



# Northern Rockies

## LEGACY PROGRAM

The Sonoran Institute's Northern Rockies Legacy Program represents an enduring commitment to the rich resources of the Northern Rockies – its land, people, and communities.

Based in Bozeman, Montana, our work is based upon the idea that communities manage growth most effectively when they have accurate, compelling information and meaningfully engage their citizens. We work with community partners to shape a better future for the region – one of healthy landscapes, vibrant economies, and livable communities.

### OUR VISION & GOALS

The Northern Rockies region is home to diverse communities where ranchers brush shoulders with high-tech business owners and sportsmen mingle with conservationists. The region harbors some of the country's most important wildland resources. Nearly all species of wildlife seen by Lewis and Clark freely roam these mountains and valleys. Icons of the National Park System – including Glacier and Yellowstone – occupy the landscape, as do vast expanses of privately-owned land supporting family ranches and farms.

People continue to move to the region for its stunning beauty and high quality of life. While this growth brought many benefits, it also created many challenges. Much of the new development occurred outside of cities and towns; for instance, in Gallatin County, Montana, population grew by 133 percent between 1970 and 2004, while the area of land developed grew by 271 percent. Poorly planned development drives up taxpayer costs for services and infrastructure, threatens the economic future of communities, and degrades rural lands.

This is a moment of opportunity. The sluggish national economy and the pause in growth gives communities time to rethink how they have grown in the past, and to shape a more sustainable future of vibrant, compact communities surrounded by working lands, wildlife habitat, and open space.

To achieve this vision, we:

- Demonstrate how sound planning and development is a financially smart investment for communities and businesses.
- Create and support a network of local organizations to advocate for sustainable community development.
- Provide technical assistance to help communities craft and implement effective solutions to their growth challenges.
- Help reshape the bankrupt and stalled subdivisions that resulted from the Great Recession.
- Advocate for state policies that grant communities the authority and resources to effectively manage growth.





## Challenges & Opportunities

### Work in Select Communities to Create Effective Models

*The Challenge:* One of the most effective ways to help communities manage growth and change is to provide them with successful examples of local growth management.

*The Opportunity:* Work directly in select communities to create compelling models of smart growth that can be exported throughout the Northern Rockies. Our work provides land-use planning tools, workshops and training that inform local decisions and enhances local leadership, and promotes policy reforms removing obstacles to smart planning and conservation.

### Make the Business Case for Smart Growth

*The Challenge:* Sprawling growth patterns waste taxpayer dollars, reduce agricultural productivity, and degrade the natural assets that bring economic value. Sprawl also forces residents to spend more time in a car and more of their income on gas.

*The Opportunity:* Our work demonstrates that smart development is a better investment of taxpayer dollars, enhances regional economic vibrancy, protects property values, and responds more effectively to changing economic conditions and market demand. We effectively deliver this business case to communities to help them make economically smart decisions.

### Build Community Capacity to Manage Growth

*The Challenge:* Managing growth so that it respects community values requires strong leadership at the local level. This means citizens, elected officials, businesses, and community leaders must work together toward the same goals. In many communities, citizens who want to help shape their community's future often don't know where to start.

*The Opportunity:* Support community leaders, especially local community organizations, through organizational assistance, trainings, small grants programs, and networking opportunities. These "quality of life lobbies" can be very effective advocates for better land-use and conservation, particularly when they are well-organized and have the information and facts to make their case.

### Reshape Development Patterns

*The Challenge:* The real estate boom and bust of the past decade has resulted in thousands of failed and abandoned development projects – what we call "distressed" subdivisions. These blighted areas of half-completed streets, weed fields, and empty lots tie up land that could be more valuable as wildlife habitat, working farms, or open space. These areas are also a significant public liability for services and infrastructure.

*The Opportunity:* Apply our Reshaping Development Patterns (RDP) project to protect areas with high environmental and agricultural values and reduce taxpayer costs by facilitating the redesign or outright extinguishment of vacant subdivisions. The RDP project, a partnership with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, also seeks to help communities learn from past mistakes to allow them to chart a better future.

### Use Grass-Roots Organizing to Influence State Policy

*The Challenge:* State laws and policies play an important role in the ability of communities to manage growth and change. Often, these policies are heavily influenced by paid lobbyists who pressure legislators in favor of special interests.

*The Opportunity:* Our community capacity-building initiative is creating a network of local organizations and bringing them together to effectively advocate for state policies that encourage sustainable communities.





## A Pivotal Moment

Before the Great Recession, the Northern Rockies economy and population were booming. Real-estate was hot; demand for housing soared, as did home prices. Thousands of construction jobs poured into the region. Many communities enjoyed surging tax revenues and could scarcely keep up with project approvals. By the time the bottom dropped out, thousands of new homes were constructed or approved and waiting for development.

Today, development has slowed to a halt. Jobs are scarce. Local budgets are in the red and many communities are making deep cuts to local services. Housing prices continue to drop and a glut of foreclosures and vacant subdivisions burden local markets. As the economy sputters, there are growing questions about the nature and trajectory of the changing economy and its influence on growth and development. Will there be changes in what gets built, where it gets built, and what it looks like? How have housing preferences changed? What are the most financially-viable development patterns in a new economy?

Smart communities are positioning themselves for success in the changing economy. They build partnerships to spur investments that make our communities more attractive places to live and locate business. They take advantage of a growing demand for walkable neighborhoods and vibrant downtowns. They look for new ways to expand housing and transportation choices and provide amenities that attract visitors and businesses. They use resources more efficiently to save money and the environment. They preserve and build upon their assets and heritage. The challenge is great, but successful communities learn from the past to establish more livable communities and more resilient economies.

# COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The Sonoran Institute works collaboratively with a wide range of partners to produce tangible conservation outcomes and policy reform. Our work is grounded in communities and is supported by policy. We help advance local strategies and create models of best practices that can be applied throughout the region.

We provide support to communities through:

**Direct technical assistance**—assisting community leaders, elected officials, and local partners to facilitate open, participative community processes that help communities reach their goals.

**Research**—providing research on a wide range of topics to help inform local decisions and stimulate community discussion.

**Training**—building capacity among our local partners by disseminating best practices, land-use planning and conservation tools, and the results of our research.

**Policy reform**—engaging in policy reform to support effective conservation and smart growth decisions at the local level.



## Current Initiatives

### Research and Communications

Development that creates great neighborhoods and preserves natural assets is also smart economics. Our work across the Northern Rockies has established a compelling case that smart development reduces public costs and creates more desirable neighborhoods. This cutting-edge work reinvigorates a narrative in support of conservation in the Northern Rockies, which we effectively deliver to policy makers, business leaders, and real estate development professionals.

### North Platte River Valley, Wyoming

The Northern Rockies Program hosts public education events, visioning exercises, and leadership development workshops to help guide a renewed land-use planning process. We are working with landowners, community leaders, agencies, and organizations to help ensure that future growth preserves the Valley's rich character, enhances the natural resources, and stimulates the economy.

### Sheridan County, Wyoming

Our work with Sheridan County partners raised the bar for development. We are now working with other Wyoming communities to show that good design conserves riparian areas, foothills, working agriculture and scenic vistas. Sheridan's leaders deserve credit for progress made managing complex growth-related issues and we remain committed to helping them find solutions to upcoming challenges.

### Gallatin County, Montana

In Gallatin County, we are partnering with Montana State University on *Gallatin Valley 2050* to plan a more sustainable future for the Gallatin Valley. *Gallatin Valley 2050* utilizes a new citizen planning tool called Envision Tomorrow that allows citizens and community leaders to "paint" future growth scenarios on a map, compare them for indicators such as water use and carbon footprint, and create strategies that will keep Gallatin Valley special as it grows.

### Teton County, Idaho

Teton County experienced enormous speculative development from 2000 to 2008. This was followed by a crash in the local real estate market, leaving thousands of empty lots in distressed subdivisions. Our Reshaping Development Patterns project helps the community and developers redesign failed subdivisions to conserve sensitive farmlands and wildlife habitat and reduce taxpayer liability.

### Networking Communities

We are creating and supporting a network of community organizations and leaders that allows them to learn from each other and spread best practices in growth management and community development.



*The Sonoran Institute inspires and enables community decisions and public policies that respect the land and people of western North America.*

### CONTACTS:

Diane Snyder  
Northern Rockies Regional Director  
dsnyder@sonoraninstitute.org

Randy Carpenter  
Northern Rockies Associate Director  
rcarpenter@sonoraninstitute.org

John Heyneman  
Wyoming Project Manager  
jheynean@sonoraninstitute.org

Northern Rockies Legacy Program  
201 S. Wallace, Suite B3C  
Bozeman, Montana 59715  
tel: 406-587 7331  
www.sonoraninstitute.org



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