COMMUNITY REBRANDING
How One Rural Community Combats the Loss of Their Major Employer

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When the 2015 Montana Legislature passed Senate Bill 411, the community of Boulder, Montana, was faced with two choices: wait for the change to occur or take the opportunity to rebrand their community. They chose to be proactive and take the opportunity to transition the Boulder community through a visioning process. Boulder’s supportive residents found value by working together to solve the challenge of losing their major employer when the future economic viability of the community was seriously threatened. The lasting community bonds and discovery of various growth opportunities help to lead the charge for a bolder Boulder.
COMMUNITY HISTORY
Boulder, Montana, is a rural community surrounded by majestic mountains in southwestern Montana. Boulder is conveniently located along I-15 and suits the states’ nickname of Treasure State. With the rich history of a small town friendly atmosphere, natural resources, recreational opportunities, and community vitality, Boulder residents took the opportunity to rebrand themselves when Senate Bill 411 mandated the closure of Boulder’s largest employer, Montana Developmental Center (MDC). MDC provides treatment to people with serious intellectual disabilities who have been determined by a court to pose an imminent risk of serious harm to self or others (Montana DPHHS, n.d.).

For over a century, Boulder’s identity was that of an institution community. With close proximity to the cities of Butte and the capital city of Helena, Boulder’s location is prime real estate enriched with the Montana brand. The community’s richness is based in its grass roots approach of loyalty and forward thinking.

COMMUNITY VITALIZATION
The opportunity to rebrand Boulder was demonstrated through the lens of community rethinking and empowerment. The challenge was to find resources to pursue new growth and value.

Boulder began its focus on rebranding the community in the fall of 2015. A local community group called Boulder Transition Advisory Committee (BTAC) was formed with the help of the local Montana State University Extension Agents. BTAC includes area stakeholders who are committed to helping with the future transition of the Boulder community due to the pending closure of MDC. Its measure of success will be to identify and obtain the necessary resources to help foster economic development to create new employment opportunities that contributes to the overall quality of life.

BTAC meets monthly at the Town Hall and is a place where community conversations forge powerful impacts and community bonds. There is no better source of community rebranding than a passionate community. This passion is shared through a collective group of community organizations, business owners, elected officials, and engaged citizens of not just the Boulder community but surrounding area as well.

The relevancy and timing of the work was more formally adopted when Boulder’s residents began work on a project called “Making Boulder’s Future Bright.” This synergy of the community-driven change provided the foundation for growth.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND DIALOGUE (PROCESS)
Making Boulder’s Future Bright project continues to be the initiative for rebranding the community. Boulder chose a path which enhanced old collaborations and formed new partnerships. The first step was to get buy-in from the city council and

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county commission. The local Extension Agents presented the idea of study circles to both sets of elected officials. With support from the town council and county commissioners, a formal study circle process was initiated.

To introduce study circles and get community buy-in, a kick-off event took place in early March 2016. Local Extension Agents collaborated with the Montana State University Local Government Center (LGC) for facilitation as well as creating the study circle participatory guide. The Study Circles process was explained during the kick-off event. Some community members took further interest in the process by role playing the first session of the upcoming study circles.

The study circles consisted of six different groups of 6-12 people who met once a week for four consecutive weeks. Each group had two trained facilitators with one serving as the scribe. Each participant received the Making Boulder’s Future Bright Study Circle Facilitator and Participant Guide. This discussion guide was adopted from Everyday Democracy and the Northwest Area Foundation’s Building Strong Neighbors and Thriving Communities.

By mid-April, all groups came together to report their recorded thoughts from the four sessions. Session One was getting to know one another and each person’s connection to Boulder. Session Two discussed on how the Montana Developmental Center closing will impact Boulder. Session Three reported how community residents can build a stronger, more vibrant Boulder. Session Four told how the community can make a difference and move from talk to action.

The study circle’s deliberate discussion of these issues built a community-wide vision using an asset building framework. As described by Green and Haines (2012), asset building increases the capacity of (Boulder) residents to improve their quality of life by detailing discussion of the gifts, skills, and capacities of the (Boulder) individuals, associations, and institutions. The framework of visioning is often defined as a citizen-based planning process with diverse members of a community using collaboration and consensus-building techniques (Lachapelle et al., 2010)

Among the top assets, the Boulder community identified were abundance in natural resources, strong sense of caring, excellent location, peaceful, and recreational opportunities. Those five attributes helped lay the foundation for Boulder’s Vision:

Boulder is a strong community committed to planned growth that enhances new economic diversity while preserving our natural beauty, clean environment, and small town friendly atmosphere. Boulder is a family- friendly town with an emphasis and focus towards promoting safe and healthy living, and creative new learning opportunities. Boulder has a diverse economy that builds on its
natural resources and heritage while safeguarding our traditional agricultural culture. We continue to support and encourage local business and artisans while promoting value-added products.

The collected work of the study circles created four groups who took on the next step of community rebranding:

1. Marketing Boulder
2. Attracting and Retaining Small Businesses
3. Recreation
4. MDC Repurposing

Each group began to work on the steps needed to turn dialogue into action and to meet on a monthly basis.

COMMUNITY SUCCESS
The work of the four study circle groups has created ongoing dialogue. Meetings with the Montana Department of Commerce and Montana Department of Agriculture took place in the summer of 2016 to help bring ideas and more resource opportunities to entrepreneurs and business owners. A collective decision of BTAC was to hire a third party to develop a Master Plan for the community. The Master Plan guiding document has identified the foundational needs on which to build the town’s economic revitalization. The Master Plan was funded through the Big Sky Trust Fund Grant with partners Jefferson Local Development Corporation and the City of Boulder. The grant was awarded in June 2016 and to date is 55% complete with completion to be done by June 2017.

A community-wide Ambassador Program was started with the help of the Marketing group. The Making Boulder’s Future Bright website (http://www.makingbouldersfuturebright.com/) was created to provide a communication outlet and up-to-date information on the work happening in Boulder. Over a 16-month period, Boulder residents have invested 21,278 hours or 10.2 years of work (per 1,200 population). The process is helping to unite the community toward common goals and informal group leaders are emerging to help spearhead efforts. This internal leadership development is a crucial part of getting actions accomplished and is developing into a vital community asset.

COMMUNITY FUTURE
Boulder’s work will be part of the 2017 Montana State Legislature. Regardless of the Legislature’s decisions, Boulder residents and stakeholders can be proud of their accomplishments and investments. Boulder’s social capital is a strong foundation for future development and opportunities.※