SUCCESSFUL GARDINER

FINAL REPORT

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Future West is grateful for the involvement and support of the
Successful Gardiner Leadership Team in the development of this Community Profile.

Future West helps communities identify
and achieve their desired future.

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Introduction

Gardiner, Montana, the original gateway community to the world's first national park, is at a crucial point in its development.

With its storied history as a staging area for visitors from across the country and around the world who come to experience Yellowstone National Park, to its important role as a commercial hub for nearby ranching and outfitting operations, to the housing it provides for park and forest workers, Gardiner is widely recognized as a community with character, and characters. It is also becoming clear that it is a community in transition, which has many concerned about losing what makes Gardiner a great place to call home.

To ensure Gardiner remains an authentic, vibrant, and healthy town, a Leadership Team of Gardiner residents partnered with Montana State University Extension, Park County, and Future West, a Bozeman-based non-profit, to organize Successful Gardiner.

Successful Gardiner's goal is to engage all of the community in a dialogue and problem-solving process in order to:

- Identify shared community values that define who we are and what we care about.
- Build a common understanding of community issues, underlying causes, and potential solutions.
- Develop a prioritized action plan to address those issues and capitalize on opportunities.

TO LEARN MORE

about *Successful Gardiner*, visit www.successfulgardiner.org

The Successful Gardiner Project consisted of three phases:

PHASE 1
LEARNING

PHASE 2
VISIONING

PHASE 3
ACTION PLANNING

Background

Successful Gardiner consisted of three phases: 1) LEARNING, intended to give residents a common understanding of community assets, trends, and challenges, and to explore the attitude of citizens about those things; 2) VISIONING, designed to identify the type of future residents desire for the community; and 3) ACTION PLANNING, designed to help the community identify and assess the options for attaining that vision.

The learning phase consisted of a Gardiner Community Profile and interviews with residents and surveys of community attitudes. The Profile covered three topics as they relate to Gardiner: housing, schools, and the Gardiner "operating system" (that is, how things get done in a town without a municipal government). The following is a summary of the Community Profile; for more in-depth information, the Profile can be downloaded at www.successfulgardiner.org.

Housing

Housing has always been a challenge in Gardiner. In the past five years, however, the situation has become much worse for both renters and would-be homebuyers. According to surveys completed by HRDC in Bozeman, 58% of Gardiner households reported that they struggled to find available rentals, and over 75% found that purchasing a home is not possible.

The housing situation impacts the larger community as well. It makes it hard for businesses to hire the workforce they need and for the school district to recruit teachers, and it leaves many workers with long, difficult commutes. These housing challenges also threaten the "civic infrastructure" of the community. Gardiner's strength comes from the diversity of its residents and their civic participation, which are undermined by the lack of affordability.

Many tools exist to address the need for affordable housing on both the supply and demand sides. On the housing supply side, the community can work to both increase the number of homes available for long-term rent or purchase, and ensure that the current supply of that housing is not diminished. On the housing demand side, while little can be done to alter the total demand for housing, the community can work with partners in the nonprofit sector to provide various forms of assistance to low and moderate income residents so they can afford to rent or purchase homes.

Schools

While the Successful Gardiner project is focused on the community at large and does not directly focus on schools, it is clear that how goes the community's schools will in large part determine how goes the community, and how goes the community will determine the fate of Gardiner schools.

The School District budget has been significantly reduced in the past few years due to a drop in enrollment and State of Montana budget amendments. Simultaneously, the school also faces the pressing needs of aging and failing infrastructure. Enrollment has been on the decline for

The learning phase consisted of a Gardiner Community Profile and an exploration of community attitudes.

The Profile can be downloaded at successfulgardiner.org

the past decade, dropping by about 33% in the past ten years, from a kindergarten through high school graduation enrollment of 255 in 2008–2009 to 171 in 2018–2019. This drop in enrollment can be traced directly back to Gardiner's housing situation.

Operating System

Because Gardiner is unincorporated, functions that a municipality normally does – what one might call a community's "operating system" – are quite decentralized. Gardiner's operating system encompasses both infrastructure and services – things like roads, water, wastewater, emergency services, health and human services, and garbage disposal and recycling. These functions are performed by an array of entities, from Park County to individual taxing districts.

This chapter of the Profile includes options for Gardiner's operating system:

1. **Continue the existing decentralized, volunteer-driven, unincorporated operating system**. Under that system the community has no mechanism for dealing with land use issues through regulations or incentives. It can however, pursue strategies through volunteers, volunteer organizations, and county and state government.

2. **Work with the Park County Commissioners to create a land use plan for the community that would be implemented through a zoning district.** This land use plan and zoning could be designed to address the affordable housing, protection of community character, and other community goals. It must be initiated by the County Commissioners, but the process should be led by Gardiner citizens and be in conformance with the desires of the community.

3. **Pursue incorporation as a municipality. There is a spectrum of functions that an incorporated Gardiner could perform.** As noted above, basic infrastructure and services such as road and bridge maintenance, water and wastewater, law enforcement, emergency services, refuse disposal, and even street lighting are currently performed by Park County and individual taxing districts. The citizens and leaders of a Gardiner municipality could choose to accept some or all of these infrastructure and service functions, or it could choose to leave them decentralized. At the least, a community plan and land use regulations, similar to Option 2, would be required.

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Pre-workshop Community Input

Between January and April 2019, Successful Gardiner collected community input that utilized an online survey, postcards, interviews, and a youth event at the school. The community was asked:

- **What do you love about living in Gardiner and why is that important to you?**
- **What concerns do you have for the future?**
- **What hopes do you have for the future?**

Additionally, youth were asked two additional questions:

- **What would make Gardiner a better place to grow up?**
- **What would make you want to return here later on in your life if you left?**

A total of 229 individuals were reached during this effort, using the following tools:

TOOL	PARTICIPANTS
Interviews	51
Online surveys	128
Postcard surveys	29
Youth event	18
Email	3
TOTAL	229

The result of the public input indicated that the issues of priority for the community are:

1) Affordable Housing

2) Economy

3) Education

4) Tourism Impacts

5) Community Growth & Change

6) Demographic Change

7) Governance

8) Health

Public input showed the following community values:

1) A Connected and Caring Community

2) Good Stewards of Yellowstone

3) Civic-Minded and Engaged

4) A Unique Small Town

5) A Great Place for Families

6) A Safe Community

Successful Gardiner Workshop Summary

On May 7 – 9, 2019, Successful Gardiner hosted a two-night community workshop to discuss options for Gardiner's future. A total of 116 participants worked in break out groups to discuss the following five topics. A more detailed summary of the workshops can be downloaded from successfulgardiner.org.

1. Affordable Housing

2. Protecting Community Character

3. Sustainable Tourism & Economy

4. Strengthening Community

5. Creating A More Youth & Family-friendly Community

Housing Affordability

Because housing affordability is linked to the community's operating system, potential housing actions were discussed in relation to the three operating system options (volunteer-driven, county planning and zoning, and incorporation).

Summary of the group discussion of the scenarios:

1. Continue to be decentralized and volunteer-driven: Co-op and land trust opportunities could provide citizens with voice in development of some housing; won't hurt or compete with the current Mom & Pop short term rentals. But without some type of control the community is at risk of a "corporate" takeover.

2. County planning and zoning: It would at least be movement beyond the status quo. It would allow the community to shape our town with a balanced approach to housing in partnership with Park County without incorporating and the cost of incorporating.

3. Incorporation: Will not resolve all of housing issues immediately, but it could lead to a future by design. Several participants raised concerns about the need for fairness of incorporation. Others noted that because it must be voted on, it would be a thoughtful, intentional decision made by the community.

GROUP RECOMMENDATION

This group did not develop a recommendation.

Protection of Community Character

Like the housing group, this group explored community character issues in relation to operating system options, each which could allow for different tools and resources to be available to Gardiner to take action to address community character.

Summary of the group discussion of the scenarios:

1. **Continue to be decentralized and volunteer-driven:** Maintaining character of the community is individual choice without regulation. Could lose the community's history because there is no vision for the future.

2. **County planning and zoning:** This would be a citizen – driven solution. Could be good first step or even interim step to develop more accepted regulations for community to preserve character.

3. **Incorporation:** It could be a long process, but it is citizen – driven. It holds the greatest potential for desired outcomes of maintaining community character under local control.

GROUP RECOMMENDATION

The group's recommendation was to work with Park County to create a community plan and zoning that would enable the community to develop strategies to enhance and protect local assets.

Sustainable Tourism

The group explored the three scenarios, each which offer different tools and resources that would allow Gardiner to take action to address tourism.

Summary of the group discussion of the scenarios:

1. **Continue to be decentralized and volunteer-driven:** We could move away from competition and more towards cooperation for maximum benefits. Those benefits would be more unique, authentic, and higher quality visitor experiences, and more return business. The "super host" concept should be pursued.

2. **County planning and zoning:** Viable enough to pursue further due diligence.

3. **Incorporation:** In the end, the community needs to decide if it wants local representation.

GROUP RECOMMENDATION:

- Move forward with a "super host" approach.

- The Greater Gardiner Community Council and the County Commissioners should engage with Yellowstone National Park on a visitor management plan.

- Seek a better understanding of how collaboration with Park County on planning and zoning would work, and research other county planning and zoning districts.

Strengthening Community/Creating a More Youth and Family-friendly Community

These two groups were combined in the second workshop to develop priorities and a draft action plan.

The group recommendation was to prioritize gathering spaces and community wellness, especially mental health. Recruiting community volunteers will be essential to moving either of these ideas forward. Additionally, strengthening how the community shares information about existing resources was viewed as a critical first step.

GROUP RECOMMENDATION

1. Mental and General Health: Form an advisory council to identify issues and needs.
2. Create more gathering spaces and programs for all ages: Ideal space may include: Wifi, comfortable seating, ping pong, big screen TVs, accessibility, gym, weight room, basketball.
3. Strengthen community communication channels: Newsletter, facebook, flyers, block parties.

Options for Gardiner

As summarized in the introduction, Gardiner has three primary options for addressing its challenges: 1) continue to be decentralized and volunteer-driven; 2) partner with Park County on a community plan and land use regulations; and 3) incorporate as a municipality. This section explores those options more fully, especially in regard to the affordable housing and community character issues.

The sustainable tourism and the strengthening community/creating a more youth-friendly community groups developed discrete recommendations that can be implemented regardless of which of the following options the community chooses.

OPTION #1
Continue to be decentralized and volunteer-driven.

Gardiner's existing operating system is quite decentralized: roads are maintained by the Park County Roads Department, law enforcement is provided by the Park County Sherriff's Department, clean water and wastewater treatment is provided by the Gardiner Water and Sewer District, refuse disposal is provided by the Park County Refuse District, and many other functions are provided through the Park County General Budget.

Under the existing operating system, there is not a separate property tax levy for Gardiner residents – an owner of a home in Gardiner pays the same property tax as any other equally-valued home in unincorporated areas in Park County. Any town property tax levy would be additional to existing property taxes.

Under the existing operating system there are no ordinances specific to the community, including zoning for land use. There are some state requirements for things like electrical permits, but the community cannot now use regulations to address housing issues. However, the community could work with other entities such as Park County, HRDC, MSU Extension, or Montana State University to implement the existing Gardiner Housing Action Plan.

How could this option address housing, community character, and sustainable tourism challenges?

- It could work with community partners to identify and procure land for housing.

- It could work with community partners to seek state and federal grants for rental assistance, home purchase assistance, and weatherization.

- It could work with community partners to establish a Community Land Trust.

- It could work with community partners to establish a Community Housing Cooperative.

- It could seek a strategic partnership with Park County on housing. The Park County Growth Policy states that "now that Gardiner has developed

a housing action plan, the county should become active partners in its implementation. The Planning and GIS Departments have skills that can help." The Park County Growth Policy lists two actions for housing in Gardiner that could be implemented through a partnership between Park County and Gardiner:

- ○ Action 1: Provide technical planning and mapping assistance to Gardiner in order to identify land appropriate for new development of rentals and ownership units in affordable and market-rate sectors.

- ○ Action 2: Provide assistance to Gardiner in monitoring the implementation of the Gardiner Area Housing Plan. Park County could establish a Housing Authority that would appoint a Board of Directors of Park County citizens. A Housing Authority can administer rental assistance programs and manage low-income housing. A Housing Authority could work with other entities such as HRDC, or MSU Extension to implement an existing Gardiner Housing Action Plan.

- The community could also work with Montana State University's Community Design Center (CDC), an initiative of the School of Architecture. The Gardiner School District is currently partnering with the CDC to develop alternative designs for housing on school property. In the future the community could work with the CDC on a more comprehensive analysis of community design including limits driven by infrastructure, the existing transportation system, and other community elements such as parks and open space. This analysis could be focused on both commercial and residential development.

- To deal with the issue of community character, under this option the community could develop voluntary design guidelines and education programs directed toward developers.

OPTION #2
Partner with Park County on the development of a community land use plan and zoning:

As an alternative action, the Gardiner community could work with the Park County Commissioners to develop a community plan and land use regulations that would be administered by Park County. This approach would allow the community to do much of what could be done under incorporation: the creation of a plan for the future, implemented through a zoning district that would regulate what types of land uses could be built where. This strategy, however, would provide little benefit for obtaining state and federal housing assistance.

How could this option address housing, community character, and sustainable tourism challenges?

- The community plan could identify a vision, goals, and policy direction for these specific challenges specifically.

- The community plan could create policies for partnerships between entities such as Park County, HRDC, MSU, or MSU Extension to implement the existing Gardiner Housing Action Plan.

Park County and the Gardiner community could create a partnership to address housing issues.

- The land use regulations used to implement the community plan would determine the land use patterns of the community (that is, what sort of land uses are allowed in which sub-districts; for example, a sub-district identified for certain types of housing or certain types of commercial).

- Land use regulations could address issues such as the conversion of long-term rentals to short-term rentals. Existing short-term rentals would not be affected by new regulations.

OPTION #3
Incorporate as a municipality.

Because it is not incorporated as a town, Gardiner currently has no regulatory options for addressing conversion of existing housing to other uses, and community character issues such as historic preservation and parks and trails. Incorporation would allow the community to do those things. Incorporation would also make the community eligible for state and federal housing assistance.

A municipality may encompass a wide spectrum of forms and functions. For Gardiner, on one end of the spectrum it could involve accepting control of existing infrastructure and services that are provided by other entities, such as the water and sewer district, road maintenance from the county, and law enforcement from Park County. It could also involve the creation of new services, such as a parks department. On the other end of the spectrum, a municipal government in Gardiner could choose to not accept these infrastructure and service obligations, and instead let these services continue as they are now.

This option would involve a town property tax levy, so property taxes would increase. The amount of a potential town property tax would depend upon the range of services and infrastructure the municipality would assume (see the Gardiner Community Profile for an analysis of the potential costs of incorporation). To incorporate as a municipality, state statute requires a petition signed by at least 300 registered voters or 2/3 of the elected voters in the proposed town, whichever is less. The County Commissioners then set an election for or against incorporation. If that occurs, a local election would establish a City Council.

The municipality would adopt a non-regulatory plan (called a "Growth Policy" in Montana) that is very similar to a community plan under option two. This plan would identify housing goals and actions and implement them through a zoning ordinance. Like a County zoning district, the town zoning ordinance would determine the land use patterns of the community.

How could this option address housing, community character, and sustainable tourism challenges?

- The Growth Policy developed by the town could identify a vision, goals, and policy direction for these challenges specifically.

- The Growth Policy could create policies for partnerships between entities such as Park County, HRDC, MSU, or MSU Extension to implement the existing Gardiner Housing Action Plan.

To incorporate as a municipality, state statute requires a petition signed by at least 300 registered voters of 2/3 of the registered voters in the town, whichever is less.

- The land use regulations used to implement the Growth Policy would determine the land use patterns of the community.
- The land use regulations could address issues such as the conversion of long-term rentals to short-term rentals. Existing short-term rentals would not be affected by new regulations.

It is important to note that Options 2 or 3 could be pursued in concert with elements of Option 1. For example, if the community chose to work with Park County on a community plan and land use regulations (without incorporating), it could also work toward establishing a community land trust or a housing cooperative.

Pros and Cons of the Three Options

PROS of the decentralized, volunteer-driven approach:

- No additional taxes.
- Some may perceive that a lack of regulations is a pro – developers have the freedom to do what they want; decision-making is at an individual level.
- The community could perhaps solve some of its housing challenges without a local government; it could use other tools such as a community land trust, a housing coop, and other programs that HRDC and/or MSU could deliver.

CONS of the decentralized, volunteer-driven approach:

- No ability to stem the loss of housing by conversion to short-term rentals or commercial uses.
- No ability to shape the future of the community through land use and community design strategies.
- Fewer state or federal resources available to the community.

It is important to note that Options 2 or 3 could be pursued in concert with elements of Option 1.

For example, if the community chose to pursue Option 2, it could also work toward establishing a community land trust or a housing cooperative.

PROS of the community planning and zoning partnership with Park County approach:

- Ability to stem the loss of housing to short-term rentals or businesses.
- Ability to determine the land use patterns of the community.
- Some ability to address community design issues, such as building size and location, and location of infrastructure.
- Little to no financial costs for taxpayers.
- The community character workshop group recommends this option.

CONS of the community planning and zoning partnership with Park County approach:

- Ultimate authority on zoning regulations belongs to the County Commissioners in Livingston, not the local community.
- The community would not be eligible for a range of grants and loans for housing, infrastructure, and historic preservation that would be available under incorporation.

PROS of the incorporation approach:

- Ability to stem the loss of housing to short-term rentals or businesses.
- Greater ability to shape the future of the community, including infrastructure, community design, and parks and trails.
- Ability to determine the land use patterns of the community.
- Ability to have subdivision regulations tailored to the community (Gardiner now falls under Park County subdivision regulations).
- Local leaders elected by the community.
- Potential for greater community identity.
- Ability to institute a building code to address substandard housing.
- More money would stay in the community (most notably, state entitlement dollars).

CONS of the incorporation approach:

- Additional taxes.
- Significant further research is necessary to answer legal, fiscal, and infrastructure/services questions surrounding incorporation.
- While the decision to incorporate or not is straightforward (a petition and a public vote), the process of establishing a municipality will require substantial time and energy of community members.

Bigfork Case Study

Bigfork, an unincorporated community (like Gardiner) of approximately 4,200 people located on the northeast shore of Flathead Lake, has experienced incredible growth in past few decades, increasing its population by over 200% since 2000. While a large majority of the Big Fork area is rural, it does have a distinct core of residential and commercial neighborhoods.

In 1990, residents of Bigfork formed the Big Fork Steering Committee to establish a community-wide planning effort. It was becoming increasingly apparent to community residents that growth in the area threatened those very qualities that drive growth: the area's character, rural environment, and vistas.

That planning initiative culminated in the Bigfork Neighborhood Plan and the establishment of the Bigfork Land Use Advisory Committee (BLUAC), a volunteer group charged with administering the Plan and providing recommendations to the County Commissioners. Finally, the Plan was implemented by the establishment of a Bigfork Zoning District, which was based upon the goals in the Plan and the Plan's Future Land Use map.

In 2004 the community decided that growth and change in the area necessitated an updated Bigfork Neighborhood Plan. Surveys showed that residents overwhelmingly supported the existing Neighborhood Plan and the creating of a new plan; specifically, that planning and zoning were vital elements in coping with the growth pressure the community was continuing to experience.

The current Bigfork Neighborhood Plan is divided into eleven sections. The foundation of the document is the Bigfork Vision, which is supported by sections that describe and analyze the community: Population and Economics, Housing, Downtown & Highway 35 Corridor, Land Use and Natural Resources, Local and Social Services, Transportation, Public Facilities, Implementation Strategy, and Amendment Process. The Bigfork Zoning District was amended to reflect the updated Future Land Use map.
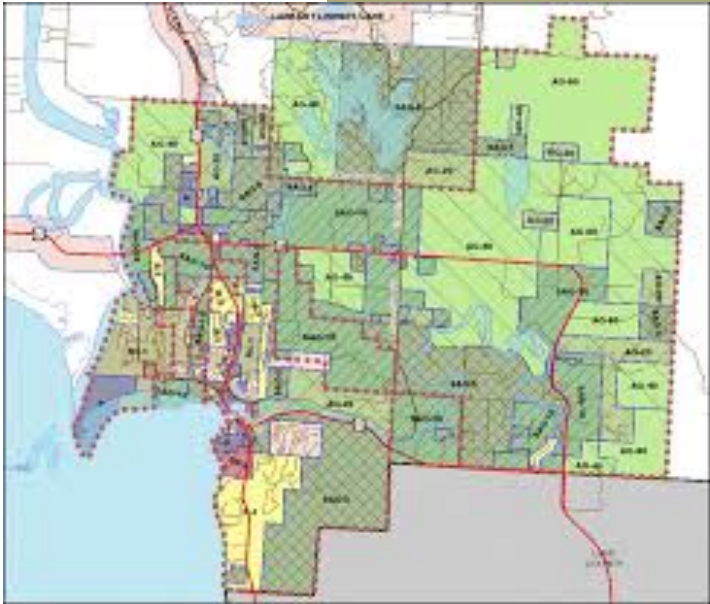
Red Lodge Case Study

Like other communities in scenic areas, Red Lodge has experienced great change. Housing costs have soared, newcomers have brought new values, and in downtown, brightly painted buildings clash with traditional building styles. Outside the city new homes occupy what was once prime rangeland, threatening the area's open spaces and working landscapes.

To meet these challenges, in 1992 citizens of Red Lodge (an incorporated city) gathered for a two-day Successful Communities workshop – termed the Beartooth Front Community Forum (BFCF) – to discuss the city's future.

Participants first sought a consensus on what they loved about Red Lodge and which characteristics made it a great place to live. Despite differences in politics, backgrounds, and outlooks, the event's participants discovered that they held similar attitudes about what they valued in their small town. Broad agreement emerged on a few key issues: land-use planning, clean water, and opportunities for young people.

Participants decided to form an organization to pursue projects that would retain and enhance those values in the face of growth and change. They named it the BFCF after the original event.

The role of the BFCF was – and continues to be – to help citizens understand and influence community change, and to further empower the already-effective nonprofit and government sectors of the community. As an issue or challenge was identified, BFCF often incubated and "spun off" new organizations to address those challenges. BFCF chose to operate as a meeting point, discussion forum, and catalyst, rather than building its own staff.

BFCF has achieved significant accomplishments: the first-ever city master land use plan, establishment of a local Boys and Girls Club, a bear-proof garbage container rental program, retention of the post office's downtown location, and incubation of a half-dozen other local nonprofits. Those accomplishments are a testament to the power of informed, civil dialogue that can lead to meaningful community.

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