

MONTANA ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS ASSOCIATION

Community Resource Assessment Report:

Custer

*& the Confluence of the Yellowstone & Big Horn Rivers,
near the intersection of Yellowstone, Big Horn, and Treasure Counties*

After 196 years as a trading post,

What comes next?

2003 Report by:

- *Lee Boyer, Montana Dept. of Agriculture*
- *Bob Parsley, USDA Rural Development*
- *Tom Kaiserski, Beartooth Resource, Conservation, & Development Area*
- *Al Jones, Montana Dept. of Commerce, team leader*

THE entire team would like to thank the folks of the town and surrounding territories for their exemplary hospitality, energy, reflection, courage, and commitment. We were amazed at what you've accomplished already, how many hats each of you wear to make your community work on so many levels, and the vigorous pioneer spirit that still suffuses all of you. The many potentials of your community were startling and offer a brighter future than most farm/ranch market centers. Even after 5 hours of touring your area and meeting with local businesses and institutions, we only scratched the surface and missed many folks and other hidden resources.

Particular Thanks go to Ellen Allen, Sheri Kirschenmann, Gary Ruff, Coleen Keller, the Congregational Church, the School, Jimbo's Junction City Saloon, Sjostrom's, the Honorable Mayor Lee Perrin, Milton Mothersheads, Doug Kurth, R.J. Stookey, and the many folks who had excellent insights and sincere interest.

Listening Sessions primary points

(great participation from at least 50% of the residents!)

Problems/Challenges

- Town businesses are decreasing and residents don't support local businesses, I-94's impact of making Billings shopping and services too accessible
- Yellowstone County ignores us, not taken seriously by County or State
- School Enrollment is declining, 30% of students are from other districts
- Sewer system
- Lack of available housing for sale/rent and buildable lots in town
- City water system to overcome uneven well water quality, high fluoride and sodium levels, some with high bacteria counts as well
- We have no vision of our future here
- Need to include and involve new community members
- Mosquito control
- Local TV and radio stations (Billings) aren't received here so cut off from local news
- School needs considerable repair, a new larger gym, computer lab, locker rooms, larger weight room, larger vo-ag shop/equipment, more community-available meeting space, more library resources for the community (open to the public apparently)
- Jobs for youth and adults
- Diversify economic base so Ag downturns aren't as devastating
- Find a draw to the community/ tourism and highway travelers
- Resistance to new ideas, stuck in maintaining status quo
- Decreasing overall population
- Need to attract young families rather than just retirees to keep school going
- Keep the school viable
- Lack of lighting at the football field
- Youth recreation-teen game center and skatepark
- Town doesn't think about growing, just about keeping what's here now
- New housing subdivision with larger house lot sizes would be helpful
- Congregational Church's bad basement floor in the meeting room
- Lack of leadership locally
- Indoor running/walking track

- Weight room equipment more oriented towards adults and seniors needs.
- Gym's foundation needs repairs, settling
- Low wages available locally
- Rising taxes
- If gym was condemned that could close the school (?) and town will die
- Shortage of Emergency Medical Technicians so ambulance service not available since no one's qualified to operate it.
- No volunteer firemen live in town anymore so response times are much longer, bad trend.
- Ambulance needs equipment upgrades, may need replacement
- Fire trucks need work, need vehicle extrication tools for car wrecks
- Lack of community and leadership from the churches
- School's heating system
- Athletic trainer services for adults and seniors for use of the school weight room
- Getting people involved in the School Foundation
- Declining church congregation memberships
- School Board and School Foundation disagreements/lack of support
- Need to Enlarge the boundaries of the sewer system to encourage more housing development
- Custer is increasingly a bedroom community where folks commute away for jobs
- Drug awareness program needed
- Town believes it's not going to grow, just slowly keep shrinking
- Abandoned commercial buildings and houses, often absentee owners
- Need to keep the town clean and maintained
- School efforts are too focused on sports
- People are nickled and dimed to death by all the fundraising going on all the time
- Community Calendar needed so fewer meetings/events conflict or are missed
- Lack of places for large gatherings (meetings, funerals, etc.)
- Old families want everything done their way, reject change and don't welcome new residents, yet seek to control the school, churches, etc.
- Many are comfortable with how things are now and afraid of change, the unknown.

Strengths/Assets

- School, particularly business classes, computer availability, sports programs, vo-ag program, accessible library, dedicated teachers/staff ...draws 30% of its students from other districts to attend it at considerable driving distances.
- Good core group of volunteers that shoulder responsibilities well
- Just about everyone will help their neighbor for any reason
- Being a small community
- Historically significant events and sites here
- Public-minded community
- Everyone helps the kids
- Community Park
- Safe place to live
- Very productive ag community
- Great school with lots of teacher attention 1:1 for students, few discipline problems, very high graduation rate 95%+ (MT avg is 84%, CA avg is 62% or so)
- Cheaper to live here but the amenities of a big city 50 miles away and a small town.
- Interstate Highway Access, both I-94 & I-90

- Community is warm and welcoming to newcomers
- Beauty of the area
- The way the community works together
- Local businesses are a great asset, any lost would be a great loss
- Good selection of churches (4: Congregational, Catholic, Baptist, 7th Day Adventist)
- Nice cemetery & tennis courts (separately located)
- Nice arena and calf-roping events
- Good hunting up through elk and good fishing although not as good as the famous parts of the Big Horn River (no one mentioned where the good fishing holes were specifically and everyone had seen quite a bit of game this season.)
- Fewer people than Billings
- Friendly people
- Paved roads
- Highway Dept. (MT Dept. of Transportation) is an asset
- Hospitals only 55 miles away, most travel by helicopter ambulance
- Lots of young couples here
- Our church
- Good Senior Citizens' Center (for just the good ones or a nice place?)
- People support local fundraising efforts and kids
- Good kids
- Outdoor recreation activities/opportunities
- Jimbo's Junction City Saloon
- Perrin's Conoco
- Cattle Development Center feedlot
- School Music Programs
- Grocery Store
- Town is platted
- Outfitting & Summer Guest Business
- Calcuttas (horses, not India, I think)
- Ranch recreation businesses
- Town can be seen from the Interstate (unlike others further up I-94)
- Low drug use
- Family values
- Good location (in relation to everything)
- Size of the School
- Can count on help with your kids
- Diversity
- Two major rivers
- 3 Feedlots
- Good place for hiking and for river floating

Projects/Opportunities

- New school gym-longer, wider, more seating, larger weight room, locker rooms
- School library expansion/improved public accessibility to resources
- More activities for kids after school
- New School building entirely
- Upgrades/repair/expansion of town sewer system

- Town drinking water system to replace most wells
- Repair the ditch system (stormwater collection?) throughout town
- Increase Booster Club enrollment
- More school trips and educational programs for kids
- Day care centers/providers in town needed
- Assisted Living Center to free up some houses, keep residents here, and create a few jobs.
- RV Parking/campground/facilities
- Add another motel
- Truck Stop
- Directional signs to Custer on Highway 47 (connector between I-94 & I-90)
- Further improve park
- Landscape projects around town, perhaps for FFA chapter
- Finish the old RR depot at the park for year-round use, more flexibility
- Espresso coffeehouse/kiosk
- Soda parlor/Ice Cream shop
- Car Wash
- Get a grant to buy costly equipment/items for the school Music program (didn't specify what-grand piano? Recording equipment? Sheet music sets?)
- School Computer Lab and upgrade computers there
- Upgrade the tools and equipment in the School's Vo-Ag Shop
- Need a handyman business in town
- Teen center
- Mosquito control program-regular insecticide fogging along the river
- New or newer Ambulance
- More EMT's and sufficiently trained EMT's to resume ambulance use here
- Jaws of Life for Fire Dept.
- Defibrillator for Ambulance
- Recruit town residents back into the Volunteer Fire Dept.
- Clean up town
- More auto repair shops needed
- Incorporate as a town or at least thoroughly explore it's pro's & cons
- Laundromat needed
- Storage units needed
- Rental housing needed
- Places for community groups to meet in that has storage closets they can store their stuff in. Possibly a re-use of existing gym if a new one is built or a room on that wing. Community Center probably the best term for it.
- Need mechanics and welders (unclear if in general or for a specific business)
- Retirement Center development
- Increase Tourism
- Ethanol production
- Research a way to bring new jobs
- Mountain Man Rendezvous here
- Teach local Montana history to kids
- Repair roping arena
- Swimming pool
- Auditorium at school
- Re-open the closed café at the motel and add game arcade and pool table for youths

- New classrooms at school
- Community Calendar to check events/avoid conflicts
- Marksmanship Class/Training for youths
- More ski trips for youth
- Add golf team to school
- Add volleyball team to school
- Leadership training program for kids needed
- Something to keep ditch from flooding
- Need growth
- Bathrooms need remodeling for ADA compliance
- Get a van for senior citizen's center
- Remodel kitchen at senior center
- Be progressive, not stagnant
- Historical interpretive signage
- Swimming Team (after a swimming pool)
- Museum
- Baseball Complex/fields
- Bike Trails
- Better shopping here
- Exchange house for community members, like a St. Vincent De Paul, Community Hope, Family Services, Project Hope, etc.
- New deck for the RR Depot building at the park
- Finish interior of the depot
- Fix the floor in the depot

Area Strengths & Assets That Came Up in the Tours

but not directly from the listening sessions *(since we take for granted most of what we have and see every day, assuming other places have these too.)*

- Western Area Power Administration Substation -offers greater potential for wind energy than places without it. This is probably long term but it's a heckuva big piece of relatively rare infrastructure and located in what looks like a good place for windfarms.
- Cattle Development Center Feedlot -beyond their feed purchases and employment, their heifer development program extends the lifespan of cows and number of calves for area ranchers, allows specialty feeding programs, could support a small-medium slaughterhouse/packing plant.
- Little Big Horn Battlefield's 300,000 annual tourist visits 30 miles away (3rd largest tourism destination in Montana for over 100 years, most written about battle in American History)
- Big Horn County Museum in Hardin is a much vaster complex than anyone expects

- Sites of Ft. Ramon/Manual Lisa, Ft. Benton, Ft. Cass, Ft. Pease, numerous historic personalities/incidents, buffalo jump and likely hundreds of native encampments over 5,000+ years.
- Proposed and progressing Ethanol refinery and coal-fired Electrical power plant at Hardin, expected to employ around 50-60 people on site, some of whom may prefer to live in Custer or along the Big Horn River valley, as well as buying local grain and generating high protein distillers' grain for Cattle Development Center and Huntley feedlots (improves beef flavor and tenderness noticeably.) Al and Tom have been working with those projects for the past year+
- Milton Mothershead's inventive skills and welding shop show real promise to grow into a manufacturing business
- Local buffalo ranch has some intriguing possibilities for tourism, hunts, serving buffalo at restaurants and pitchfork fondues/events, ...
- Scenic, empty roads off the highway are ideal for organized and independent tours by car, motorcycle, mountain bicycling, horseback, or walking. Pictographs, rock formations, Boot Hill, historic sites, pretty views, vast views clear to Hysham, river side, wildlife, etc.
- Superb local cooking- if nothing else drew and stopped folks in Custer, your cooking and baking would.
- Town is pretty, has a variety of housing mostly well-maintained, and kept a surprising amount of essential services (grocery store, gas station/auto parts/bulk plant, cafes, post office, motel, auto/heavy equipment repair shops, welding shop, feedlots, school, park, senior center, highway exits (2), considerable scenic variety, significant historical sites, and has all other services pretty conveniently so it's a much easier town to live in than most in Montana and has a lot to build on already, more like a town of 1,000+ people!

We're not supposed to add in unmentioned strengths but the gracious tours and folks we met kept revealing so many surprising assets (and we likely missed quite a few more.)

The Team's Responses to Your Input:

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GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

The Community Assessment in Custer was a very positive and rewarding experience. This small rural community

really laid out the red carpet for the assessment team, and clearly demonstrated their willingness to do whatever was needed to keep their school and community alive and thriving. *There is something special about this community that I observed from the moment we met the local hosts and guides.* The community is filled with people who share similar positive traits of enthusiasm, energy, and a tradition of "doing whatever it takes to get things done"! I felt from the beginning that the community

of Custer was going to gain tremendously as a result of this Community Assessment. But this was just a starting point! The Assessment was going to be helpful to these people, however, these public minded citizens were intent on saving the community and the school no matter how much work was involved, or how long it takes.

The rugged country around this community is absolutely beautiful, very historic, and at the confluence of two major Montana rivers. In order to experience the richness which abounds in this area, a person needs to turn into Custer, visit with some of the locals at Jimbos, and venture out on one of the many rural roads that lead to several scenic and historic sites. The area abounds in excellent fish and wildlife habitat, which clearly is a tremendous seasonal draw to this Southeastern Montana farming/ranching community.

Now that I have visited this community and surrounding area, I would recommend that anyone who enjoys the beauty of rural Montana landscapes to stop and check it out!

Among the many unique natural resources that Custer should be noted for is a great location. It is close to one of Montana's major cities, but far enough to be very rural. The community is situated close to the Interstate highway, and near the confluence of two major rivers, the Yellowstone and the Bighorn. It is also on a short route that leads directly South to the Little Bighorn Battlefield, the site of the June 25, 1876 battle between the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry under General George Armstrong Custer, and several bands of Lakota Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho.

I would like to extend my most sincere appreciation to the Community of Custer, the Resource Planners, the tour guides, the ladies who provided treats and refreshments, and the people (including students) who shared their concerns, hopes, and dreams for their school and community.

I am confident that this assessment will help the people of Custer achieve some of their long-range community goals and secure adequate funding for the many projects that they would like to see

completed. When economic and community development tools/techniques are blended with a progressive and determined community like Custer, it very soon becomes obvious that things will change for the better.

Personally, I think that Custer will survive, and through the will and determination of the people, will eventually thrive and prosper!

STRATEGIC PLANNING:

Strategic planning is always an essential first step in any community development project. It doesn't matter if you are building a playground for the city park or putting an addition on the community center, the first step is always some form of planning.

As an example, here are some things to consider:

1. Does the project have community support?
2. Who will be involved in completing the project?
3. What materials are needed?
4. What the materials will cost?
5. Are there any legal issues involved?
6. Are there local/state/federal/private resources to help with the project?
7. Is there a local commitment for operation and maintenance when the project is completed?

A plan lays out a blueprint for change within your community. ***It takes you from a pie-in-the-sky vision to specific actions and projects.*** Following are some good reasons for doing a strategic plan.

- To create a vision of what the community wants to become in the future.
- To see "the big picture" of how the community will be changed.
- To make sure that everyone in the community shares in the vision/plan.
- To select and agree on some common goals.
- To involve as many people as possible in the process.
- To find out how much time, money, and other resources are needed.
- To get the support of Federal, state, private, and non-profit partners.

Following are some important steps to take in getting started.

- ❑ *Identify a lead organization.* This organization will be used to provide leadership and support in the early stages of the strategic planning process. The organization will provide meeting space, computers, copiers, fax machines, secretarial support, and other things needed to get started.
- ❑ *Form a Steering Committee.* This steering committee will oversee the strategic planning process. Recruit up to a dozen community members who have the respect and trust of others, and who represent different interests within the community.
- ❑ *Involve all kinds of people.* The strategic plan will have more support if many people are involved. You need to hear from people who have different points of view, even if you do not agree with them. Involve local organizations that can carry out actions in the strategic plan. These might be senior citizens, schools, local businesses, civic clubs, church groups, or non-profits.
- ❑ *Identify local resources.* Strategic planning requires people, places, and things to do the work. Create a list of startup needs and find people or organizations willing to help.
- ❑ *Develop a process.* Who will organize meetings? Who needs to attend? When and how will the public be involved? How many meetings will be held? What results do you want from each meeting?
- ❑ *Develop a timetable.* Create a planning timetable that describes when and where events will take place and who is responsible for organizing them.

Analyze Resources:

After a thorough community assessment is completed, look at available or needed resources such as people, organizations, money, facilities, equipment, and other things that can be used to carry out your plan.

Determine what Federal, State, foundation, and private resources that you can apply for. (Suggested resources will be provided by the Assessment Team) Think about creative ways to find additional

resources, especially those that do not involve money. And remember. ***Committed and motivated people are just as important as money!***

Rank issues/problems in order of importance:

Rate these issues on seriousness of the problem, and number of people affected. In public meetings try to focus on the most important issues. Differences of opinion and lack of resources may mean that some highly ranked issues or problems are left out of your strategic plan in the short run. However, these issues can be included in later updates of your plan.

Determine your long-term goals:

Your strategic plan should include goals for each of the highest ranked issues. **It is not necessary to begin working on every goal in the first year.** In some cases, more information may be needed about an issue before it can be solved. When you develop goals, you are setting the direction for your community. **Any specific action you take later should relate directly to your goals.** Describe your goal in detail, **so everyone will know when you get there!**

Select Strategies:

Next, decide what is the best way to achieve your goals. Brainstorming with a diverse segment of your community is often the best way to do this.

After you have developed a list of strategies, evaluate which ones will be most effective.

If negative impacts are identified in any of these areas, you can brainstorm about ways to minimize or avoid them.

IMPLEMENTING YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN:

The hard work begins with the implementation of a strategic plan. ***Everything can't be done at once, so your plan must be divided into several programs of work.***

It is most common to divide a 10-year plan into 2-year work programs to make it more manageable. Each two-year work program describes who will do things,

what will be done, how much it will cost, and how success will be measured.

Following are a few key points to remember when implementing a Strategic Plan for your community.

- ❑ Start with smaller projects that have a high chance of success.
- ❑ Manage your resources wisely to get the most value from your limited funds.
- ❑ Act responsibly so you maintain your supporter's confidence.
- ❑ Keep the community and partners informed and constantly involved.
- ❑ Set benchmarks to measure how well you are doing.
- ❑ Evaluate progress regularly and publicly. Report this to the community.
- ❑ Change plans whenever necessary, keeping in mind the long-term vision.
- ❑ Learn from experience. Do not make the same mistakes twice.
- ❑ Celebrate your successes publicly!

Since the Custer community does not have any paid staff to research funding sources for economic and community development, it will be difficult to secure the needed funding and resources without a financial investment of some kind.

In my view, someone must be hired or several volunteers assigned to follow-up on strategic planning, search for funding sources, complete grant/loan applications, etc.

Community development will only be productive, if and when there is an initial investment of time and money from the local community.

It was obvious during the listening sessions that this community has many volunteers who are willing to provide ample amounts of time for community development activities. Volunteerism and cooperation are major attributes that seem to be in great supply in Custer. This will be important since most community projects require considerable volunteerism regardless of where they are or what kind of project is involved.

The community plan for Custer must ensure that an adequate number of individuals are assigned to pursue the resources and information provided by the Assessment Team.

INFRASTRUCTURE:

The Custer listening sessions clearly identified major problems with community infrastructure.

Many people noted that something needed to be done with the antiquated sewer system and that there was also a great need for a community water project. Both of these projects are essential to any type of community development. It would not be prudent to promote or construct any new development in Custer until these problems are resolved.

There are several organizations that can provide technical assistance to rural communities who are **upgrading or developing water and waste water systems.**

Two of these organizations are:

Midwest Assistance Program (MAP) not only provides training hand-in-hand with technical assistance to small communities, but also in classroom settings. The training is directed to the leadership of the small communities served. The goal is to facilitate improvements in water, wastewater, solid waste management and community development to improve the health, welfare and well being of residents in small communities.

Water and wastewater related technical assistance provided to small communities can be divided into two broad categories: development and support.

Development assistance is provided to help communities obtain or expand water or wastewater facilities.

It includes needs assessments, income surveys, dealing with engineers, financial packaging, application preparation, construction supervision, and many other kinds of "front-end" work necessary to put facilities into place.

Support assistance helps communities manage, operate, and maintain facilities that are already in place. It may include operator training, improving financial management systems, setting rates, or other items to help systems work more effectively.

MAP assists communities **with virtually every aspect of water or wastewater system development** - from construction funds to tap-fees, from selecting engineers to reviewing plans, from community organizing to management training.

For information please contact:
Midwest Assistance Program (MAP)
P.O. Box 1456
Whitefish, MT 59937
406-863-4900
Bill Leonard
bleonard@cyberport.net

Additional assistance for water and waste water projects can be obtained from:
Montana Rural Water Systems (MRWS)
925 7th Ave. South, Great Falls, MT 59405
Phone (406) 454-1151
mrws@worldnet.att.net

Both MAP and MRWS are experienced in the planning and development of rural water and waste water systems. They are familiar with the agencies that provide funding to small rural communities, and know who to contact.

Two of the funding agencies are:

USDA Rural Development
Rural Utilities Service
P.O. Box 850
Bozeman, Montana 59771
Mitch Copp, Director
406-585-2520
Mitchel.Copp@mt.usda.gov

Montana Department of Commerce
Community Development Division
P.O. Box 200501
Helena, Montana 59620-0501
Newell Anderson, Administrator
406-444-3757
neanderson@state.mt.us

Other resources that might be helpful in water and waste water projects are:
<http://www.mtfinanceonline.com/pubinfra.html>

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
www.dnrc.state.mt.us
rbeck@state.mt.us
(They have a loan fund specifically for water and wastewater systems.)

MT Board of Investments
www.commerce.state.mt.us/BrdInvst
dewer@state.mt.us

David Ewer or Geri Burton
The BOI InterCap short-term loan program is very helpful in getting these projects early stages financed and BOI handles public bond issues quite often.

Montana Department
of Environmental Quality
www.deq.state.mt.us
tlivers@state.mt.us

COMMUNITY FACILITIES:

There were many comments during the listening sessions about the need for financial assistance to repair, renovate, or build structures that are considered essential community facilities.

The facilities described by many community members included: a new gym, community center, health/wellness center, senior citizens center, fire department, emergency medical equipment/vehicles, and local parks/ buildings.

All of these proposed projects fall within USDA's Community Facilities Program guidelines.

USDA-eligible Community Facilities include: *schools, libraries, childcare, hospitals, medical clinics, assisted living facilities, fire and rescue stations, police stations, community centers, public buildings, and transportation.*

Community Facility **loan** programs are for constructing, enlarging, or otherwise improving community facilities providing essential services in rural areas and towns with a population of 20,000 or less.

The funds are available to public entities such as municipalities, counties, special-purpose districts, Indian tribes, and corporations not operated for profit.

Rural Housing Service (RHS) also *guarantees* community facility loans made by banks or other lenders.

Community Facility **grants** are designed to assist in the development of essential community facilities in rural areas. The Agency will authorize grant funds on a graduated basis. Eligible applicants located

in small communities with low populations and low median household incomes may receive a higher percentage of grant funds. The amount of grant funds provided for a facility shall not exceed 75% of the cost of developing the facility.

For information contact:
USDA Rural Development
Community Facilities Program
P.O. Box 850
Bozeman, Montana 59771
Sue Gantz, Program Director
406-585-2555
Sue.Gantz@mt.usda.gov

Additional resources are available through the Montana Department of Commerce-**Community Development Division**. The Community Development Block Grant program funds are most often used in combination with other federal, state, or local funds to make basic community infrastructure improvements, such as **water and sewer facilities**, affordable to low and moderate income families.

Public facility projects can also include facilities designed for use predominantly by persons of low and moderate income such as nursing homes, senior centers, Head Start centers, or mental health centers.

Planning grants are also available to Montana communities for related housing and public facilities activities. The grants can be used for a variety of planning activities including the initial planning necessary to get a project underway, or to conduct other important community planning activities such as preparing or updating a growth policy, preparing a neighborhood redevelopment plan, a housing study, capital improvement plan, or similar planning processes needed to help a community address critical needs.

Counties can apply for projects to assist unincorporated communities; in particular, water and sewer districts.

That would be through Casey Joyce at Big Sky Economic Development Authority in Billings 256-6875
cjoyce@bigskyyeda.org Casey has worked a lot on the Lockwood sewer project as well as Huntley-Worden issues. *ALJ*

For more information please contact:
Montana Department of Commerce
Community Development Division
P.O. Box 200501
Helena, Montana 59620-0501
Newell Anderson, Administrator
406-444-3757
neanderson@state.mt.us

Other funding sources for community facilities projects can sometimes be acquired from foundations. Following is a list of foundations that can be contacted for funding criteria.

<http://fconline.fdncenter.org/> (subscription required)
<http://www.nwaf.org/>
<http://www.philanthropy.com/>
<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/>
<http://www.hhs.gov/grantsnet/>
<http://www.wkkf.org/>
<http://www.fordfound.org/>
<http://www.benton.org/>

Montana State University-Billings's campus library has a special grants research room with considerable foundation information. Most foundations do not do buildings or infrastructure (education and health care get most of the dollars from foundation giving.) *ALJ*

TOURISM:

I think Custer has tremendous potential as a tourist destination.

The historic nature of this area makes it a natural destination for tourists and history buffs. Throughout the local area and within a fifty-mile radius are many historic sites that are of special interest to people who love and enjoy Western history.

This area is also well known for sites where people can camp, hike, bike, hunt, and fish.

The historic sites, tourist areas, and hunting and fishing havens should be marketed and publicized in the *Custer Country* tourism guide distributed statewide and through the Travel Montana website.

You may also want to consider putting together a tourism website for the community of Custer.

The name Custer should get lots of Internet "hits" when people search travel sites involving Western history and the Little Big Horn Battlefield.

Perhaps something can be done to promote the community as a starting point to visit before tourists head South to the battlefield.

The development of a small local museum and historic center on I-94 and highway 47 would surely draw many visitors.

Travel Montana is the statewide tourism development and promotion program provided by the Montana Department of Commerce.

Travel Montana serves the people of Montana with programs designed to develop and promote Montana as an attractive destination for visitors from around the world.

The goal of this agency is to work with our statewide partners to create a tourism industry that provides positive benefits for Montana's economy, its communities, and its people. For more information you can contact:
<http://www.travelmontana.state.mt.us/>

The Montana Department of Commerce also has a grant program to assist in the promotion and implementation of tourism related events. It is called the **Special Events Grant Program (SEGP)**. Montana communities, organizations and tribal governments sponsoring or planning special event projects are invited to apply for \$50,000 in state tourism "bed tax" grant funds.

For complete guidelines and an application form, please call or email Carol Crockett at 406-841-2796, email:
Carol@visitmt.com:

Someone should also check out the Lewis and Clark website to determine how it might be used to promote tourism in and around your community. It can be accessed at:
<http://lewisandclark.state.mt.us/>

BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

Much of the testimony presented by the Custer community at the listening sessions had to do with improving the overall economic condition of the community and area.

There was extensive input regarding economic development planning, technical assistance for business development, leadership development training, and related issues. All of this fits within the scope of **USDA Rural Development's Rural Business Opportunity Grant (RBOG)** which non-profits, public bodies, and Indian Tribes are eligible to apply for.

Grant funds may be used to assist in the economic development of rural areas by providing technical assistance, training, and planning for business and economic development.

RBOG Grant selection criteria include the extent to which economic development resulting from the proposed project will be sustainable over the long term; the extent to which the project should lead to improvements in the quality of economic activity within the community, such as higher wages, improved benefits, greater career potential, and the use of higher level skills; the amount of leveraging of funds from other sources; service to communities that are experiencing trauma due to a major natural disaster or the closing or major downsizing of a military facility or other major employer; service to communities that have remained consistently poor over the long term or have experienced long term population decline or job deterioration; and the extent of the project's usefulness as a best practice model for other communities.

Another Rural Development program that can assist communities and businesses with economic development funding is the Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG). The Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBS) makes grants under the Rural Business Enterprise Grants Program to finance and facilitate development of small and emerging private business enterprises located in areas outside the boundary of a city or unincorporated

areas of 50,000 or more and its immediately adjacent urbanized or urbanizing area.

Public bodies, private nonprofit corporations and federally recognized Indian tribes receive the grant to assist a rural business. Eligibility is limited to public bodies, private non-profit corporations, and Federally-recognized Indian Tribal groups.

Public bodies include incorporated towns and villages, boroughs, townships, counties, States, authorities, districts, Indian Tribes on Federal and State reservations, and other Federally-recognized Indian Tribal groups in rural areas.

The small and emerging businesses to be assisted must have less than 50 new employees and less than \$1 million in gross annual revenues.

Funds are used for the financing or development of a small and emerging business. Eligible uses are: Technical Assistance (providing assistance for marketing studies, feasibility studies, business plans, training etc.) to small and emerging businesses; purchasing machinery and equipment to lease to a small and emerging business; creating a revolving loan fund (providing partial funding as a loan to a small and emerging business for the purchase of equipment, working capital, or real estate); or construct a building for a business incubator for small and emerging businesses.

It was clear during the listening sessions that everyone would like to save the few businesses that remain in Custer.

In addition, many folks talked about the need for additional business development in the form of a motel, RV Park, welding shop, ranch recreation, or a mechanic shop.

To help finance business ventures of this type USDA offers a guaranteed loan program. The **Business and Industry (B&I) Guaranteed Loan Program** at USDA Rural Development helps create jobs and stimulates rural economies by providing financial backing for rural businesses. This program provides guarantees up to 90 percent of a loan made by a commercial lender. Loan proceeds may be used for working capital, machinery and equipment, buildings and real estate, and certain types of debt refinancing. The primary purpose is to create and maintain employment and

improve the economic climate in rural communities. Assistance under the B&I Guaranteed Loan Program is available to virtually any legally organized entity, including a cooperative, corporation, partnership, trust or other profit or nonprofit entity, Indian tribe or Federally recognized tribal group, municipality, county, or other political subdivision of a State.

For more information about the loan guarantee program and the RBOG and RBEG please contact:
Mr. John Guthmiller
RBS Program Director.
USDA Rural Development
P.O. Box 850
Bozeman, Montana 59771
406-585-2540
John.Guthmiller@mt.usda.gov
<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/busp/bprogs.htm>

Business Resources Division MT Department of Commerce

The Business Resources Division at the Montana Department of Commerce is comprised of a variety of programs aimed at improving, enhancing, and diversifying Montana's economic and business climate.

Working closely with the private sector, our economic and community development partners, other department divisions, state agencies, and federal and private programs, the division strives to enhance the economic base of Montana through business creation, expansion, and retention efforts. Technical and financial assistance and relationships with local development groups, chambers, and similar organizations provide a springboard to help Montana communities develop their full economic potential. We assist businesses and communities of Montana in achieving economic prosperity, keeping in mind that the vision of prosperity to be achieved must be defined by the businesses and communities that we serve.

Contact:

Al Jones
Regional Development Officer/SC MT
Business Resources Division
MT Dept. of Commerce
406-655-1696
aljonesrdo@attbi.com

In addition to the above listed business resources, the following website is a free website to help people who may be interested in getting involved in their own business:

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

Another great resource for business development is the Small Business Administration (SBA).

The SBA website has information regarding business development, financing businesses, business counseling, government contracting, HUB Zones, available training, and much more.

The Montana website for SBA is:

<http://www.sba.gov/mt/index.html>

SBA, MT Dept. of Commerce, & Yellowstone County fund an SBA Small Business Development Center and Business Information Center at the Big Sky Economic Development Authority offices at 222 N.32nd. St. in downtown Billings, 2nd floor.

There is no charge for business counseling by the SBDC officers, Scott Langmann and Deanna South, just call for an appointment- 256-6875 or dsouth@bigskyeda.org

HOUSING:

In the years to come, the growth in rural population and the predominance of low-wage jobs will more than likely translate into an increased need for affordable capital to fund housing in communities like Custer.

USDA Rural Development has many housing programs that might help meet the housing needs of people in your community.

Most of the programs are income based, and some have age criteria.

Someone in the community who is interested in housing promotion and development, whether it be single family, multi-family, self-help housing, rental housing, or repair and rehabilitation loans/grants should access the USDA Rural Development - **Rural Housing Service website**.

Rural Development's **single-family housing programs** are designed to help eligible rural residents obtain decent, safe and sanitary housing. To qualify for

assistance, you must meet certain requirements related to household income, available assets, credit requirements, and repayment ability.

In addition, you must be **unable** to obtain other credit from traditional home mortgage sources without USDA Rural Development assistance.

The income level requirements are based on the household size and a percentage of the county median income.

Farm Labor Housing:

The Farm Labor Housing Loan and Grant program provides capital financing for the development of housing for domestic farm laborers.

Loans are made to farmers, associations of farmers, family farm corporations, Indian tribes, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and associations of farmworkers.

Typically, loan applicants are unable to obtain credit elsewhere, but in some instances, farmers able to get credit elsewhere may obtain loans at a rate of interest based on the cost of federal borrowing.

Grants are made to farmworker associations, nonprofit organizations, Indian tribes, and public agencies.

Farm Labor Housing loans and grants are provided to buy, build, improve, or repair housing for farm laborers.

Funds can be used to purchase a site or a leasehold interest in a site; to construct **housing, day care facilities**, or community rooms; to pay fees to purchase durable household furnishings; and to pay construction loan interest.

Loans are for 33 years at 1% interest, except as noted above.

Grants may cover up to 90% of development costs.

The balance may be a Farm Labor Housing Program loan. Funds may be used to build, buy, improve, or repair labor housing and to provide related facilities.

For more information about single family, multi-family, or farm labor housing please contact:

Deborah Chorlton Director,
Rural Housing Service
USDA Rural Development
P.O. Box 850

Bozeman, Montana 59711
406-585-2551
Deborah.Chorton@mt.usda.gov
<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/mt/RHS/rhs.htm>

In addition the single family housing loans and grants and the Farm Labor Housing, USDA Rural Development Rural Housing Service also has a variety of other programs. These include Multi-family housing, Mutual Self-help housing, Housing Preservation grants, and the Community Facilities loans and grants.

The Rural Housing Service provides a number of homeownership opportunities to rural Americans, as well as programs for home renovation and repair.

RHS also makes financing available to elderly, disabled, or low-income rural residents of multi-unit housing buildings to ensure they are able to make rent payments.

COMMUNICATION:

Communication is an essential part of any form of community development. There were many comments in the listening sessions in regard to lack of communication, lack of unity, resistance to new ideas, and getting people involved. Although these comments were not heard in every session, they indicate that some people in the community have concerns about local community support and involvement.

Following are just a few ideas to improve communication in the Custer community:

- ❑ **Establish a Community Development Council made up of representatives of every club, organization, and civic group in the community.** This Council could meet monthly to work on strategic planning, community events, goal setting, problem solving, and resource coordination. An important function of this group would be to provide the community with a single source of information about economic and community development.
- ❑ **Ask a local civic or school group to put together and sell a Community Calendar.** The calendar would highlight important yearly and historic

events in the community. It could also be used to publicize people's birthdays, anniversaries, school events, community clean-up days, and meetings of local development organizations.

- ❑ **Establish two Community Awareness Days.** One in the Fall, and one in the Spring! These awareness days would serve several purposes. First, this is a chance to involve the entire community in an information Town Meeting to publicize community projects. Second, these meetings would serve as a kick-off for the Custer Community Clean-up Project, and thirdly this would be a great time for two community picnics at the local park!
- ❑ **Ask for volunteers to serve on a Custer Historical Society.** This group would be involved in surveying the community for historical information. They would be charged with putting together a history of Custer and the surrounding area. This Society would do research locally by interviewing local citizens, visiting and documenting historical sites and structures, and reviewing appropriate Internet websites. Their goal would be to put together a History of Custer and the surrounding area, and to secure resources for a local historical museum. In addition, this Society would be expected to provide the local school with historical information that could be included in the curriculum so the younger people would understand their community's history and culture.
- ❑ There are many other ways to improve communication within a small rural community. Lack of communication is a problem in most communities that are experiencing problems in their communities and schools. Development and growth can only happen if most people in the community are informed and supportive. Thus, it is important to let everyone know what is going on. A good suggestion is to be more inclusive than exclusive when working on community development projects.

Don't leave anyone out! That person may be the one with the best idea!

GENERAL INFORMATION:

The online **Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance** gives a person access to a database of **all** Federal programs available to State and local governments (including the District of Columbia); federally-recognized Indian tribal governments; Territories (and possessions) of the United States; domestic public, quasi-public, and private profit and nonprofit organizations and institutions; specialized groups; and individuals. After you find the program you want, contact the office that administers the program and find out how to apply. The website is <http://www.cfda.gov/> **FirstGov - Your First Click to the US Government**

On FirstGov.gov, you can search more than **51 million web pages** from federal and state governments, the District of Columbia and U.S. territories.

Most of these pages are not available on commercial websites.

FirstGov has the most comprehensive search of government anywhere on the Internet. We are working with agencies to encourage portals organized around customer groups and topics, instead of agency names. Examples of cross-agency portals include: seniors, students, people with disabilities, workers and exporters. FirstGov™ is the U.S. government's official web portal.

Office of Citizen Services and Communications
U.S. General Services Administration
1800 F Street, NW, Washington, DC 20405
Call 1-800-FED-INFO (1-800-333-4636)
<http://www.firstgov.gov/>

Another great website which is provided by **USDA's Office of Community Development** allows anyone to check out Notices of Funding Availability (NOFAs) These NOFAs are announcements that appear in the Federal Register, printed each business day by the United States government, inviting applications for Federal grant programs. This website allows

you to generate a customized listing of NOFAs that might be useful to your community. Check out the site at: <http://ocd1.usda.gov/nofa.htm>

Land and Water Conservation Grants-Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife, & Parks

The Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is a federal grants program. The program has two sides--the state side and the federal side.

The state side of LWCF allows states to assist their political subdivisions by providing grants for acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities. Any political subdivision of the state, or sovereign Indian Nation, may sponsor a project. This includes incorporated cities or towns, counties, school districts, state agencies, and tribal governments. Only an eligible sponsor may submit a project application.

The sponsor must have effective land control in the form of title, or in the form of a long-term lease (minimum 25 years) from the federal government.

The kinds of projects that have been approved and funded in the past include such facilities as **ball fields, open space acquisitions, golf courses, public parks, swimming pools, skating rinks, picnic facilities, playground equipment, snowmobile facilities and walking trails.**

Facilities directly supporting outdoor recreation areas, such as **restrooms and maintenance sheds**, also are eligible.

To learn more about this program contact:

Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1420 East Sixth Avenue
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701
Phone: (406) 444-2535
E-mail: fwpgen@state.mt.us

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:

A Manual for Small Downtowns,
by Dr. Martin Shields,
Penn State University.
<http://retailmarkets.aers.psu.edu>

National Trust for Historic Preservation-
National Main Street Centers
www.mainst.org
International Downtown Association
www.ida-downtown.org
Rocky Mountain Institute
www.rmi.org

SUMMARY:

In closing, I would just say that the capacity of a community like Custer to pursue economic development efforts is often limited as much by a lack of communication, cooperation, goal-setting, and consensus as by a lack of dollars.

"Prepared" communities have thought about their future and understand how economic development fits into the type of community they want. They know what their economic development goals are.

It should never be assumed that there is interest in growth and development.

The Community Assessment that was completed on March 3-4, 2003 is an essential first step in becoming a "Prepared" community.

Another problem in most community-based efforts is a lack of managerial or organizational capacity to pursue development.

Research has proven that organized communities are more successful in their economic and community development efforts.

"Prepared" communities have some form of organization devoted to promoting the achievement of the community's economic development goals.

This organization is vital, active, representative, and effective.

The organization and their leadership also have the capacity to identify, collect, and direct the resources available for pursuing the community's development goals. It is my feeling that Custer has the essential organizational structure to actively pursue their community development goals.

It is very important for any community involved in development processes to have a sound base of knowledge and information. In a "Prepared" community key people have a basic understanding of community development

principles, and the resources available to them.

They also have current and accurate information about their community and the local economy (strengths & weaknesses).

Although Custer has key people who are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about community development, it might be advisable for these people to take part in a community development training or workshop.

These are provided by various agencies and organizations throughout the year, and are generally advertised on state and federal websites.

Assessment is absolutely necessary for any community to determine where it is compared to where it wants to be, what it should do to get where it wants to be, and what is feasible.

I really feel that the citizens of Custer have demonstrated their interest and determination in seeing that this community grows and prospers.

The community knows that things are not going well, and as a result of the community assessment have decided what they would like to see in 5, 10, and 20 years down the road.

It will take many months of planning, meetings, and seeking resources to help the community decide what it needs to do and which parts of their plans are feasible.

I would like to wish this community much luck and prosperity in their economic and community development efforts.

I am sure that the energy and enthusiasm that was evident during the community listening sessions will ensure that Custer will survive, thrive, and prosper in the years ahead!

I hope that USDA Rural Development can somehow take part in the growth of the community.

Bob Parsley

Al Jones
Regional Development Officer/ South
Central Montana
Business Resources Division
Montana Dept. of Commerce
Billings field office
655-1696
655-0899 fax
aljonesrdo@attbi.com

Custer has always been at a natural crossroads in the middle of rich land but has yet to reach the real potential of those big advantages.

I blame this on several people:

1. Manuel Lisa, *St. Louis Fur Trader*

If he'd considered to enlarge the trading post here begun in 1807 and brought up families and craftspeople rather than just traders or trappers, this could have grown more along the lines of Ft. Benton, Ft. Union, or Ft. Laramie. That would have sustained a considerable population here at Montana's first American settlement. With the development of the gold fields, Bozeman Trail, and the NP railroad being able to pass through Custer, this might well have become among the largest cities in Montana by now, building on more than Great Falls did at 2 rivers' confluence on the plains.

2. Frederick Billings, *Northern Pacific Railroad President when it came through here in 1878-82.*

Billings arbitrarily picked the city location that bears his name from a map while meeting with the Great Northern and Milwaukee Road heads as a place to swap freightloads midway between Minneapolis & Seattle. If he'd just seen the country instead of the map, Junction City/Custer would have made more sense as it didn't require the vast irrigation canals that Billings did (taking until 1892 to complete!) and steamboats could have brought up more of the materials at a lower cost. Coulson would have survived while Junction City would now be Billings, significantly raising your land values and shortening your distance to Red Lobster.

3. *Sitting Bull, Two Moons, etc. of the big village Custer attacked.*

If they had just camped at the confluence of two big rivers with better firewood and shade surrounded by bluffs, it would have been far harder for Custer's troops to successfully attack the camp, it'd naturally have funneled resistance towards them, yet given plenty of defensible high hills like Reno-Benteen found, probably avoiding the demise of Custer's 224. This would also have drawn a lot of tourists, albeit fewer than wiping out Custer, right to the town's doorstep.

There're lots of folks and decisions we can blame for Custer's shrinking over the past 50 years or so. Really about none of it can be reversed, whether it's farm kids leaving for bright lights/big city or increasingly automated large farms reducing the customer base for the town's businesses, schools, and even sewer services.

Far too many small towns that grew (and shrank) while primarily serving as local farms' closest source of goods, services, and entertainment lock themselves into the faint hopes that CRP will end, corporate farms will reverse, farm families will grow back to every 160 acres with 8-12 kids and hired hands, ag prices will go back to their WWII real dollar levels, the interstate highway will become impassable for easy shopping drives, and professionals like doctors, accountants, teachers, etc. will once again flock to small towns to find a quiet place to make a decent living over 40 years.

Custer however sits astride the resources that most shrinking farm market centers don't have so there's plenty of reason to hope that Custer's other potentials can be realized.

What could Custer become over the next 20 years, depending greatly on the choices made by the folks in and around Custer now?

1. Bedroom Community to Billings & Hardin

Custer's grocery store, gas station, restaurants, good school, sewer district, auto repair shops, highway, scenic

beauty, strong churches, senior center, and the hundreds of empty acres around it all make this surprisingly feasible.

The advantages would be bringing in more people to sustain all of the above who struggle on the small customer base here now. It would also stimulate expansions and additional local businesses like daycare, handyman services, lawn and landscaping services, construction, hair salon, and likely some others mostly service businesses.

The disadvantages would be sizing infrastructure like sewer/water for an influx that might not come, many of the movers might be people past children at home, an influx of new people stresses institutions and relationships more dramatically than slow decay does, and the town's character will change somewhat (although it's always changing and really unique to each person's experience and perceptions.)

The biggest real downside, in my mind, is the frequently estimated gap between what residents want for public services (sewer, water, roads, police, fire..) vs. what their property taxes actually pay for (homeowners typically demand \$2.40-3.40 in public services for every \$1 in taxes they pay, assuming that taxes on businesses and farmland will make up the difference for them.)

So just pursuing a bedroom community blindly can result in a place with all kinds of expanding fixed costs of operation and too little taxes to pay for it, a prescription for awful roads, ill-maintained water systems, no cops, overwhelmed schools, and an overreliance on volunteer firefighters and volunteers in general.

It probably would make sense to incorporate as a town to provide a more structured way of providing services, handling the town's development, and balancing interests. Having some sort of regular city council/town meetings in Custer I suspect would be more helpful than burdensome.

A next step would be finding or forming a partnership with a residential

real estate firm and a home supplier (either a traditional contractor or a manufactured housing dealer like Commercial Group West, Big Sky Homes, Pierce Homes, etc.), selecting a land parcel for a new residential subdivision that made sense for the city's existing sewer system and roads, and doing the civil engineering work to layout the infrastructure/roads and their costs. That would allow developing a plan to pay for the improvement with special improvement district assessments, county municipal revenue bonds, etc. (it's almost certain not to fit grant programs.) Then the real estate firm could start marketing the homes/sites in the Sunday Gazette. I'm guessing the sites would be probably half or less of a Billings lot and by adding ready to go manufactured housing (the nice ones they build now, some 2 story), Custer could offer a bevy of \$85,000-\$150,000 homes that coupled with low mortgage rates could draw many first-time homebuyers as well as military retirees, empty nest couples, retiring farmers, Hardin hospital employees (many commute from Billings now) etc.. This would help skew the housing mix towards folks more likely to have kids at home than doing 5-20 acre parcels with a single big house on it (mostly empty-nesters.)

There seemed to be opportunities for this almost in all 4 directions of the town and in an ideal world you'd have 2-3 different subdivisions going all with different partners and looks.

Future Scenario #1

If Custer really pursued the bedroom community strategy, which surprisingly none of the other towns have in Yellowstone County, and added 20-40 homes a year (about 10% of Billings' new home construction through the past 12 years so a pretty overly optimistic number that in reality could be more like 2-10), over a 10 year period, Custer could grow to 300-500 population again, so about 60 town kids for the school, probably triple the sales for the town businesses, a lower sewer district tax

burden, and probably another 5-10 small businesses (albeit most as home-based service businesses.)

Tom Kaiserski and I can help the town pursue this strategy so I'm not listing a lot of resources here, many of which are in the Billings phone book like the Home Builders' Association, the Manufactured Homes dealers, the civil engineering and surveying firms, the real estate firms, the mortgage lenders, the paving/sidewalk contractors, etc.

Some excellent resources (all books, that I have) for thinking through housing development and avoiding the messes that often happen:

- *“Residential Land Development Practices, A textbook for developing land into finished lots”* by David E. Johnson, P.E. 1997
- *“Construction Cost Estimating & Project Control (primarily roads and infrastructure)* by James M. Neil, P.E. 1982
- *“Freedom to Build”* edited by John Turner & Robert Fichter 1972
- *“Sustainable Communities, a new design synthesis for Cities, Suburbs, & Towns”* by Sim Van Der Ryn & Peter Calthorpe 1986
- *“The Geography of Nowhere”* by James Howard Kunstler 1994
- *“Natural Capitalism”* by Paul Hawken & Amory Lovins 2000

Other good resources are the Yellowstone City/County Planning Dept. headed by Ramona Mattix on the 4th floor of the Billings Parnly Library, Candace Beaudry there has a lot of experience with rural subdivisions from her time as Sweetgrass County Planner.

Future Scenario #2

Custer as a tourist/resort community.

It sounds kind of absurd but Custer really does have all of the raw ingredients for this: pretty country, rivers, highways, close proximity to a city and major airport, good fishing and hunting, winter and summer recreation, historic sites, existing tourist flows at the Little Big Horn Battlefield/1-90/Billings, easy to find/get to but at the same time tucked away, cafes/bars/gas/groceries, little regulation and low taxes (low property values, little infrastructure, unincorporated).

To build on this future, the efforts would go into subdividing into 5-20 acre ranchettes along the Big Horn and Yellowstone River valleys, long narrow lots with the narrow edge as river frontage. Those could be developed to a considerable extent by the ranch owners in spare time with owned or rented heavy equipment (site clearing, gravel road building, excavations, soil/water tests, brush clearing, and for some, even constructing the buildings themselves for sale.)

This would draw a mostly seasonal and weekend population that would at times considerably expand the demands on the local businesses and generate construction jobs, some service jobs, and gradually some would become year-round residents and fishing shacks would morph into full homes.

Absorakee, Fishtail, St. Xavier, and Ft. Smith would be good near examples of the results of this path.

There is probably a decent market for rental fishing, hunting, get away cabins that ranchers could build on their own land and then rent them out (many motels began that way in the first half of the 1900's.) This would likely be the starting point with second homes following it after a few years.

Removing more of the fishing and hunting territory from real or imagined public access and into either landowner permission or guided fishing/hunting would be a natural step. As I don't hunt or fish myself I won't make a

speech about the right of the public to wander through any farm or ranch looking for fun and game, just like I welcome anybody passing by to swing through my yard, chop down a tree for a fire, leave the gates open, and stomp around the gardens.

The economic impact on the community and the landowners is so much greater when people have to pay something realistic for the privilege and in return get better game, less crowded/safer experiences, and vandalism/inadvertent destruction is minimized. By making it cheap or free, it tends to destroy the experience of being in the wilderness and getting lucky with a cast or shot.

Building Custer up to draw more Billings fishermen who at best pick up some beer and fresh bait at the grocery store or a beer and a sandwich at either café is a pretty thin return for the impact of hundreds or thousands flowing through the area.

Developing central gathering points aimed at promoting and facilitating outdoor recreation would likely include:

- A. A Fishing Shop and/or some easy to find fishing guides/outfitters.
- B. At least 1 if not more places to put a boat into the water from a dock, a fuel dealer, boat/raft rentals, and probably a branch of the volunteer river rescue patrols, and clear markings of dangerous places. I understand someone already rents and runs river rafting nearby and that's probably the logical focus for this.
- C. If the hunting's as good as claimed, you might be able to lure a wild game processor and a taxidermist to Custer. Wild game processing and taxidermy are both reasonably profitable businesses that can be built on a shoestring and fit well in small communities with lots of hunting nearby.
- D. Organizing annual events for fishing, hunting, snowmobiling, mountain-biking, Harley-riding, river rafting, kayaking, 4-wheeling, dirt-climbing motorcycles, endurance horseback riding, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, military

maneuvers for the Reservists or Guard, etc. would put the place on the map, draw lots of folks to see the area with the hope that some would stick around, and drop a few dollars locally.

These always involve a lot more grueling work and a lot less money than expected, but they are a lot of fun and really put a place on the map.

By working with the area associations already existing for most of these or a charity that wants to do that sort of fundraiser, it can be as simple as providing locations, routes, resources to contact, and a welcome (*it always ends up more complex than that, but it can start that simply.*)

Examples that struck me there:

- Jedediah Smith raft race down the Big Horn playing off the trapper's adventures there and adding hurry to a usually leisurely mode of travel.
- Harley run down Mussellshell Trail Road or others and along the valley of the Big Horn River down Highway 47. Jimbo is already in this group and could obviously figure a better route than I.
- Mountain Bike Marathon down Hwy 47 starting in Hardin and ending in Custer or a circuit of Pineview Road and Mussellshell Trail ending up with a pitchfork fondue party by one of the cafes.
- Snowmobiling agility and speed combination races on the rolling hills and prairies around Custer, again finishing at a local bar/café.

Obviously these would benefit the local motel, bed and breakfasts, the grocery store, the gas station, etc. as well as the bars/cafes. **These could be organized as fundraisers for various town projects** like the school, just as Reed Point's Sheep Drive is.

A starting point would be with retailers who draw many of a particular sports' enthusiasts to them, i.e. Scheels', Big Bear, Rainbow Run fly shop, Shipton's Big R, Gart Sports, Beartooth Harley Davidson, The Spoke Shop, Reiter's Marina, Montana Honda & Marine, etc.

History Hill, Horner's Holes, and History Hole: *cultural and historical tourism development at Custer*

As to Bob Watts' concepts for "History Hill", he obviously has considerable capacity for actually executing something like this based on what he did years ago in the Dakotas. His costs and funding model need a lot of work. The result would be something sort of blending the Black Hills, the Battlefield visitors' center and surrounding retail, and Cody all of which are already doing most of what is envisioned there, so I don't know how competitive it would be.

Horner's Holes or Duck-Billed Dinosaurs' Graves

Museum of the Rockies, world-famous paleontologist Jack Horner's very successful dinosaur fossil digs near Custer have considerable promise. Dino-tourism is a huge potential in Montana and Custer has an interesting location in relationship to Makoshika State Park in Glendive, the Ekalaka dinosaur museum, and the Museum of the Rockies or the Black Hills or Cody & Yellowstone. Bob Watts' obvious sculptural talents could be perhaps applied to lifesize dinosaur statues along I-94, emerging from the trees (that'd get more attention than a billboard!) Helping organize and fund additional dinosaur digs in the area and then setting up the digs so they're more tourist friendly and dig-volunteer funded would probably be the best step rather than the typical thinking which imagines a multi-million dollar museum with a six-figure operating budget all supported with non-existent or rare resources. That's why we need to think of ways to present it with compelling interest and minimal costs.

History Hole concept

Bob Watts' idea of building something high to attract attention got me wondering how the opposite might

work, how could a hole in the lowest part of the area draw tourists?

Running a formal archaeological excavation of Montana's first-known white settlement, the Ft. Ramon/Manuel Lisa fur trading post 1807-1812, seems like a way to build an enduring tourism draw here by making a temporary hole.

By doing an excavation instead of just putting up a roadside sign about it, we add the mystery of discovery, old puzzles, artifacts, and an important chapter in the West's 19th Century exploration.

Lisa helps provision Lewis & Clark and then upon their 1806 return, Lisa hires 3-4 of the expedition to help him establish the trading post. Clark is a partner in the post as well. It's the farthest trading post from St. Louis, predating Nebraska and Dakotas sites that Lisa later established as their first white communities. Lisa was a Spanish Cuban living in French territory that then becomes U.S. territory so calling it white rather than European or American is simpler. L&C veteran John Coulter, while searching for customers for this trading post, brings back the first English accounts of Yellowstone National Park and runs the Blackfeet gauntlet and then returns 200+ miles to the post nude with a just a blanket and a broken spear.

It's occupied between 1807-1812 roughly and burned when they abandon it after many raids. Subsequent trading posts Ft. Benton in the 1820's and Ft. Cass in the 1840's-50's mean the site will take awhile to pinpoint. There should be enough left in traces of the buildings, the fort's dump and scrap piles, etc. to learn quite a bit about it.

I suspect it would be interesting enough to be the subject of articles in many magazines over the several summers of a dig (Travel Montana will help recruit and subsidize the writers) i.e. perhaps *Montana the Magazine of Western History*, *National Geographic*, *Sunset*, *American Archaeologist*, *True West*, *Montana Living*, *Big Sky Journal*, *Montana Magazine*, etc.. Pursuing getting the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, or the History

Channel to do an episode on it would be another possibility.

This would mark this as a serious site to visit for the Lewis & Clark Bicentennial as well as some of the 300,000 annual visitors to the Little Big Horn Battlefield 30 miles away.

This is a project I can assist on and have made a number of exploratory calls already.

Crunching a budget for the dig based on most of the diggers being folks who pay to do this as part of their vacation, thus underwriting all or most of the dig costs, the economic impact of that many folks staying and eating in Custer and ranch homes makes extending the dig several summers and coming up with subsequent digs look like a very nice little economic development activity right there. The activity and daily discovery of a dig in progress should also help jumpstart tourism almost immediately. Dinosaur fossil digs, other trading post sites, old campsites of tribes passing through over the thousands of years, there's lot of potential here.

Eventually the trading post could be rebuilt as it's bound to have been pretty small, probably two single-story log huts (1 for living and trading, 1 for storing furs and supplies) with a connecting palisade (that's how Lisa's 1812 Fort looks and also how the Lewis & Clark expedition's Fort Clatsop sorta looked.) That would be pretty cheap to construct out of local trees, volunteer labor, and Travel Montana might be able to kick in a matched grant of \$20-30,000 which would go a long ways on building that given the original structure would only have had some fabricated hinges, a few iron nails and hooks, and not much more in terms of purchased building materials hauled manually upstream in a keelboat from St. Louis along with men, provisions, and trade goods.

Future Scenario #3

Custer on it's current path of the past 30 years or so as an unincorporated community dependent on surrounding

farm/ranch populations for its schools, businesses, and jobs.

Obviously this is mostly a guess about the next 10 years as there are almost always some big changes that no one's old forecast included whether it's the Internet, CRP, NAFTA, 4.25% prime interest rates, MPC's demise, etc. So take this with a huge grain of salt:

Most of Custer's retail stores have faded away while the service businesses hang on or have grown a little. More of the ranches have been consolidated into larger places often simply so the owners could retire and their kids weren't willing to run it. Most of them end up moving to single-floor patio homes in Billings to be close to medical and home health services.

A Town Pump/Lucky Lady Casino convenience store or a truck stop got built at Exit 49 to Hardin and it's the largest employer now after the school.

The gym finally got replaced with a big steel building but the money for the wood floor and bigger bleachers is still being raised.

To everyone's surprise there's only a few less kids in the school as some of the folks at the feedlot, Hardin ethanol plant and power plant, and Hardin & Crow hospitals moved into Custer with kids.

There's half as many teachers though thanks to retirement, tight funding, and online classes in most subjects.

The football field's illuminated finally and there's a nice concession booth there whose sales of pop and popcorn funded the lights.

The Sjostrom's retired and sold their café to a nice retired Army Sgt.'s family who've been running Thai food Tuesdays and Spanish food Saturdays that have been drawing some folks up from Billings and got written up in the Gazette last year.

The feedlot's been doing well with it's Waghu cattle for Kobi Beef (world's most expensive) and the little packing plant in Hardin re-opened to handle it.

The fishing's gotten poorer each year while the number of fishermen have increased. The state's been issuing a lot more deer and elk tags to thin down the herds so a lot more hunters from Billings have been coming up and paying to hunt on local ranches. It's not much money but it's something, and Jimbo's is full of hunters now starting with bow season.

The abandoned Agate shop finally burned down as did a couple of other abandoned houses and folks moved in manufactured houses to fill those spots pretty quick so the town looks better.

Everyone's still on wells although more folks have bad ones now. The big parcel on the edge of town is still for sale and the sewer only reaches within the existing town.

The Senior Center is really hopping and is looking at more space.

The motel is still open and they cleaned out the long-closed café and turned it into a community meeting room with some kitchen prep facilities so that's been a popular alternative to church basements and the school.

In other words, even without major changes, you'll still get some things done given the strength of the community's volunteers now, but other trends you won't be able to buck or address because you stayed the course.

Future Scenario #4

Custer in the Granola Age 2013 A.D.

After Mad-Cow Disease is identified in the old meat production system in 2007, the commodity markets fall apart and the demand for source-tracked beef skyrockets. Custer's ranchers are able to quickly adapt because of the Cattle Development Center feedlot's proximity and veterinarian owner. Using the distilled grains from the Hardin ethanol refinery, that now employs a 100 folks, Custer beef has a superior flavor too and suddenly Custer ranchers are making big profits while the big meat packers are bankrupted through lost sales and the families of

Mad Cow victims who'd thought it was Alzheimer's Disease. A small slaughter and meat-packing facility is built by the ranchers and the feedlot there for a few hundred thousand and it now employs 25 people so housing prices in Custer shot up to near Billings levels. There's a number of houses going up reflecting the new prosperity and jobs. More of the irrigated farmland has switched to corn for the ethanol plant so hog production has resumed at a few places and also supplies the Custer packing house. The Western Sugar Refinery is using most of it's output for ethanol and plastic feedstocks now so beet demand is way up too. Dryland barleys' been going to the ethanol plant as well so wheat's pretty much disappeared from the area.

Some of the smaller irrigated areas have switched to truck gardens and sell their fresh beans, melons, sweet corn, squashes, and carrots at the Billings Farmer's Market, considerably raising their profits and creating a lot of demand for teenager and migrant labor. More of the migrant families are buying homes in town with the RC&D's first-time homebuyer program and as they have larger than average numbers of kids, the school is packed now.

The town incorporated, the sewer district expanded, the town voted on doing a city water system this year, the ambulance and fire trucks are newer, an assisted living center got built, the school gym got replaced but the school still is pretty short of teachers like everywhere else, the Catholic church did a big addition but still shares a Priest with other towns...

The grocery store expanded 3 times and is more of an organic and health foods store with a notable inhouse bakery doing stone-ground whole grain breads. It employs 12 people now and draws folks from a 50 mile radius or more.

Jimbo's and Sjostrom's have become magnet restaurants for a hundred plus miles because of the meat and produce they get locally makes for great flavors. Sjostrom's added a convenience store to their place. With

all the activity, Perrin's expanded out back and is stocking a fair amount of hardware and home repair items too now along with a coffeeshop up front that seats 16 and is full most mornings and lunch times.

The old agate shop has been renovated into a day care center and does a land office business, especially with the large outdoor playground it put into the vacant land around it.

The demise of more major airlines and the rise of general aviation (small private planes and air taxis) with cheap new planes developed in the 1990's has resulted in Custer developing its old emergency WWII landing field into a small actual airport for private planes with Perrin having put in a small refueling station. Hardin had never improved their airport and Laurel's had filled up so Custer had considerable demand and was able to tap FAA funds to do 90% of it. The new prosperity of the local cattle ranchers had allowed many to buy a plane and the packing plant now shipped premium steaks to Minneapolis and Fargo/Moorehead restaurants as air cargo from the airport on the air taxis.

Future Scenario #5

Custer & the new Hutterite Colonies. The few kids we saw at the high school who had any intent of coming back to run family farms and ranches along with the consolidation going on suggests that there will be tremendous ownership changes of the ag land in the area just as there have been over the past hundred years, particularly since the end of the homestead boom in the 1920's. A quite possible entrant into that vacuum would be new Hutterite colonies offshoots from the Mussellshell, Golden Valley, or Wheatland colonies. Their buying power, operating efficiencies, and appreciation of good farmland (as well as nearness for farmer's market sales, egg sales like the Bull Mtn. Colony does now to Wal-mart, dairy opportunities with the irrigated soil and ethanol-distilled grains feed, etc., the feedlot's heifer development program, etc. would make the Custer area a

reasonably likely place to gain one or more new colonies.

The challenge would be to convince them not to operate their own schools and instead enroll their kids at the Custer schools, which with a new colony and the increasing sophistication required by farming, moving past their current 8 years of schooling is becoming more likely. If so, that could add dozens of very well-behaved and attentive students to the school, blending in well with what you have now and helping assure the schools' survival and regional appeal.

The inward nature of the colonies would cut into most town businesses (except for Perrin's fuel sales, feedlot, and Mothershead's welding shop) unless they used the access to fresh produce, eggs, meat, and breads/pastries to make themselves into more 50 mile draws and less dependent on local customers.

I suspect it would provide a net increase in local population by 100-200 people within 10 years and reduce the consumption of good land into scenery on 20 acre second home ranchettes.

This would probably have the least impact and go the furthest to maintaining roughly the status quo, although the local churches would shrink as more of their parishioners retired, died, or moved away without their successors on the land replacing them at those churches.

Contacting area colonies to let them know they'd be welcome and letting them know of large farms for sale would probably be all that it takes and could well be a critical aspect to maintaining the agricultural base of the community.

Moving from 10 year speculations to help show how many different futures Custer can have simply by the actions taken, not taken, and unexplored, *change is certain but whether you're buffeted by it or it's a result of the community molding*

itself to a better future that it chooses for itself.

Resources

for other specific needs that came up in Custer's input:

Van/Bus for the Senior Center:

There are 2 potential sources for these vehicles used but well-maintained and handicapped/wheelchair lift installed:

Special Transportation in Billings runs a fleet of mini-buses for getting mobility-impaired folks (up through paraplegics) around town. They're a non-profit organization and certainly must have some vehicles that are periodically replaced. As the usage by the Senior Center would be far less intense than daily city work, this could be a good value.

Ryder Transportation Systems runs the school bus service for much of Billings and regularly cycles out it's older buses for a few thousand dollars. Some of those buses have wheelchair lifts built in, I think, so contacting them to keep an eye-out for such might be worthwhile. Otherwise the school bus configuration is manageable for seniors, having packed 30 of them in one myself, but not particularly comfortable or easy.

Funding a New Gym/Complex

I know less than most folks about school funding. Contacting the Office of Public Instruction is bound to point towards some resources:

OPI School Renovation Grants-
Tom Rogers 406-444-2577

OPI School Finance Training
Nancy Hall 406-444-1257

Bond issues, MT Dept. of
Commerce Board of Investments Bond
Program Officer Geri Burton 406-444-
1365

Other thoughts:

Planned Giving program for school alumni (when they die, part of their estate or a separate life insurance policy is donated to the school for that

purpose. As you've had several hundred kids over the past 50 years spend a lot of time in that gym, it could be a very productive approach.)

Adding a concessions booth at the gym, staffed by students, selling soda, popcorn, coffee, chips, and candy, maybe hot dogs to the fans. The beverages are phenomenally profitable and this would build some local cash towards either repairs to the existing or towards a new facility.

I don't know how school mill levies work for an unincorporated town but it's obviously something to look at. The bonds can be issued through the MT Board of Investments and as these are tax-free bonds, the interest cost would probably be under 6%. Community support appears high- I'd be curious if they'd support a 4-10 mill levy just to fund the new gym (asking what folks will dig in their own pockets for is always a reliable indicator of how sincere their interest is in a project.)

Adding a Computer Lab at the School

Originally computer labs were driven by the machines costing \$5,000 apiece so a school could only afford a handful of them and had to maintain access for everyone and provide special instructors. Now with refurbished PC's running \$200-\$500 and new ones \$500-\$1000, spreading them in the school rather than concentrating them would seem more feasible. I think more schools will take advantage of online courses (ranging from free ones like at BarnesandNoble.com or MIT to cheap ones like through Micron's University site to full-blown college credit through the 600 plus schools offering it (go to U.S. News & World Report magazine's website and you'll find an annual list of all 600). That allows students to pursue individually a particular foreign language, all sorts of science and math courses, develop independent study programs, pick up college credits before leaving high school, test out academic majors, and do it at their own pace. They can buy their textbooks online at BarnesandNoble.com or Amazon.com

or Half.com or others so it really opens up pretty amazing opportunities.

Cleaning up the town & dealing with vacant/abandoned buildings

The Yellowstone County Attorney's office could provide you with a copy of the current "Community Decay" ordinance. The Montana Codes Annotated also address these problems under the search words "Urban Renewal" and "Public Nuisance". Go to www.discoveringmontana.com and you can link through to all the state laws (M.C.A.) and search by keywords like those above. Enforcement would either come through the County (challenging to get their attention on this) or be something that as an incorporated town, Custer's city council could tackle.

People really don't have the right to let their buildings rot away as it creates a breeding ground for vermin, an unsafe area for neighborhood kids, a fire hazard, drives down property values of neighbors' properties, allows weeds to proliferate, and lastly is a visual blight on the whole community. That's why one of the statutes allows the city or county to notify the landowner and if they don't get it cleaned up, tear it down and bill the landowner for the clean-up as well as fine them heavily and put them in the hoosegow (these are important as absentee property owners are notoriously reluctant to spend a dime on decrepit properties.) County Sanitarians and fire marshals are great allies in this.

Expanding the Grocery Store into the old service station site next door

Tom Kaiserski at the Beartooth RC&D may have an EPA-fund to help with that in 2004 (the process has been taking a long time to establish the revolving loan and grant fund through EPA for just this sort of clean-up.) Expanding the store for either more merchandise or additional profit centers like pizza, ice cream, espresso,

drugstore items, video/DVD rentals/magazines, hardware, pet food, emergency animal health care products, greeting cards, more frozen foods, soda fountain/snack bar, community meeting room, Laundromat, fishing/hunting supplies, or professional baseball stadium are all things that could be done with the additional space that would both sustain the grocery business and provide more services to residents and travelers.

Replacing the ambulance, upgrading the fire and emergency response equipment

An unconventional routes to getting this done:

Get as many healthy folks between 18-59 yrs of age to donate blood plasma every time they go to Billings, up to weekly. BioLife Plasma's right behind Costco and pays something over \$20 a time. The payment can be place in an account there and a check sent monthly to the fire dept. bank account to accumulate to buy equipment and fund repairs.

If 15 people gave 30x in a year, you'd raise \$9,000+ with no risk, no investment, and less time than most fundraising events consume to put on.

The plasma by the way is made into EMT first responder IV solutions, burn medications, cancer drugs, hemophilia treatment, etc. which is what made me think of it in the first place.

This is also a great tool for church congregations to address various funding needs like building repairs, equipment, youth trips, etc.

Any charity can use this method even if only 1 person is donating in a whole year, so this could also be used for the School Foundation, youth programs, rehabbing the depot at the park, the Senior Center bus/van, town clean-up, etc.

Recruiting more firefighters and EMT's

It's a dumb point, but look for folks around town who are healthy, bored, and

like to be appreciated/make a real difference. By taking the recruiting approach of the U.S. Marine Corps:

Example of what I'm saying:

How long has it been since you really saved someone's life?

The Custer Ambulance and Fire Dept. have several openings for very healthy, tough adults who won't let a neighbor battle a fire alone or ignore someone in agony. We're looking for the strong, the reliable, the compassionate, the alert, people who can conquer their fear at a burning building, a car wreck or a birth. It's not for the squeamish, the selfish, or the sluggish, it's for people who want to learn what it takes to save lives, save homes, and save the future.

Are you ready to join these ranks?"

In other words by appealing to the best in people, the heroic and helpful, compassionate, rather than implying only pre-trained firefighters/EMT's should apply or that it's all staffed and not that critical, I think you'd recruit more with danger, urgent need, training, and profound results.

Perhaps by setting up some fairly rigorous physical and mental challenges at the park and then running "try-outs" there, you can draw out more volunteers.

I saw somewhere the average volunteer fireman in the U.S. now is in his mid-50's (oddly the same average age for farmers and 1970's rock band members) so recruiting the next wave is becoming absolutely critical. Remember people will always be more interested in getting into a hard-to-get-into organization than a desperate one.

Drawing more population to town

I've sort of addressed that in the future scenarios above to help Custer figure out where each road leads and which one(s) they want to travel down.

A. Bedroom Community for Billings and Hardin:

This would involve the least change and probably work against eventually becoming a town, as it has in Lockwood and Absorakee. Residents demand more public

services than they're willing to pay for so without quite a bit of business tax base (businesses demand less services than they're taxed to pay for so they subsidize the partly-freeloading homeowners.) So if you just have lots of housing, you can end up looking like Colstrip where there are a bare handful of local businesses (as then everyone would shop after work and then drives the 50+miles home.) The town roads and sidewalks would need more maintenance/repair than anyone wanted to pay for and the water issues would worsen considerably. Trash collection, junked vehicles, annoying uses of homes, petty crime, would all likely rise (drive through Lockwood to see the many advantages (!) of being an unincorporated bedroom community and wonder at the independent/no taxes folks that think everything's swell there.

Custer's in a pretty setting with a good community mix there and the highway access to Billings and Hardin suggest that with the right realtors/builders/lenders on it, you could probably double to quadruple the population here in 10-20 years.

B. Recreation Town for Billings and far beyond

This would be focusing on part-of-the-year, weekend, and summer/hunting season residents/visitors. There are certainly most of the elements in place or available to do this.

It'll generate more local consumer services jobs and service businesses, get some more construction work going steadily which has lots of spin-off benefits, and help what businesses you have now considerably.

It won't help the school much in enrollment or local support (people usually don't notice, much less support, schools where they recreate rather than live.)

It will raise property values which is a mixed blessing for people with Montana incomes which will provide more of a property tax base for the school.

This is also a scattered, near random strategy that lead one wag to call tourism the strategy that towns without a strategy wander into. In other words, if a lot of folks pursue it on their own in their own way, some will work and all of it will build the area's perception as a place to get away to.

The next step would be encouraging area landowners' to subdivide rough country into 20 acre parcels as a cabin/2nd home sites and market them in Billings and on the internet. That's the match that starts that slow fire.

C. Independent Town

This would reflect Custer's past and actually be the toughest strategy to achieve, albeit a worthwhile one. This would require stimulating existing businesses to expand, starting more businesses, removing or reopening abandoned buildings, buying and building franchised businesses, and developing the adjacent land into fairly dense traditional homes all within your then incorporated city limits. This strategy requires a constant balancing act in expanding business to provide jobs, services, and as tax-base to support city services along with developing enough housing that your local market for everything from diapers to dinners keeps expanding and creating new business opportunities. Powell, WY, Conrad, Columbus, and Big Timber would be examples of towns that have managed this while remaining farm market centers. Hardin, Lodgegrass, Worden, Lockwood, Absorakee, would be examples of ones struggling to do that.

D. A specialized community.

That would mean pursuing or accepting a set of folks with differences or specific needs. Example targets could be long-haul truck drivers' families, retiring military, home-based workers who telecommute, migrant workers putting down roots, Crows tired of the reservation environment (half live away already), refugees from other continents, retired farmers, retirees from other states/big cities, horselovers, etc.

Church floor and repair costs

See the blood plasma donation idea mentioned above as one new way I've run across. There are endless church fundraising ideas as it's a challenge all face.

School Foundation

One really popular fundraising tool that drew looks that suggest you're not using

it is "**Planned Giving.**" There are lots of resources on how to do this, even lots of life insurance agents have been trained in it. Workshops on it are periodically taught by the Yellowstone Boys & Girls Ranch Foundation in Billings and they're probably the most knowledgeable about it (ask for John Eastman or Gary Hickle.) Planned Giving is when folks put the cause in their will, like the School Foundation, the new gym, scholarships, a church floor, the depot or the park itself, etc.. Sometimes the cause takes out a term life insurance policy on someone and makes the payments with the payout upon death going to the foundation (the trade term instead of death benefit is "a will matures.") Sometimes you can get folks to assign a portion of their existing life insurance death benefit payout to the foundation (after all they'll be dead and this is a way for them to steer part of it to something that matters to them.) It could also be earmarking part of the proceeds from selling the deceased's ranch, farm, house, business, livestock, collections, etc. would go to the school foundation simply by making that adjustment to their wills. The School Foundation probably should organize a town workshop on that just to explain the idea (this is also a very powerful funding mechanism for churches as telling St. Peter "Say, did you know I paid for a new roof on my church on the way up here today?" can be quite appealing.

Lights for the Football Field

The biggest thing you need is a little plywood & 2x4 slapped together concessions booth. The Coke or Pepsi distributors in Billings will donate the pouring equipment. Nothing's more profitable than a glass of fountain pop (well except iced tea, lemonade, or bad coffee.) Adding hot popcorn, the aroma sells it, and other salty snacks obviously will drive pop sales while candy really doesn't. Popcorn, nachos, etc are important because they're snacks you share so everyone gets thirsty instead of a kid wolfs down a candy bar and is okay for another hour. Staff it with volunteers. You should be able to generate considerable profits then to address the

lights, other field costs, and eventually a weight room/equipment or towards the new gym costs, i.e.

6 football games @ 100 attendees per game=600 stomachs in a season sitting there for 2 hours or so. 600 stomachs = 200 beverages @ \$2 each =\$400 and 60 bags of popcorn at \$2 each=\$120=\$520 gross as a pretty conservative estimate. Many venues average \$2.5 per person in average concessions spending.

Drawing more trade off of I-94

I talked with Jimbo about this later on and he's already pursuing it.

The motel would really benefit from illuminated highway signs 10 minutes or so driving time in both directions so sleepy travelers realize they can pull off at Custer.

The grocery store and Perrin's would pull in more as travelers wouldn't assume either were here (groceries or auto parts) and the repair shops would all do well to advertise that way as well with permanent signage on private land along the highways. Jimbo's researched the issue already so if you catch him when he's not on the run...

Roadway signage is about the only way Custer's businesses can really start to tap into the many potential customers driving past on I-94 since they don't actually drive through the town to notice businesses and services.

The most important thing with these signs, along with the permits, is making sure they are placed far enough away that a driver has a chance to think about it, consult the passengers, and deaccelerate to make the turn off, so 5-10 minutes drive time or so. If the sign's too close to town, it'll compress their decision-making time too much and most will drive on despite their interest.

Obviously such signage would benefit the river rafters, fishing or hunting sites, Sjostrom's restaurant, Mothershead's welding/repair shop, residential building lots for sale, etc.

Drawing more use for the cemetery

I've stated that goal badly, but I was repeatedly told what an attractive and well-kept cemetery Custer has. By

contacting funeral homes and ministers in the area (particularly in Billings), many plots would be purchased by non-local users because of price, location, and the likelihood that someone wouldn't try and redevelop the cemetery site in 20-50 years as often happens in urban areas (yuck) because of land prices. This would generate work for backhoe services (the current method for grave-digging), receptions/wakes perhaps at local churches or cafes or the park/depot bldg., coffin building and tombstone carving opportunities for local craftspeople, additional income for local ministers/priests officiating at the interments, etc.

A profitable sideline that's growing to this is offering pet burial plots as well. The newest cemetery in Billings has a section for pets and pet-only cemeteries have done quite well around the country. With probably 20,000+ pets in Yellowstone County, that's a decent-sized market.

In Conclusion:

I left out a lot on this as I expect to directly assist in helping Custer pursue the future it chooses. You're part of my service area for the Dept. of Commerce and I'm only 50 miles away.

This is a great group of people in a pretty location next to a major highway and close to a city-you folks can do amazing things with what you have (as you've already shown in the past and are realizing again now.)

aljonesrdo@attbi.com

& 406-655-1696 (Billings)

Lee Boyer's Points:

I encourage you to read Bob Parsley's report. Bob has done a wonderful job and covered nearly all the topics that arose during the meetings held in Custer.

I do want to thank the wonderful people of Custer who were the most gracious of hosts. I really enjoyed my time there and meeting all you wonderful folks. I hope I can get back there soon.

I would encourage the community to develop some sort of signing on the Interstate with the idea that it will draw people to stop at your community.

Also, one of the main themes we heard was a community center was needed. I believe a solution would be to complete the old depot so it is available year round. There are some grant programs available to youth organizations such as 4-H and FFA. They are listed below.

Rural Community Development Grants (4-H or FFA)

Contact: Sam Antonick
Montana Department of Agriculture
P O Box 200201
Helena, MT. 59620-0201
406-444-2402
Fax 406-444-9442

Building Our Montana Communities (FFA)

Contact: Sam Antonick
Montana Department of Agriculture
P O Box 200201
Helena, MT. 59620-0201
406-444-2402
Fax 406-444-9442

I believe there are some other 4-H programs available through your county extension agent or contact

Terry Wolfe
Montana 4-H Foundation Montana 4-H Foundation
210 Taylor Hall
P.O. Box 173580
Bozeman, MT 59717
Email: 4hfdn@montana.edu
Phone: 406-994-5911
Fax: 406-994-5417

For those individuals who may desire to do something in marketing agricultural products or a food product, there may be assistance available through the Montana Department of Agriculture's Growth Through Agriculture Program.

Contact:
Quinn Holzer
Growth Through Agriculture Program
Montana Department of Agriculture
P O Box 200201
Helena, MT. 59620-0201
406-444-2402
Fax 406-444-9442

If I can ever be of assistance, please contact me at

G. Lee Boyer
Rural Development Bureau Chief
Montana Department of Agriculture
P O Box 200201
303 North Roberts
Helena, MT 59620-0201
406-444-2402
406-444-9442 Fax
lboyer@state.mt.us

Tom Kaiserski's Points

Custer Resource Team Assessment
(RTA)

By Tom Kaiserski

It has already been said, and I will say it again, all of the team members were very grateful for the generous hospitality bestowed on us during the assessment.

I was certainly impressed with the warmth and positive spirit of the people involved with the listening sessions. And then it was all capped off for me to get to meet Frank Borman, a real hero and someone I admired as a youth during the exciting days of the Apollo moon missions during the 1960's. The RTA was a memorable experience for me and I sincerely hope it will result in positive actions for Custer.

Prior to the RTA I had been working with the board that operates the sewer system in Custer, and right from the beginning of that work I was surprised by the thoughtful and proactive attitude of the people I met.

I say they were proactive because they seemed to be taking the right steps toward addressing the long-term operation and maintenance of the sewer system, before a major breakdown put the community in some sort of crisis situation.

I have been in some communities that seem to be hesitant to heed the advice of technical assistance folks like me for fear

it's going to cost them money. I mean, they'll only listen if you are offering no strings grant money and if not, then they don't want to hear what you have to say. I did not get that sense at all with the Custer sewer board and I experienced that same feeling during the RTA. I sensed a genuine enthusiastic attitude of the people that exuded a can do spirit that seemed to say *"we want to improve Custer and we hope you folks can help us do that"*.

With the quality of people Custer has, its can do attitude and a scenic location along I-94 and the Yellowstone River, there are great things in store for this little town.

So now that I have had a chance to praise the people of Custer, we'll have to come back down out of the clouds to the reality of the hard work required to build the community up.

Accomplishing some of the tasks and addressing the needs that were identified at the RTA will be work, hard work. But then nothing in this world that has any lasting value and produces a sense of satisfaction, comes without hard work and, maybe most importantly, perseverance.

But once we recognize and accept the fact that the things we want and need will require patience and sacrifice to achieve, and then half the battle is won.

The people of Custer are obviously no strangers to hard work, and so Custer will succeed with its effort to improve if it sets its sights on achievable goals and then sticks with the effort until the job is done.

The approach must be patient though, and in our modern microwave society patience can be hard to practice.

My format for this write up will be a bulleted listing of things that I heard at the RTA that I hope I can provide some information to help the community move ahead with.

I hope that the things I present will, when combined with the write ups of other RTA team members, provide resources that are beneficial to Custer.

Sewer System – Hire a consultant to complete a preliminary engineering report (PER) that will study the system, identify deficiencies and recommend necessary improvements.

The Beartooth RC&D has prepared a draft application to the Treasure State Endowment Program (TSEP) that requests a \$15,000 grant that will help pay half the cost of a PER estimated to be a \$30,000 project. Matching funds will come from the Custer County Sewer and Water District. Any construction project that comes as a result of the PER findings should seek funding assistance through the state of Montana (TSEP, CDBG, DEQ and DNRC) and USDA RUS.

Water – First document any deficiencies in existing ground water quality. The comments given at the RTA did not seem to establish a definite drinking water quality problem, however there were several who expressed perceived problems. Consider including a water system component of the PER discussed above that could produce some quantifiable ground water test results as well as providing some cost estimates to construct a community water supply system.

Lack of buildable lots – Portions of the already platted town site include undeveloped lots. These lots could be attractive to developers due to the fact that the lots already exist (no subdivision costs) and could be sold if infrastructure was provided to them. The newly created sewer district can expand its boundaries, a process provided for in 7-13-2341 MCA.

Mosquito Control – I personally share this concern, I live in Columbus and this is a big problem there too. The April 24, 2003 Billings Gazette contained an article that said the USDA has developed a patented virus that kills only mosquitoes and they are looking for private companies to make a spray containing the virus. USDA, by law, is not permitted to make the spray; let's hope a private company will utilize this patent a manufacture a spray product. Attachment 1 at the end of this narrative from the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, the contact person there is Amy McKenzie at 444-5303.

Vo-ag shop/equipment – The Career Center in Billings may have older tools that are still in good working condition that may

need some minor repairs in order to restore them to operation. A co-worker of mine at one time worked there and he indicates they did have good tools that were not being used, but that could be repaired inexpensively.

Decreasing overall population and the need to attract young families rather than just retirees to keep school going –
The local community development group for the town of Rapelje, population 62, has developed a program that will make real estate in the town available at a reduced cost for young families with school age children who are willing to move in. Contact Wayne Erfle at 663-2194. Here is another suggestion, and maybe not typical for an economic developer to give, but I encourage the existing couples in Custer to consider having more children. Children are wonderful and I believe a blessing to every married couple, as well as to the community. There is no more important work that our young families can do than to bring new life into the world and rear their young into responsible adults, to be the future of our communities.

New housing subdivision with larger house lot sizes would be helpful – The Custer Sewer District is planning to hire an engineer to study its sewer system and the study should analyze the costs of extending service to the platted yet undeveloped lots in town.

Regarding subdividing lots outside of town, current subdivision rules make subdividing an expensive proposition. Gone are the days when 20 acre tracts were exempt from any review and all it took was a survey and a poorly constructed and cheap access road and you were selling lots. Today, all land divisions creating lots less than 640 acres in size must meet development standards that require good roads and other services that make for much better developments, but they are costly. Al Jones has previously recommended to prospective subdividers to contact the City County Planning Office, and that is good advice.

Ambulance needs equipment upgrades, may need replacement –

Contact American Medical Response in Billings (259-9601) to find out if they would donate a used ambulance, one that is being taken out of service, to Custer.

Fire trucks need work, need vehicle extrication tools for car wrecks –
Contact the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA, www.usfa.fema.gov/grants) or Dan Bushnell, DNRC Public Information Officer, 406-444-0465, to determine the availability of grants for trucks and equipment. Beartooth RC&D can assist with applications.

School's heating system –
Consider utilizing any excess heat from the heating system to co-generate electricity. RTA member Al Jones has done considerable research on co-generation.

Declining church congregation memberships – This is partly a symptom of the decreased population in Custer, but may also be attributable, among other reasons, to an increased secularization of American society. In America we cherish religious freedom and separation of church and state and rightly so, but in my opinion, all too often this has been misinterpreted as sort of a prohibition about ever talking publicly about ones faith. I think this tacitly has discouraged people from deepening their religious convictions, ultimately causing people to drift away from their churches. To counteract this trend, I think people need to not let themselves be intimidated from talking about their faith, in all settings, while respecting other's religious beliefs. Custer should include among its community development goals encouraging and helping its churches thrive.

Custer is increasingly a bedroom community where folks commute away for jobs – The town of Joliet is a good example of a town that has fought to keep the businesses it has, and in the last 15 years has added some key ones, such as a new bank, a car wash, a mini storage, a local newspaper and a new community center.

The town needs to fight to keep its existing businesses and one way to do that is by area residents shopping locally. Another retention strategy is for local businesses to utilize existing business technical assistance

and financing programs. *The Billings Small Business Development Center in Billings can help (256-6871) as well as Beartooth RC&D (962-3914).*

Sponsor events to draw people from Billings – Rural communities such as Custer need to view the Billings population as a marketing opportunity. Often Billings' people are eager to travel to the nearby rural towns like Custer to participate in events.

Try attracting them with various sporting such as running races or triathlons, bicycle racing (mountain and road, little Rapelje is now sponsoring three bicycle races annually), 3 on 3 basketball tournaments, or join in the Billings area Little League baseball program.

Other events could include a Mountain Man Rendezvous as Al Jones suggests, perfect with the Custer area trading post history or how about a craft or quilters fair.

I have always felt that rural Montana communities could also attract mountain bicycling tourists by publishing road maps of the area that provide guidance for scenic trips that originate in the Custer area.

Explore the potential to reopen the hay palletizing plant located east of Custer- This could be a good economic development project for a local community organization to tackle.

Highway Dept. (MT Dept. of Transportation) is an asset – Determine the availability to obtain asphalt millings off I-94 to be used for paving in Custer for roads, parking (depot), etc.

Cattle Development Center feedlot and the proposed ethanol and power plant project in Hardin – Provide visible, vocal and organized support of projects like these through creation of a local economic development corporation, which will provide market opportunities for local farmers and ranchers.

Outfitting & summer guest business and ranch recreation businesses – The Beartooth RC&D will loan out a USDA publication entitled “Alternative Enterprises and Agritourism, Farming for

Profit and Sustainability-Tool Kit”, a three inch thick binder packed with information on subjects such as farmers markets, farm stands, agritourism, and community supported agriculture.

Adding value to farm products offer producers direct connections to their customers and allow them to sell a "farm experience" as well as their goods. Pairing farms with entertainment can draw families — and their recreational dollars.

Seasonal festivals, hayrides, petting zoos, on-farm classes and workshops bring more potential customers to the farm. Another option for recreational farming is leasing wooded land or marginal cropland for hunting, fishing or hiking. “Custer Country”, the State tourism bureau, can offer a wealth of ideas and information.

Two major rivers – A business in Laurel is providing jet boat tours of the Yellowstone River, maybe an opportunity in Custer.

More activities for kids after school – Soccer has increased in popularity nationwide, even in smaller communities. Youth soccer, when played in the fall, can be a great complement to spring season baseball. Gene Aubrey is the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) representative in this region and he can provide information on starting a soccer program. Gene lives in Columbus and can be reached at 322-5137.

Repair the ditch system throughout town – The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide technical assistance with this project, 657-6135.

Truck Stop – A local development group could contact some of the truck stop companies and inform them of site and infrastructure availability in an attempt to attract a facility to Custer.

Incorporate as a town or at least thoroughly explore it's pro's & cons - Beartooth RC&D has researched this subject and found for a town the size of Custer it is probably cost prohibitive to incorporate.

An alternative to consider is provided for in Montana law 7-3-417 MCA

and that *is formation of a Community Council*; an elected body that can bring community issues to the County Commissioners.

The newly formed Sewer District Board or the School Foundation Board could serve as the elected community council, thus serving multiple purposes. The Community Council could become a 501c3 tax exempt organization, thus able to apply for foundation grants and providing for an elected local government that is able to effectively represent Custer at the County level of government.

Laundromat, storage units needed and re-opening the closed café at the motel -

The Montana Small Business Development Center (SBDC -256-6871) can provide business planning technical assistance to a prospective entrepreneur interested in operating these potential businesses.

The Beartooth RC&D (962-3914), among other loan programs, can provide business start up gap financing in participation with a bank loan.

Swimming pool – The town of Absarokee built its swimming pool in 1987 with grant assistance from the Montana Dept of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Land and Water Conservation Fund mentioned previously in this document in Bob Parsley’s Custer RTA write up. Beartooth RC&D could provide assistance in applying for this grant

Get a van for senior citizen’s center – A contact for assistance for this project is Pat Vandell at the Yellowstone County Council on Aging, 245-6177.

Historical interpretive signage – Custer Country may provide assistance with this.

Baseball Complex/fields – Beartooth RC&D can provide design assistance with this and funding could include the LWCF mentioned previously and Baseball Tomorrow (www.mlb.com) which will fund nonprofit organizations involved in youth baseball and softball. Programs may apply to the Baseball

Tomorrow Fund, a joint initiative of Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association. Grants may be used to finance a new program, expand or improve an existing program, undertake a new collaborative effort, or obtain necessary facilities or equipment.

Exchange house for community members, like a St. Vincent De Paul, Community Hope, Family Services, Project Hope, etc. - Beartooth RC&D helped establish Project Hope of Columbus, now in its third year of operation, and we could do the same in Custer.

Utilize the energy and skills of Bob Watts on tourist-related development – The Custer area has a rich cultural and historical heritage as has been cited in this RTA. Mr. Watts is an accomplished artist and has ideas and skills that could be beneficial for implementing a well conceived and locally developed strategy to capitalize on tourism.

Tom’s Summary

My sincere offer to the community of Custer is that Beartooth RC&D will work to provide as much assistance as possible in implementing the recommendations of the RTA. Read over the assessment, as a community prioritize the projects and then ask us how we can help.

Attachment 1:

More Mosquito Management Info.

Several state agencies involved in researching and mitigating the spread of West Nile virus in Montana are reminding residents about simple but effective steps they can take to help.

"Spring is here, migratory birds are returning and mosquitoes will soon be hatching ... all are factors in the spread of West Nile virus," said Amy MacKenzie, who is coordinating mosquito surveillance for the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS).

The message, like last year, is to take preventive steps to reduce mosquito breeding sites, avoid mosquito bites and report the deaths of certain species of birds.

There is also a vaccine against WNV for horses, a message the Department of Livestock has been sharing since February. The equine WNV vaccine is available through veterinarians. There is no human vaccine.

The best way to stop mosquitoes from breeding is to regularly remove all man-made potential sources of stagnant water, because mosquitoes can potentially breed in any stagnant puddle that lasts more than **four days.**

Drain any water-holding containers, including discarded tires. Drill holes in the bottom of containers that are left outdoors. Clean clogged roof gutters regularly.

Turn over plastic wading pools or wheelbarrows when not in use and do not allow water to stagnate in bird baths. Clean and chlorinate swimming pools or hot tubs that are not in use and be aware that mosquitoes can breed in the water that collects on pool and tub covers.

Aerate ornamental pools and use landscaping to eliminate standing water that collects on your property. **Thoroughly clean livestock watering troughs monthly.**

When outside and mosquitoes are present, use repellent containing DEET (*may show as N,N-diethyl-m-toluamide on product labels*). DEET can be harmful if not used as recommended.

DPHHS recommends that people use mosquito repellent containing up to 30 percent DEET for adults, along with wearing loose-fitting long-sleeved shirts.

When an adult goes into an area of biting mosquitoes, the DEET can be sprayed onto the clothing, thus reducing the amount of DEET exposure to the bare skin on the neck, face and hands.

Other mosquito repellents can be used, but they don't work as well or as long as those containing DEET.

If you plan to be outdoors for a great length of time, it is recommended to wear shirts that cover the arms and pants that cover the legs. Then, for bare skin on the face, neck and hands, use mosquito repellent containing DEET.

For children, repellent containing less than 10 percent DEET is recommended

along with wearing clothing that covers the arms and legs.

To keep mosquitoes out of your residence, make sure windows have screens, and repair any holes in the screens.

Report the following dead or ill-appearing birds to your local Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department office if they are fresh (within 48 hours of death, do not smell and show no signs of decay) and if there is no clear indication of death: Crows, magpies, ravens, jays and raptors. Other birds will only be collected if they are freshly dead or dying in groups (generally 6 or more.)

Report any dead or ill-appearing horses to your local veterinarian.

West Nile fever can progress to encephalitis, a viral disease that affects the nervous system and can cause severe complications and death. It affects horses, birds and humans, and occasionally several other animal species. Experimental tests suggest that sheep, chickens, and pigs could be affected by WNV. Two cases of illness caused by WNV were detected in sheep in the United States in 2002. In tests, the virus caused pregnant sheep to abort. Cows may show antibodies to the virus, which means they have contracted it without showing any clinical signs or becoming ill.

WNV was first confirmed in Montana in a horse in late August 2002. A total of 134 horses were eventually diagnosed with the disease last season in 26 Montana counties. Thirty-eight of the infected horses died or were euthanized. There is one known human WNV case in Montana, and that person has recovered.

Agencies collaborating in monitoring WNV are the departments of Livestock; Environmental Quality; Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Agriculture; and the Montana State University Entomology Department.

Concluding Conclusion

As stated by each team member, we all greatly appreciated the extraordinary efforts so many folks went to in this as we could tell all of them had many, many responsibilities.

It continually surprises me how far things can grow and flower with just a little outside help. Custer's had so many successes already, when the odds were against you. We discern you're up to the task of deciding what Custer's future will be. How to get there will build on the tools herein and more to be discovered.

If you look ahead as we've tried to do here, you really can choose to a surprising extent what the town's next years will be like. You just need to choose.

And we'll continue to help you.

Al Jones