are many ways that we can create a stable community and at the same time make this a great place to raise our families.
- The 9:00 pm whistle!
- The local Wednesday paper is an asset. We need to support it.
- Part of W. Main Street it has been looking better on the southside of the street.
- We have a nice Chamber of Commerce building.
- We have some good restaurants.

**SUMMARY OF WRITTEN RESPONSES TO  
THE QUESTION:  
WHAT ARE LAUREL'S PROBLEMS &  
CHALLENGES?**

- Opposition from city government. Too much red tape for new construction, which complicates bringing in new businesses **[2 comments]**

- Infrastructure needs and maintenance (i.e. streets, curbs, gutters, sidewalks, water and sewer system, etc.)**[81 comments]**.
- City council needs to follow through with their recommendations and make more well-considered decisions
- Weed control needs to be addresses on city property **[4 comments]**.
- Electorate and legislators who are apparently hostile or apathetic to public projects.
- Find a way for the City to grow without downtown becoming deserted **[2 comments]**.
- Need downtown revitalization effort **[36 comments]**
- Old buildings in downtown need to be imploded & new buildings built **[9 comments]**.
- TAXES (including school mills) being increased.
- Poor infrastructure planning to service the growing population **[6 comments]**.
- Availability of drugs and alcohol to middle and high school students **[3 comments]**.
- Pervasive bullying “jock” attitude that starts in the middle school and carries through to parenting & next generation (noticeable in soccer & little league)
- Laurel residents being inhospitable to visitors and non-native residents **[2 comments]**
- School system and city soliciting donations from small businesses without obtaining goods and services from local merchants.
- The way the city government appears hostile to small business.
- Difficulty attracting new business with sufficient capital.
- Traffic on south side (and other areas of city) **[14 comments]**
- Too many casinos **[6 comments]**
- Too few family restaurants **[6 comments]**
- Weeds & grass on private and public property not being mowed as required **[3 comments]**.
- Lack of clothing and specialty retail stores **[3 comments]**
- Wal-Mart will challenge local businesses **[8 comments]**
- Proximity to Billings presents challenges.
- Need for more youth-oriented activities **[5 comments]**
- Noise from trains and trains parking and blocking intersections **[2 comments]**
- Insufficient tax base to finance needed projects. Need to annex outlying subdivisions that are using infrastructure without paying for it. **[4 comments]**
- No action or interaction throughout the City, businesses and the people.
- Lack of Laurel support in community affairs.
- Need for elderly support and senior care facilities **[2 comments]**.
- Our smaller stores don’t seem to make it here.
- Library needs more child-friendly hours during school session.
- The high water and utility bills **[5 comments]**.
- Need affordable, decent housing for the workers and residents **[3 comments]**
- City sometimes seems too anxious to get money from residents for future services.
- Poor snow removal after snow storms.
- Find more use for the Airport.
- The public swimming pool is deteriorated and needs to be repaired or replaced.
- The main interstate exit to Laurel (south side) is unattractive and unappealing **[2 comments]**

- Businesses needing to get involved in financing infrastructure improvements
- Poor, unresponsive or unengaged city leadership [**3 comments**].
- Lack of vision & willingness to change & invest financially in the future of the community.
- Destruction of neighborhood elementary schools (too much busing and fuel waste).
- Limited living wage employment opportunities.
- Some ULTRA Conservatism within the community.
- Attitude of city workers – bickering, laziness unprofessional conduct.
- Layout of the town is too small & cramped – need to expand & add the subdivisions.
- Dysfunctional law enforcement agencies [**6 comments**].
- Lack of code enforcement [**3 comments**]
- Landlords shouldn't be held responsible for tenant water bills. If so, shut off after one month non-payment and contact landlord.
- Not enough community togetherness.
- We need better balance in the city government
- Difficulty Getting I-90 travelers that are exiting to Laurel to come downtown, past new section East of 1<sup>st</sup> Ave.
- Lack of a paid fire department
- The lack of police presence.
- The very poor planning in placing the library and post office so far out of the downtown area. .
- They are hiring illegal people down at the refinery that have fake ID's and no green cards and a bunch of them are not even 18 years old. When good men can't get jobs and no work gets done it hurts the town and the good people in it.
- Lack of support the local business
- Need museum and/or cultural activities. [**2 comments**]
- Need promotion of Laurel community projects and events
- No signage to draw people to Laurel or into downtown [**2 comments**].
- No natural beauty to entice people to stop.
- Need time limits on building/remodel permits to prevent projects from dragging on and on indefinitely
- We need bike paths.
- A taxi service is necessary. A service for the bars. I think it would cut down the DUI's tremendously.
- Improve the underpass.
- The entrance from the West on Old Hwy 10 should be cleaned up [**2 comments**]. Also, the area South of the track off of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South near the asphalt and concrete plants needs to be cleaned up.
- Problem? City allowing a local outfit to build a gas station in a residential area.
- Access to South side – in and out because of the railroads.
- Need to pave 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue North.
- Need to fix the corner drains on south side.
- Widen 4<sup>th</sup> Street from 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the southeast 4<sup>th</sup>.
- We feel that one major problem Laurel is experiencing is the pressure placed on the local school system by the current growth. Schools are hard-pressed to provide a quality education under the current funding system.
- Traffic makes it hard to support local businesses (ACE Hardware, Jan's IGA, etc.)
- Lack of railroad participation in community affairs
- Poor school system
- Lack of local support for local businesses
- Railroad not maintaining its property
- No printing shops

- Residents too tied to the past to see the opportunities of the future
- Residents without pride in their city/community/property [**2 comments**]
- Lack of partnership between Chamber and City to recruit new businesses to Laurel

SUMMARY OF WRITTEN RESPONSES  
TO THE QUESTIONS:  
***WHAT PROJECTS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN LAUREL? WHAT VISION DO YOU HAVE FOR LAUREL IN THE NEXT 2, 5, 10, 20 YEARS?***

- Community Clean-Up [**16 comments**]
- Infrastructure projects [**16 comments on water and sewer, 48 comments on roads, 64 comments total**]
- Growth management planning [**18 comments**]
- Downtown revitalization [**15 comments**]
- Community Center [**13 comments**]
- Museum [**5 comments**]
- Historic preservation [**7 comments**]
- Master planning effort
- We need to promote the influx of business to Laurel, and at the same time monitor the directions that it is going. This private community is not used to the foreign trade.
- Lower utility bills [**2 comments**]
- Infrastructure needs and cost analysis
- More activities for families/youth [**9 comments**]
- New tennis courts [**7 comments**]
- New swimming pool (indoor) [**12 comments**]
- Upgrade high school track & football field.
- Laurel maintaining its autonomy from Billings.
- City administration to quit foolishly spending tax dollars to promote an agenda of merging with Billings.
- Streamlining local government operations
- A tolerance program instituted for Laurel residents
- Public bathrooms at Kid's Kingdom and other parks [**2 comments**]
- Playground equipment at South Pond – 5 years.
- A movie theater [**6 comments**]
- A Head Start program – 10 years.
- More restaurants
- Miniature Golf.
- Public golf course.
- A limit on casinos. [**3 comments**]
- Summer city programs for Kids
- Use of “town square” where the movie theater was.
- Better use of library facilities and space to allow for more books and materials.
- Better rental housing. [**2 comments**]
- Better park system – We have one great park for kids and two picnic tables.
- Lower taxes for seniors.
- I think we need something like a city bus system so that people that need transportation can go shopping or whatever their needs may be. People like the elderly, disabled or anyone in need of a ride [**2 comments**].
- Get rid of W-Mart and expand on local businesses.
- New businesses and investors need to be actively sought out.
- More retail in town. [**4 comments**]
- Good paying jobs for people to remain in Laurel.
- Traffic to Hwy 212 rerouted between Laurel and Park City.
- A government that works & acts at a faster pace.
- Work with the Railroad to help improve appearance of their grounds and buildings. ..
- More stores



- Bike/pedestrian paths especially from school for the school kids to walk on the sides **[2 comments]**
- Improve traffic flow – more stop lights or signs and teaching drivers how to use them. **[13 comments]**
- Find major sponsor for Downtown Revitalization
- I would like to see the Railroad be a better neighbor.
- Offer incentives for improvements to local businesses.
- Beautifully kept yards
- 10 years- move railroad tracks out of town
- Ten years – major resort of some kind to come build here.
- General agreement on vision for Laurel.
- Enact stricter codes regarding property maintenance
- Return to neighborhood schools concept.
- 10 years – More camping sites. Encourage private campgrounds on the river.
- 20 years – Another full interchange from I-94
- Some better places to eat out, other than fast food.
- An annual “Clean Up Our Town” in April/May.
- Some type of incentives to encourage businesses to move into Main Street buildings and to encourage owners to fix them up.
- A “family friendly” park w/ grills.
- Two years : A dog park, there is such a need for this in this area.
- Equipment to remove snow in the winter.
- The kids need a skate park so they actually have something to do besides run around town.
- Live music events and venues to exhibit local talent
- Taxi service;
- Bike paths
- Laurel Fire Dept. becoming a full-time Dept.
- Roads repaired,
- Ambulance service needs to upgrade their personnel so that they can give I.V.’s and transport patients in critical condition.
- Some type of public mass-transit such as Amtrak running from Billings to Missoula (or West and East in Southern Montana) or perhaps a bus line from Laurel to Billings.
- Institute yearly training refreshers for police department.
- Govern progressively.
- An in-depth Analysis of tax-paying potential of the community.
- A “theme” for downtown Laurel (i.e. railroad or Bavarian theme)
- Sonny O’Day’s gone.
- Something done to improve the elevators.
- The old Johnson Lumber Company buildings on the railroad side of town gone or improved a lot.
- Senior facilities moved closer to town
- Walker-friendly community.

## **LAUREL RESOURCE TEAM LISTENING SESSIONS**

*These comments were recorded during the listening sessions held July 11 – 12, 2007 in Laurel.*

## **LAUREL STRENGTHS**

### **YOUTH GROUPS AND SCHOOL GROUPS**

- Community involvement
- Veterinary care
- Location – next to Billings
- Smaller town for children to grow up in
- Schools are a great asset – supportive
- Main Street of Laurel – traditional style

- A lot of activities for youth – wide range
- Sportsmen of Laurel have a lot of opportunities
- Mix of urban and rural
- Mountains and near Yellowstone
- Parks that the city maintains
- Canoeing, fishing, kids fishing tournaments
- BLM Park
- Wildlife viewing
- WalMart coming to town may help us keep shoppers instead of going on to Billings
- Pool open in the summer
- Yellowstone River Parks Assoc.

#### EDUCATORS AND SENIORS – STRENGTHS

- Good economic base
- Well maintained and good schools
- Good sense of volunteerism
- New school buildings
- Nice neighbors – community is friendly
- Good fire department – all volunteer
- Good ambulance
- Volunteer EMT's
- Great emergency response
- Superintendent's newsletter is terrific – keeps public informed monthly – to all residents.
- Laurel Outlook
- Great 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks
- "Don't realize how small they are and do big stuff"
- Nice people
- Very active for its size
- Excellent Library – community room
- Very good churches- about 15 – 20 in town
- Kid's Kingdom – playground activities
- Sports – big part of the community. Sportsmanship has improved.
- Very good enforced leash law
- Drive in
- School superintendent is good
- Senior Center

- Meals on Wheels
- Golf course
- Churches
- Christmas Celebration – parade, live nativity
- Volunteers applying fresh paint on old buildings
- Bedroom community for Billings – strength as well as weakness

#### CHS, MRL, UNION GROUPS, UTILITIES – STRENGTHS

- People
- Refinery
- MRL
- Expansion – west end Billings has now hit Laurel
- People
- Good sized town – want to help make it better
- People – a lot of new people in town – may not have deep roots yet
- Hiring for new facility – hired from around this area
- Vo-Tech – processing program as work feeder for us
- School system is improving
- Airport
- Sweat Equity project – Solid Foundations
- Airport Authority
- A lot of community groups that are active
- Kiwanis Park
- Dual income workforce
- Soccer, Wrestling, Softball organizations
- Laurel is growing – trying to address the bedroom community aspect
- Interstate on and off ramps pending
- Invested in downtown 9 block area
- Kids Kingdom park
- WalMart is having to address some traffic issues – turn lane, storm water retention, street lights,

## BUSINESS SECTOR, RETAIL, CONSULTANTS/SERVICES, ARTISTS AND COTTAGE INDUSTRY – STRENGTHS

- Great team at city hall – very responsive
- Dedicated residents – need help, they are there
- Major rail and highway hub – tourist draw
- Proximity to Billings – draws people in
- Close to hospitals
- Local police are good
- Bedroom community – a strength as people move here to get out of the city
- Great community
- A lot of great employers
- Community still has small town values – care about each other
- If we don't know each other, we try to get to know each other
- Ditto
- Kids can ride bikes in town
- We have everything Denver has – roads, rail, etc.
- I love the schools, the administration, the aides – they are great!
- Small businesses that sponsor all of the community events – walkathons, Oktoberfest, etc.
- Banks are supportive and sponsor a lot of Laurel's activities
- Amend Park task force
- People who have donated property
- 

## FIRST RESPONDERS AND LAW ENFORCEMENTS – STRENGTHS

- It is a community of change – which presents opportunities
- Community does bickering but we eventually do get the job done.
- Biggest strength is in the people.
- Community is like a family. We know each other.
- The community of Laurel – supports our schools.

- Dedicated core group of law enforcement, first responders, firemen, that give of themselves – have teamwork mentality.
- 35 volunteers in our Fire Department – dedicated people
- Volunteers will meet the team when it comes back – even if at three in the morning.
- Very creative Chief that strives to find funding and resources
- School resource officers – kept incredibly busy
- Have dry hydrants mapped
- New set of TNTs – about \$25,000 (extrication devise)
- New ambulance – but not quite equipped to roll yet.
- Airport is growing
- Fire department does all of its own repair and mechanics
- Have two great Commanders; one must be available at all times
- Officer in the schools is working with school administration to work on problems.
- Steve Solberg donates a car for the school resource officer.
- Drug officer

## BANKING – STRENGTHS

- New businesses moving in to Laurel
- People are supportive of the community and schools
- Housing boom
- Next to Billings – also a challenge
- Railroad, interstate, streets that intersect
- Existing buildings that could house new businesses
- School system
- People from Wyoming – have to go through Laurel before they turn on the Interstate
- History of the market area
- Planning has been done already – streetscape for Main Street

- WalMart – will increase tax base – new and more money to implement plans
- Two big employers – railroad and refinery

#### GOVERNMENT SERVICES, CITY COUNCIL, PLANNING BOARD – STRENGTHS

- Our citizens
- Kids Kingdom Park
- General location – mountains, streams, development of the community
- Closeness to Billings – but not too close
- Community – great people
- Ditto the above
- Ditto community and the people
- Location – crossroads
- Railroad and refinery
- Did receive grant from the state for waterlines yesterday
- Businesses coming to town to help with tax base – may take two to three years to build up
- Resource team will help us hear from silent majority and get us on the right track
- Strong city council – make hard decisions; do proper research
- Terrific opportunity with core group of business people interested in making Laurel grow – beyond what we have thought of in the past.
- Beginning to get young families in town
- We offer a great educational system and employment opportunities
- Potential for new involvement and activity with the young families moving to town
- Utilize the hospitals in Billings
- Two clinics – for a town this size we are very fortunate
- Starting point to the gateway to Yellowstone Park
- Two stop lights

- Crossroads for the state and for recreation – mountains, lakes, Billings are convenient
- Best 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks display
- Capacity of our water plant is good
- TSEP grant we received yesterday was for updating of system- not expansion.

#### MEDICAL AND AGRICULTURE – STRENGTHS

- Nursing home is not a place to go to die
- Educating people to take care of themselves
- We give information to people to empower themselves and take care of themselves – want to share this info with people of Laurel
- Encourage people to train as CNA's – get them into training
- Adopt-a-Grandparent Program – tremendous when schools come in.
- YMCA kids come in once per week.
- Bands and choir come in to play/sing at nursing home at times.
- Evergreen has internship with the colleges
- Carnival a couple weeks ago- clowns, rides, etc. – but people didn't come.
- We actually active/interactive people that have a lifetime of history to share.

#### MANUFACTURING AND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE – STRENGTHS

- Beartooth RC&D
- Big Sky EDA
- Chamber does a great job working on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July festivities.
- One of the busiest highway exchanges in the state of Montana.
- Veteran's nursing home effort – it was decided Glendive was the site but.....we learned we have some of the cleanest air in Montana – due to air flow and winds from

Yellowstone Valley (in residential area.)

- Great history around the area.
- Close to just about anything in Montana
- New west highway interchange
- Outstanding police department and volunteer fire department
- School system is really good
- Good city government (even though I give them a hard time)
- Large school district – 7<sup>th</sup> largest in Class A
- All the hospital facilities we need
- Great metropolitan area, great restaurants in Billings – and it is not Denver. It is big to us and we don't have to live there to enjoy the area.
- Retired people enjoy living here.
- Good medical facilities here, too.
- Beautiful cemetery
- Veteran cemetery coming here
- Town laid out nicely – easy to get around.
- Great organizations – Jaycees, women's clubs,
- We have a lot of cottage industries here...working from home. (Light manufacturing, Midwest Software, etc.)
- Real estate is a bit lower than other places
- So easy to get to anywhere from here – and we have great places to go: Big Horn River, Edgar, Lovell, highest mountains in Montana (Red Lodge), Yellowstone River,
- Boat Float
- Nez Perce history
- Nice events we put on – but we need more.
- Beautiful town square –
- Lack of communication between chamber, businesses and city is improving
- Community yard sale
- Parades

- Woods Power Grip company
- Railroad is working with us on our taskforce
- New owners to old hotel – fixing it up
- WalMart – will probably benefit us – people could stay here now to shop
- Wyoming traffic will divert here – so need good streets and lights.
- Our people – super, super people.
- Old German heritage (Russian Germans)
- When we need something here we do it.
- American Legion Ballpark – grant from FWP – lighting done with local money; electrician donated his time.
- Concession stand – paid for the lights, too.
- Chamber expand – offer more services
- Real Estate and beautiful homes
- We claim everything thru the Zoo as Laurel.

#### CHURCH AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS, REALTORS, COMMUNITY AT LARGE – STRENGTHS

- People – good volunteers willing to do projects
- Sits on Yellowstone River and has very productive and growing refinery, railroad, cross roads with rail and highway – lots of traffic that crosses these paths.
- Huge opportunities because of our location that we could tap into
- Airport – diamond in the rough
- Build on our assets to make stronger better place to live
- Ditto all of the above
- Community comes together when something needs to be done.
- A lot of businesses that have been here forever – hope that they remain.
- People – all of the small businesses.

- Laurel can expand and stretch out.
- A lot of history here.
- Pride, comfort and legacy
- Fireman's memorial coming
- Veteran's cemetery
- Several youth groups – and close to 20 churches

### LAUREL RESOURCE TEAM LISTENING SESSIONS

*These comments were recorded during the listening sessions held July 11 – 12, 2007 in Laurel.*

### LAUREL CHALLENGES

#### YOUTH GROUPS AND SCHOOL GROUPS - CHALLENGES

- Traffic flow problem – bottleneck coming in or out of town; noon hour is especially bad during school year
- Too many casinos – people don't get past them to come into town.
- Dislike flashing lights of casino
- Ditto – too many casinos – do I want to move my kids here?
- Also – too many pawn shops – may coincide with casino business???
- We are full of rednecks- I am one – but....we tend to be a good old boy redneck community. Not always a bad thing.
- Not connected as a community –have youth, have middle age group, and senior citizens. There are generational gaps – need to realize we have more in common.
- Adjustment to WalMart coming to town
- Need more mom-and-pop stores to establish a unique shopping location
- New kids to the school district are not welcome – especially in the high school
- Difficult to break in to this community – just because it is small doesn't necessarily help

- Loss of our round house – was demolished; Preserve special architecture for the future
- Not enough for our children to do – if not involved in sports.
- No movie theater, place for kids to hang out.
- City pool – YMCA runs it in the summer- people want indoor pool year round.
- Stray pets
- Lack of a tax base – people in the county don't pay city services
- Lack of children's books in the library
- Rail yards and clean up of area

#### EDUCATORS AND SENIORS – CHALLENGES

- Commercial area- but it does struggle
- Tax base – not enough money to get things done
- Streets – are in really bad shape
- Derelict buildings downtown
- Concerned for existing downtown businesses when WalMart opens.
- Keep downtown Laurel alive.
- City parks could be kept up better.
- Skate board park mess needs to be cleaned up
- Need tennis courts replaced; pool repaired
- Movie theater burned down
- Stop signs put up without notification – need to educate drivers when they put one up/before put one up. Cross traffic is very dangerous. Speed is not posted.
- Traffic and communications are an issue
- Improved communication between businesses, local citizens, public notices
- Keep up school and city websites.
- Address the public - answer questions when a resident asks a question during a city council meeting.

- Sometimes organizations place items in the Laurel Outlook and they do not make the paper
- Give specific directions – don't assume people know, for example, the "usual parade route"
- High school has a terrible reputation – drugs, violence, bullying.
- Some people don't let their children attend school here
- Home schooled and public school have a disconnect
- Traffic to be snarled when WalMart opens
- People work and volunteer in Billings – not in Laurel – even if they live here
- Volunteerism – lacking

#### CHS, MRL, UNION GROUPS, UTILITIES – CHALLENGES

- Technical world – can't just hire off of the street anymore
- Housing – lack of housing prevents people from staying here
- Attracting businesses to Main Street with WalMart
- Attracting people to come into town all the way
- Historical buildings are vacant – and in sorry shape
- Swimming pool –
- Lots of service organizations – but not working together – doing different projects with own agendas
- People don't work here – tend to not invest time here
- Main Street – add trees, parking
- Underpass- only way out of town- need another way over the railroad tracks
- Strain on our city services due to subdivisions outside of the city limits- but using city services.
- We are behind – we see result of growth, but don't have growth revenue. In a lag time that will last for the next several years. Hard for person on the street to realize.
- Streets

- Loss of movie theater – huge loss
- Investigate 8<sup>th</sup> Ave built to cross the tracks
- Interstate will have on and off ramps on the west end

#### BUSINESS SECTOR, RETAIL, CONSULTANTS/SERVICES, ARTISTS AND COTTAGE INDUSTRY –CHALLENGES

- Improved planning
- Maintain current businesses
- Founded in 1880's – infrastructure is old – funding not set aside to replace it
- Lack of storm drains – Laurel gets it share of storms, need to plan for the water
- Streets and infrastructure – Cherry Hills Subdivision – a lot of pipe breakage and problems with the pipe
- Streets not equipped to handle truck traffic
- We have come to see ourselves as a bedroom community – people go to Billings to shop and then our businesses can't make it. Perhaps WalMart will turn this around.
- City is not cooperating – don't think of Laurel as a bedroom community – we have to grow.
- Cliquish town – must be more welcoming with new employment opportunities.
- Work outside of Laurel and have children – people don't even know you live here.
- Businesses are not willing to be open late.
- Legislation for tourist tax failed
- Water prices in Laurel are very expensive
- Local grocery store is too expensive.
- Maintenance – we can build something then there are no funds to maintain it.

#### FIRST RESPONDERS and LAW ENFORCEMENT – CHALLENGES

- You can get pulled over for swerving away from pot holes.
- Streets
- Keeping up with the growth – keeping services up with the growth
- No way to address fire on third story buildings
- Volunteering is a commitment – young people in the community for the most part are not ready to make that commitment
- Usually only have three or four people interested in openings.
- Seeing increase in crime rates – as we grow – crime grows; officers are not being added.
- Could improve relationships with county
- WalMart coming will bring more people – increase in crime (shoplifting) possibly as well.
- Traffic has increased
- People and equipment – need more staff and better equipment
- We handle as many calls as the county deputy handles – 7,000 calls per year
- No jail here – take prisoners to Billings – which leaves an officer off the street.
- Go to calls alone because if call the county, they are 20 minutes out.
- New ambulance but is not equipped.
- Not room for all of us in the facility: First Responders, Ambulance and Law Enforcement – plus equipment, plus training room
- Rigs are wearing out – no money to replace them.
- Funding!
- Vehicles are old and way over miles
- The thin county/city boundaries are a safety issue – we strive to work together to cover all calls.

- 911 covers 110 miles
- Paid fire departments call us “scabs” because we volunteer.
- Keeping volunteers and adding new ones
- Must have paid fire position by 2010.
- All officers are not getting the training they need due to budget.
- We live on grants.
- Drugs are prevalent and increasing.
- Need second investigator

#### BANKING – CHALLENGES

- Streets – condition is poor
- Congestion of traffic pending
- Ditto – need street development – don’t see it happening, especially on 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. South
- Ditto
- Amazing how traffic has already increased just for the WalMart construction
- Entrances into town are awful – make more attractive
- Ditto – signage and promotion
- Clean up
- If city waits too long will be too expensive to build and move into bigger facilities. The need is here now.
- Water to the different subdivisions – currently water is not adequate; plan for the future – what happens when these subdivisions are annexed
- Policing problem will increase
- Census will demand paid Fire Chief
- School track is gravel and potholes
- MRL – get them to be a good neighbor
- MRL – owns boarded up buildings – and land underneath
- CTEP funding – challenge to access it from Yellowstone County

#### GOVERNMENT SERVICES, CITY COUNCIL, PLANNING BOARD – CHALLENGES



- Antiquated sewer and water lines
- Streets and potholes –it all takes money
- We are limited by tax dollars we generate
- Need to hear more from the silent majority
- Get local businesses involved and interested in addressing existing business needs
- Streets – have to come up with a way to address this ongoing expense
- Total infrastructure needs to be planned for – can't fix the streets before we fix the lines underneath
- It all boils down to money
- Streets are very difficult because there is not much help for street repair
- People drive through Laurel and are not annexed – so they do not pay for services
- When get into annexing – some homes are on five lots – so they do not want to be annexed because costs would go up. Eventually – they become land-locked on their own property.
- Water
- Sidewalks – in terrible shape. Used to be the city said “you fix it or we are going to” – was not enforced.
- Difficult to work with railroads – MRL says it is in BNSF's hands, BNSF says we have never heard from them, etc.
- County/city issues get very complicated – hard to sort out and address

#### MEDICAL AND AGRICULTURE – CHALLENGES

- Dialogue in the community is hard – hard to get the community involved in the medical business.
- Community involvement is lacking because we are considered a for-profit. But what we raise money for is for the residents.
- Almost impossible to get volunteers for the nursing home/clinic– don't

know why the community has not embraced our patients.

- Perception problem with nursing homes – that it is a place to go to die; some people are short term, however, and it is a place to celebrate life.
- Daycare – if our staff does not have daycare, they can't come in to work.
- Keeping our clients involved in daily life – need volunteers to come into our facility.
- Too many “what ifs” to prevent people from taking on liability of volunteer programs in-house.
- Held carnival and people did not come.

#### MANUFACTURING AND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE – CHALLENGES

- We have done a similar process at least four other times.
- Have previous assessments that have a lot of dust on them; perhaps the city put them together because they had to for a grant or requirement.
- Basically dysfunctional government when it comes to city government. No particular plan to set themselves up at the forefront of economic development in the community.
- Need an economic development arm with the blessing of the city government so programs such as Beartooth RC&D and Big Sky EDA can be used.
- Laurel Economic Development group became a land development group – not doing broad based economic development.
- Chamber – is not working the way it needs to. Total volunteer organization with a paid secretary. Not a paid business manager.
- Chamber board – 12 members – volunteers can't do everything. Need paid staff.
- If try to attract tourists to this area – what we can do is put on events.

- How will Chamber attempt to attract tourists when it is sadly understaffed?
- People don't know why this is a great place to live.
- Interchange limitations
- We are an industrial town – yet also have tourist attractions we could showcase.
- Buildings and infrastructure in downtown area are old – should probably be condemned, remodeled or fixed up.
- Everything is North of Laurel – rail owns land south of Main Street and are not in the building fix-up business.
- We need money!
- Traffic problems
- Downtown suffering because of the changes in Laurel

#### CHURCH AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS, REALTORS, COMMUNITY AT LARGE – CHALLENGES

- Create the atmosphere in town for small businesses to take risks
- Limited access going over or under the railroad tracks- creates a boundary that is a challenge
- Clean up of downtown area – challenge is to get the rail road property as well.
- Empty buildings along Main Street and other areas in town
- Businesses keeping large dumpsters on their sidewalks
- Streets and sidewalks
- Satellite subdivisions, under-developed airport
- Water system to feed subdivisions and get them involved in city services
- Churches have gone into small business sites and now that is off the tax roles.
- Laurel pays highest rate for water in the state.
- Railroad – how do we get them on board to support projects

- Aging church members – have needs and feel they can't afford them
- Struggle to incorporate new residents in subdivisions into our churches

#### What did you have to say in July? LAUREL LISTENING SESSIONS

These comments were recorded during the listening sessions held July 11 – 12, 2007 in Laurel.

#### LAUREL PROJECTS

##### YOUTH GROUPS AND SCHOOL GROUPS - PROJECTS

- Capitalize on the river and additional uses, i.e., wildlife viewing
- Improve entry ways – beautification of entry ways
- Encourage main business district to work with incoming WalMart.
- Ditto – improve casino looks as well – add flowers, etc.
- Draw in new businesses – mom and pop type stores to build a unique shopping experience, i.e., Red Lodge.
- Create a program to encourage acceptance of new students – especially in the high school.
- Would like to have a Main Street that is a walking Main Street – stroll
- Examine what we have that is special and start now to preserve it.
- New city/community pool that is indoors for year round use.
- Improved animal control – stray pet issue – need care
- Rec Center - Increased indoor facilities for indoor recreation and community center, too. Would address childhood obesity issues, too.
- Build the tax base
- Improve quantity and quality of books in the library – especially children's books.

- Improve activities with the Laurel library to get more children involved during the day.
- Parks and Rec Board – fully formed and functioning.
- Streetscaping and beautification of Main Street area – less concrete
- Work with railroads for beautification efforts
- Improve grain elevator looks
- Historic Laurel Trading post – utilize this landmark
- Bike trails – along the river and back – utilize ditch right-of-ways?

#### EDUCATORS AND SENIORS – PROJECTS

- Streets – repair
- Clean up downtown vacant buildings
- Promote drive-in more
- Traffic control
- Update and maintain the Laurel city website – must keep updated!
- Improve communication between the city council and the public
- School district needs to work better with home schooler's in the area
- Improve cultural events – something that the entire community could embrace. A building to hold cultural events such as concerts, art exhibits
- City owned camping spot- invest money into it for a top-notch location.
- New swimming facility – failing to meet infrastructure standards
- Revitalize our downtown area
- Ditto – clean it up –
- Work on entrances to the city
- Community Center
- Continued street maintenance
- Community recognition – recognizing our fireman, school events, put up banners, recognize people efforts
- Work on corporate sponsorship of projects – we have companies, let's use them.
- Get downtown more involved in Christmas activities – put children

activities in different businesses to get customers down town.

- Improve entry way into Laurel – crisp and clean vs. weeds
- Expand on 4<sup>th</sup> of July activities to accommodate all of the people – get stores to stay open
- More transportation options for Senior Citizens
- Improved youth activities
- Check with MT Dept. of Transportation on WalMart traffic issues
- Expand city limits – not been done in 30 years
- Self contained rail museum
- Understand why previous efforts failed and try again to have a communication network between organizations in town
- Comprehensive recreation plan – subcommittees of all the sports, YMCA, etc. – would unite efforts and relieve some tired volunteers
- Find a model for a successful rec program.

#### CHS, MRL, UNION GROUPS, UTILITIES – PROJECTS

- Pursue the airport – a major asset – expand on it and bring in more people there
- Historic value of buildings at airport need to be maintained
- Preserve historic buildings on Main Street
- Swimming pool
- Community Center
- Coordinate the civic groups so their energy is consolidated – pulling in the same direction; consolidate resources better
- City ordinances - need to enforce them – weeds, clean up, etc.
- Spiff up empty buildings to make them more attractive for business to enter
- Main Street – trees, parking,

- New underpass –
- 8<sup>th</sup> Ave., Railroad St., 4<sup>th</sup> St. South – all adjusted for new traffic and repaired
- Ditto
- Business attraction to downtown
- Clean up and enforce ordinances
- New street across the tracks – so people can get to Main Street – and lead right up to the Airport – Alder street.
- Movie theater
- Western boundary of greater metropolitan area – Laurel has value! Develop this value.
- Opportunity for airport expansion from Billings to Laurel – use of Laurel airport
- Pavement Condition Index – in next 5 years find revenues for street repair – we hear that the streets need repair, but the funding is the key
- People are now ready to have a tax increase to pave the streets
- Need same momentum used for Kids Kingdom for street pavement project
- Laurel Trading Post – improve safety of building
- South Task Force – addressing 4<sup>th</sup> street traffic
- Schools – going in right direction
- Churches – a very church based community

**BUSINESS SECTOR, RETAIL, CONSULTANTS/SERVICES, ARTISTS AND COTTAGE INDUSTRY – PROJECTS**

- Boulevard the highway – it is nice and wide so beautify it
- Prepare for growth and get people to town
- More emphasis on academics than sports in our school system
- Chamber and City need to recruit niche type businesses for the downtown area.

- Take some ideas from Red Lodge – provide unique stores
- Annex areas that border the city to increase our tax base. “If we don’t do it, Billings will.”
- Do an in-depth study of the town’s ability to pay taxes using medium income not average income. Once you know this data – you can address *realistic* projects and expectations.
- Make Laurel a destination point – place signage, show travelers why they should stop
- Railroad Museum
- 4<sup>th</sup> of July- people are here – so – tap them.
- Do more events such as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July – near Main Street.
- Encourage larger businesses here to sponsor events
- Would be willing to have water increased so that we can pay for the pool – and those that bring their water bill can swim at no cost.
- Come up with something to do for families on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July between 1:00pm and dark.
- We need a museum.
- Community Center/Museum/Pool
- Need a place to have activities – i.e., Oktoberfest, etc.
- More financial support from MRL for city and recreational projects
- Community Center – to bring people together
- Request employee matching funds from larger employers in town – or even volunteer hours
- City needs to go to the big employers as representatives of the smaller groups in town and be the voice for the community.
- Task force assigned to each project that we want to have accomplished.
- Street lights

- Make sure there are funds to maintain a project before it is begun

#### FIRST RESPONDERS AND LAW ENFORCEMENTS– PROJECTS

- Pursue USDA/RD grant or direct loan option (Community Facilities) for storage for vehicles. 13 rigs -
- Improve funding stream
- Need equipment – cameras in the cars needed – need software, server, - did get funding from Yellowstone Task Force.
- More resources and services to support dysfunctional families – need more support at home
- More chemical dependency services for delinquent youth – address it proactively.
- Equipment to keep up with the growth of Laurel –
- Provide housing for residents so that we can keep people here.
- Funding, funding, funding for fire department and law enforcement.
- Challenge to improve equipment so that volunteers have decent equipment to work with
- Annex more to Laurel to increase our tax base.
- *Give us the tools to do our jobs.*

#### BANKING – PROJECTS

- Utilize the fact that people from Wyoming have to intersect Laurel.
- Utilize the streetscape plan already conducted and ready to implement
- Another interchange
- East railroad access to Railroad Street
- Ditto
- West interchange
- Clean up
- Entrance signs – streetscape, too

- Community Center
- 1<sup>st</sup> Ave. South - improve entrance
- One level housing for Senior's to live
- New swimming pool – have a committee
- Enhancing football field and track
- Indoor theater
- More activities for young adults
- MRL – motivate to become a better neighbor
- City purchase some open space as it becomes available – will be too costly in the future
- Improve parking in downtown area – required to have off street parking – which is a deterrent to new business. City council needs to address this issue.
- Is the city owner of boarded up buildings due to non payment of taxes? Find out and act on this information.
- Trading Post – some materials look original from 1906. Potential museum?

#### GOVERNMENT SERVICES, CITY COUNCIL, PLANNING BOARD – PROJECTS

- Revitalize downtown
- What can we do with the railroad and refinery to come on board?
- Put traffic counters out to get an accurate count of how many people come for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July – would help with sponsors
- Capital Improvement Plan – finish
- Want infrastructure done right – that is why the streets aren't repaired- we need to repair water lines under the streets first.
- Need a study done on the costs of what it would take to do our water and streets; costs rise with time

- Explore state law that allows for annexation to be required as part of the building process.
- Have water capacity but not distribution – work on that.
- More street lights needed – all over
- Kids have baseball diamonds and soccer fields – need skateboard park for the kids. Perhaps in Thompson Park.
- Ponderosa Park – room for skateboard park – have 20 acres and are only using 2 acres; incorporate bike trail
- More for young teens to do; parks for little kids but not for young teens
- Become more kid oriented
- Community Center – get railroads and refinery to contribute – give back to the community
- Movie theater

#### MEDICAL AND AGRICULTURE – PROJECTS

- Beginning to market our facility (Evergreen) as an outreach facility – to promote wellness. Serve as a resource. How to take care of yourself – knowing what they can do to get better and stay better.
- Encourage people to stop looking at physical fitness as exercise but as learning what we need to do to help ourselves.
- Open forum on wellness to the community for ten – 15 people at a time. It is not magic but people have not shared it before.
- Find a champion and connection for Evergreen facility so that they can become an interactive part of the community...churches?
- Another daycare facility for our community.
- Partner with non-profits to get needs met for the for-profit nursing home.
- Great shift – to have a nursing home provide outreach; may need to take it

on the road as people avoid coming to nursing homes.

- Start recording people’s life history as part of the nursing home and use this as a marketing tool.
- Perhaps high school media arts could make this (recording histories) a project.
- Check to see if MRL and CHS have wellness programs within their companies.
- Connect with United Blood Services as well to get the wellness program outreach available.
- Create “Friends of Evergreen” to help promote and support

#### MANUFACTURING AND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE – PROJECTS

- Refocus Laurel Economic Development Corporation (started through the Certified Communities Program which now has been blended into CRDC – Beartooth.) and get back to doing overall economic development.
- Or...create a new group that will work only on true economic development for Laurel. This organization would report regularly to the city council.
- Utilize better our ability to put on events.
- Establish volunteers at the Chamber – to “staff”
- See state of the art tourism tools available at our chamber – then tourists can decide where to go (internet services)
- Music in town square on a regular basis
- Chamber serve as catalyst for people to get events on a calendar and publicize it so that when people come to town they have a print out of what is available and happening.
- Each town could take on an event.
- Need signs on interstate

- Easy map to use – tear off type
- Tourism training – SuperHost
- Laurel only business directory – that people can use.
- Get local organizations to contact Chamber as to their schedule.
- Recruit volunteers – perhaps use senior work program
- Equip chamber to do economic development – or refocus Laurel Economic Development to actually do economic development.
- Develop a package for economic development opportunities.
- Establish what buildings downtown should be condemned, remodeled, repaired and act on that information.
- Attract professionals into the downtown – don't have to be in Billings.
- Declare the Laurel WalMart to be ours – come on over and shop – it is a great store.
- See downtown area saved and restored
- Museum in town – have a museum board – but no museum
- Jaycees investigating signs that welcome travelers to Laurel on every exit.
- Updated swimming pool
- Civic center – to hold group events-brings community together
- Place to hold weddings, large get-togethers
- Airport – get into projects to expand it and make more viable. – need water!
- Blighted properties downtown – if owner had a plan or resources the property wouldn't look like that....so...investigate programs, buyouts, reclamation, etc., so that it can become viable again.
- Streets zoned for industrial or business that cannot handle the truck weights
- Get refinery and railroads on board to support our community – always come up to a concrete wall.
- Find a way to encourage new residents to attend local churches

#### CHURCH AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS, REALTORS, COMMUNITY AT LARGE – PROJECTS

- Complete the downtown streetscape plan that was designed ten years ago
- Put on curbs and gutters from Town Pump to Taco Johns
- South side of Main Street – 6 or 7 huge dumpsters that are on main street - make adjustments to get these off of the sidewalks and street
- Encourage and support young entrepreneurs
- Love Laurel
- Have conversations with those subdivision property owners to educate them as to costs saved NOW in hooking in to city sewer and water.