

Tri-state economic development community review collaboration

AT A GLANCE

Three states came together to evaluate community assessment programs, and redesign programs to more effectively foster community and economic development.

The Situation

Rural communities in the intermountain West are challenged by loss of economic activity, age diversity, housing and hope. Large-scale economic shifts have had dramatic and long-term consequences for residents, including a decline in leadership capacity that accompanies population loss and change. Organizations providing community economic development services are resource limited as well, having more communities and challenges than can be addressed by staff and financial resources. For nearly 20 years, community assessments in Idaho, Wyoming and Montana have been helping rural communities identify pathways to recovery, but these programs have had uneven success. The limited evaluations conducted have not conclusively identified community-based and program factors contributing to successful implementation of assessment recommendations. This project is evaluating and redesigning assessment programs to more effectively assist rural communities with addressing contemporary challenges.

Our Response

A NIFA/AFRI grant was awarded to Extension Community Development Specialist Lorie Higgins to create a three-state learning collaboration involving



McCammon residents identify local community strengths and opportunities for positive change.

Extension faculty and assessment program delivery organizations and their partners across three states including Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. The resulting Western Community Assessment Network's (WeCAN) 17-member team has been working together to identify effective assessment practices already in use and to develop new practices to replace least effective program elements. A first round of five assessments (now called Community Reviews in all three states) have taken place between March and November of 2018. Key process components include:

- Community satisfaction survey.
- Sector specific as well as open community listening sessions conducted during an initial community visit.

- Volunteer recruitment and planning for a second community visit.
- Planning/organizing work sessions held during a second community visit.
- Community coaching and technical assistance to support project implementation.

Regular state and multistate project design team meetings have identified advantages and disadvantages of new program elements and evaluations. Past assessments have been evaluated using Ripple Effects Mapping, which will be compared with evaluations conducted on new assessments in order to clearly understand the relationship between assessment practice and community impact. Research objectives include assessing community strengths and gaps across rural communities in the three states, measuring effect of increasing community engagement and coaching on assessment program impacts, and whether enhancing community-driven aspects of assessments affects practices of participating economic development professionals.

Program Outcomes

Ten community reviews have been implemented since the working group has identified best practices. Small grants have been awarded to participating communities completing both a community review and ripple mapping assessment. A website has been created, www.communityreview.org, with a searchable community development resource database and interactive map where all past and new community review reports can be downloaded. Prior to this project, communities typically waited for the community review report before getting to work, which can take delivery organizations one to several months to complete, resulting in lost momentum. Adding local planning and coaching components to the review/assessment process has resulted in participating communities taking immediate action to implement community review

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recommendations. Participating planning and development practitioners have expressed appreciation for a different, supportive role in redesigned reviews, however program tweaks are striving to balance the need to create space for expert guidance and the process of facilitating action teams as they plan to implement projects identified by residents.

The Future

A community-driven assessment process that includes additional support for project implementation appears to be having positive effects on community residents and visiting practitioners. A diverse range of residents are able to get involved right away, taking advantage of the momentum created by the review process, and practitioners feel their time is better spent assisting communities with implementation, rather than on idea generation alone. Two related issues have presented challenges to the new process: 1) established leaders making “space” for new leaders and 2) community involvement levels. Community surveys suggest the first issue is partly why some residents choose not to be involved in community activities as they feel their input is constrained by existing power structures. In response, pre-visit coaching focuses in part on how established leaders can “make room” for new leaders and a facilitated discussion with local nonprofits focuses on how to foster a culture of community involvement.

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

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