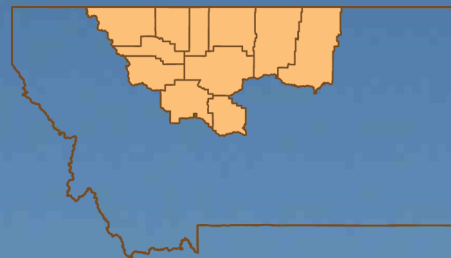


Vibrant Futures

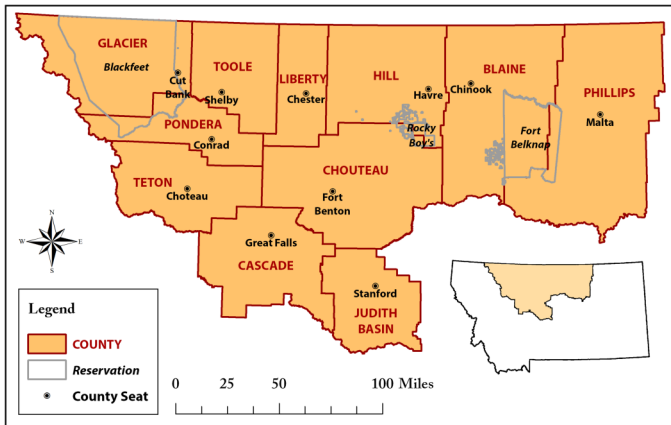


NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA

Regional Plan Summary 2015-2035

A Guide to Achieving our Mutual Goals

Why Do We Need a Regional Plan?



Northcentral Montana's regional economy, frontier history, rural environments, and small towns are part of our shared identity. In 2012 and 2013, residents told us that they prefer sustainable development to either a "boom & bust" scenario or continued loss of rural population. Their input guided our planning process, which included governments, organizations, and residents of 11 counties and three reservations. Working together, Vibrant Futures Consortium partners identified common goals and developed best strategies that reflect the needs and desires of communities.

We found that every town has its own economic strategies, and every community contributes to the regional economy. Diverse communities rely on one another for services and consumers. They strive to maintain essential services such as grocery stores and gas stations, to revitalize downtown areas, to attract more businesses, and to improve transportation, infrastructure and housing.

Who Created the Regional Plan?

Cooperation is vital to the success of economic development in Northcentral Montana. For the Regional Plan, Vibrant Futures relied on input from community leaders and residents alike. Input was originally solicited from:

- County, Tribal, and City governments
- Economic development agencies
- Universities and colleges
- Health organizations
- Nonprofit agencies

Resident and constituent groups participated through the methods listed below:

- Community discussions open to the public (Over 30 meetings, 440 participants)
- Residents surveys (Over 400 respondents)
- Specific discussion with underrepresented groups including elderly, youth, low-income, and extremely rural residents
- Scenario and implementation planning with community leaders, non-profit staff, elected officials, government planners, and residents

What Were the Results of the Planning Process?

Shared opportunities and common challenges were identified and issues prioritized through data analysis and community feedback. Based on resident input, two unifying principles were articulated:

- Young people are the future of the region. The major outcomes of the plan should be to attract and retain young adults and families to the region and engage them in the community in order to cultivate leaders for tomorrow.
- The region will accomplish more if it works together. Partnerships, collaboration, and coordination of efforts will be key to successful implementation of the plan.

These unifying principles represent the shared vision of the region. It guided planning towards five principal goal areas: regional prosperity; community vitality; physical systems; social systems; and natural assets. Each goal was broken down into strategies, with identified support systems needed to achieve the goals. Finally, specific, measurable, realistic, and timely action items were identified for specific projects that reflect residents' priorities for the region.

Goals and Strategies

Regional Prosperity—Cultivate a strong, diverse economy

- Support industrial parks, business retention efforts, and value-added agriculture
- Facilitate new business start-ups
- Market the region to non-resident visitors
- Identify workforce skills and support collaborative efforts to develop training to meet industry needs
- Revitalize main street areas
- Increase access to broadband technology
- Develop renewable energy sources
- Support natural resource development
- Encourage creation of jobs that allow opportunities to live and work in rural and tribal communities

Community Vitality—Foster vital communities throughout the region

- Meet the housing needs for all segments of the population
- Improve housing choices for low-income households
- Rehab and retrofit housing
- Eliminate impediments to fair access for safe and affordable housing
- Support local food systems
- Celebrate and promote small town character and the cultural heritage
- Foster healthy neighborhoods and preserve small town character
- Recruit commercial services and offer incentives for local businesses
- Promote park systems that meet the diverse recreation needs

Physical Systems—Invest in physical systems that meet the needs of the region's populace

- Promote a safe and well-maintained road network that supports growth
- Provide alternatives to automobile travel
- Support efforts to expand transit service and increase ridership
- Encourage street and neighborhood design that connects residents to services
- Design transportation improvements
- Support innovative practices and partnerships to construct drinking water systems
- Promote economical, clean, safe, and natural wastewater systems
- Coordinate the functions between drinking water, wastewater, stormwater, and open space systems
- Design water and sewer plants to accommodate projected population growth
- Encourage local governments to use existing tools and logical and cost-effective strategies that will support new development.

Social Systems—Improve access to quality health care, educational opportunities, social services, and local government

- Support quality education for residents of all ages
- Improve access to health care services
- Help seniors lead active, healthy, and fulfilling lives and remain in their homes and communities
- Provide youth with alternatives to high risk behaviors
- Promote healthy lifestyles through community resources and activities
- Support parks, public spaces, and new development that encourage fitness and mobility with disability
- Promote public safety and healthy neighborhoods.

Natural Assets—Preserve and enhance assets: clean water, rural landscapes, rural lifestyle, and agricultural economy

- Minimize construction and agriculture contamination of rivers, streams, and lakes
- Reduce non-point pollution and provide initiatives for protecting drinking water
- Improve overall water quality in the region
- Diversify access to new markets for farm producers
- Increase access to fresh foods from the local food system
- Minimize impacts from flooding
- Assess, remediate, and reuse brownfield sites
- Preserve farm land

Implementation Action Items

This action plan includes the following recommendations or action items that communities may choose to implement. These action items were the priorities set forth by the individuals involved in creating this regional plan and are simply a starting point for enacting the important change needed to maintain sustainable communities. Each community in the region can decide to pursue action items or create their own that reflect their local needs and can determine how best to proceed with the resources available to them.

“There is community awareness, but taking action is key to helping the community thrive.”

Source: Vibrant Futures Survey Comment

Regional Prosperity Action Items

- Develop community broadband model
- Develop bicycle tourism
- Establish business incubators in tribal communities
- Seek grant funding for small businesses to increase equity assets so they can use such assets to leverage private financing
- Promote community-driven neighborhood projects as best practice models
- Promote regional tourist attractions to encourage longer stays in the region
- Create a telework clearinghouse
- Implement a “Return to Rural” campaign
- Train the workforce in jobs related to energy efficiency

Community Vitality Action Items

- Advocate for a Housing Montana Fund
- Sponsor a “Community Clean-Up” program
- Complete a Housing Needs Assessment
- Increase regional Fair Housing outreach and education
- Form cooperatives for local commercial services
- Develop homeownership programs on reservations
- Boost downtown revitalization
- Map parks, recreation, and trails to create a regional “wayfinding” path

Physical Systems Action Items

- Coordinate transportation planning and funding efforts to improve road networks
- Improve coordination between local transit services
- Expand local transit services
- Support local sidewalk improvements
- Expand local trail systems
- Provide training for rural water and wastewater systems
- Improve infrastructure for emergency situations and response
- Create “Information Clearinghouse” with community mapping to facilitate planning for infrastructure

Social Systems Action Items

- Establish apprenticeship programs
- Complete local Community Health Needs Assessments
- Develop tele-health presentations
- Create regional leadership institute
- Appoint community equity task force
- Expand rural child care
- Assess mental health services

Natural Assets Action Items

- Expand processing and shipping options for value-added pulse crops
- Clean up abandoned gas stations and other brownfield sites
- Create community scholarships
- Develop small farms
- Develop additional oil seed processing facility
- Determine economic impact of region’s natural areas
- Build greenhouses for fresh produce all year
- Implement source water protection and Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) plans
- Work with communities to certify flood control levees
- Support regional water projects



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