**Beartooth RC&D Board of Directors Meeting**

**March 20, 2025**

**Big Horn County Courthouse**

**Present:**

Joel Bertolino, Executive / Food & Ag Director

Nan Knight, Finance Director/Brownfields Coordinator

Gaurav Thakur, Economic Development Director

Ryan Van Ballegooyen, Dept. of Labor & Industry/Job Service

Commissioner Melanie Roe, Sweet Grass County

Lawrence Killsback, Big Horn County Economic & Housing Director

Commissioner John Ostlund, Yellowstone County

Mike Boyett, Billings City Council Member

Tina Toyne, City of Hardin Economic Development Director

Holly Higgins, First Interstate Bank of Hardin

Kevin Mitchem, Sibanye-Stillwater Mine

Martin DeWitt, Small Business Administration

Lorene Hintz, Big Sky EDA/SBDC

Kayla Vokral, Small Business Development Center

**Via Zoom:**

Commissioner Scott Miller, Carbon County

Danny Choriki, Billings Area Family Violence Task Force/Ubet Post

**Guest**: Steve Simonson, former Beartooth RC&D EDD

**Meeting Called to Order:** Ryan Van Ballegooyen called the meeting to order.

**Pledge of Allegiance, Introduction of Members and Guests**

* Lawrence Killsback welcomed everyone to Big Horn County and introduced himself.

**Review January Board Minutes (Action): Holly motioned to approve. Kayla seconded. Motion carried.**

**Congressional Updates: No representatives present.**

**Treasurer/Financial Reports:**

* P. 13 – RLF as of Feb. 28th, we have 20 loans, $1.7 million loaned out.
  + New loan closed in March to assist a business that resides in Stillwater but has a location in downtown Billings.
  + Lot of activity. We have $1.8 million to be loaned out.
* P. 14 – Beartooth Books & where our funds sit so far this year
  + The only thing affected so far by federal funding pauses is our DEQ Environmental Justice grant, which is paused.
* Holly asked about the MOUs, and Nan said most have paid for the year; BSED is an anomaly because their MOU with Beartooth renews in July.
* **Holly Higgins motioned to approve the Beartooth Books & RLF as presented. Kayla Vokral seconded. Motion carried.**

**Personnel Handbook Review – Joel Bertolino**

* Joel explained that we have done some changes in the last couple years but wants to make sure there isn’t some old language that needs cleaning up or outdated policies. Ryan & Joel are working on it together.
* Joel sent it to everyone for board members to review and provide feedback/revisions.
* Ryan: checking to ensure that one statement doesn’t contradict another; reviewing remote work policies; developing an AI policy/guidelines (ensuring what we use is safe and secure, etc);
  + Kayla: we remind clients not to put sensitive information into Open AI/ChatGPT.

**Staff Reports – Program/Project Updates**

**Food/Ag Program – Joel Bertolino**

* Joel went to Helena for Ag Rotunda Day at Capitol. Able to visit with many folks, including the new Director of Ag.
* Finishing up GTA – final review of apps took place and 1 of the 5 he assisted was funded ($18,000+): Samurai Sue’s out of Red Lodge can get new equipment for food processing.
* Cut Craft: Derek Eaton – not funded for GTA/Biz Builder but continue to work with him.
  + Danny asked if he would be able to distribute other products. Joel said this is still the initial steps, but they discussed that it would be useful to use for commodities other than beef.
    - Danny said Yellowstone Pasta would likely be interested.
* Rodi Farm: working with on VAPG; she will send Joel her draft for review.
* Greycliff Mill: Hoped they would get funding out of GTA, but they are still working with MT State Food Lab with Business Enhancement Program (BEP) we helped them with.
* Farm Box: Also weren’t funded through GTA, but it was recommended they utilize BEP for some training needs.
* Yellowstone Valley Farms: His video that was filmed as a success story for Specialty Crop Block Grant is set to release on Facebook soon (put out by Dept. of Ag).
* Becky’s Berries: Visited with MMEC today and will work with them on some design work for their Absarokee plant.
* S-Ranch Meats: Ongoing. Received VAPG last year and check in with them occasionally.
* Rebel Head Kombucha: Meeting with them next week to visit her manufacturing facility in Billings; Gaurav will come, also, to discuss how Beartooth can assist her.
* Mountain View Hutterite Colony: we did some work when there was an automation loan, but they weren’t ready. They may be looking at a new facility, so staying engaged with them. May also need financing. They sell their eggs through Walmart & other local outlets.
* Turk Stovall: Assisted him with some solar/renewable energy on feedlot plans.
* Speedy & Flo’s: Stay connected via Tina; will visit this spring when greenhouse opens.
* Montana Outlaw BBQ: owner Ty Hamilton has met with Joel & Nan for assistance including some financing for equipment and kitchen. Joel will keep working with them and help them apply for GTA’s next round in the fall.
* Metra Park: working with Tim Goodrich & put him in touch with folks at MT Dept of Ag. He wants to host the next Food & Beverage Show, and Joel is 100% in favor of that. Joel was in touch with Marti who oversees it and thinks they will be coming to Metra Park in 2026. We will also work with them on a plot of land where they’d like to feature some MT commodities/crops to showcase at the Fair. Joel is putting them in touch with some good contacts, retired farmers, etc.
* Top Notch Meats in Billings: Met once and will stay in touch. They are looking at a new location and want to expand what they are doing.
* Yellowstone Food Hub: Received some funding from Dept of Ag, and MMEC is doing some work with them.
* Caramel Cookie Waffles Corp: We wrote a BEP grant for training, and they were able to hire MMEC to do 2 days of training with them.
* Grindy’s Cheeseballs: Wrote a BEP grant to work with MMEC on some design work.
* Mike Boyett commented that there aren’t dollar amounts on these grants, and some of the people he deals with want to know that.
  + Joel said we can try to include that in the future, but a lot of the assistance we provide is connecting them to contacts at Dept. of Ag or finding an accountant, etc. It’s hard to put a number on much of the TA. BEPs are all $2,000.

**Revolving Loan Fund / Brownfields – Nan Knight**

* Nan gave kudos to Lorene and Kayla for all their help. She has sent several clients their way for assistance with business planning, projections, etc.
* Nan had a meeting with Wes Stops, the Crow Environmental Director, to discuss priorities for his Brownfields projects. Both Wes and Crow Legislature want Garryowen and the Carpet Mill to be priorities for Beartooth’s Brownfields funding.
  + Garryowen: 2 petroleum tanks will be pulled.
  + Carpet Mill: they have $1.3 million from USDA to turn it into a recycling center.
* We just did sampling on Pryor High School and have sent it to the lab.

**Economic Development / CRDC – Gaurav Thakur**

Big Horn County – Housing Needs Assessment Study

* Final Report presented to the County Commissioners on March 6th
* Commissioners are very happy with final report from Ayres. Anyone interested in the report can request that from Lawrence.

City of Hardin – Economic Development Strategy

* Partnered with Tina Toyne and Consultant (Ayres Associates) on the In-Depth Interviews with Community Members and Business owners for stakeholder meeting sessions. This helped them better understand some of the challenges they are facing.

City of Big Timber - MAP EJ Grants

* Thriving Communities Grantmaking – Big Timber Civic Centre Upgrades - Declined for the first cycle & received recommendation. But it is mostly due to Big Timber not fitting the “distressed community” criteria.
* Gaurav sent a request for assistance to better explain the reasons they should be considered distressed.

City of Laurel

* Gaurav was officially appointed to Laurel Urban Renewal Agency (LURA) Board in Advisory capacity
* Also attending their Small Business Alliance group – business owners who come together to discuss challenges and opportunities

Reporting (State and Federal)

* EDA - Partnership Planning Program FY2025 Funding Application - $70,000/year for the next 3 years. Only gave us 10 days to submit that application, and it was very involved.
* CRDC - 2025 Annual Work Plan was submitted at end of February

Coal Board Application

* Lodge Grass – Backhoe and Excavator
  + Application returned due to missing signature (needed from elected member)
  + Staff Comments - According to State Accounting, funding the City of Hardin to then give funds to Lodge Grass would be a violation of the no-pay order.
  + The application will be presented to the Coal Board for the upcoming draw but will use the County as the sponsoring applicant

Montana – ORE – Opportunities in Rural Economies Loan Program

* One Health - New Office Space. Beartooth will be assisting in applying for this when the application is available. Waiting for more information as the State releases it.

Proposal for Creating a Regional Online Business Directory and Resource Library

* Application to USDA’s RBDG Program to be submitted in the next round
* Goals: Increase Business Visibility, Continuous Engagement and Communication and Resource Accessibility

**Operations Support – Myrna Lastusky**

USDA Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI) with Red Lodge Area Community Foundation (RLACF/Angela Getchell, Workforce Housing Manager)

* Coordinating a Visioning Activity with the Red Lodge Urban Renewal Agency and Kansas State University-Technical Assistance Brownfields team.
* Beartooth, Angela, & developer Tom Fischer met with community leaders to discuss possibilities for the old hospital. The visioning activity will also move this forward.
* Continue to work with several Carbon schools on a “First Right of Refusal” teacher housing model. Units will remain affordable through a partnership with Trust Montana.
  + Bridger School District is interested in putting a couple homes on a school lot.
  + Roberts School Board approved moving forward on a contract; Roberts Community Foundation has pledged their support to pay the monthly fee.
  + Plan to speak with Fromberg next – thanks to Commissioner Miller for his support and connecting us to Fromberg leadership!

USDA RCDI (Rural Community Development Initiative) with City of Hardin (Tina Toyne, EDD)

* Tina has taken advantage of several training opportunities this quarter, including a few courses with IEDC (International Economic Development Council).
* Tina & the City are working on multiple grant projects (housing study, infill & redevelopment, Hotel Becker, EcDev Strategy, etc). Tina can give you the latest news.
* This grant will wrap up on March 31st, but work will continue with the great partnerships we have formed in Hardin and Big Horn County. This has been a positive 3-year effort for Hardin and Big Horn County (resulting in not one but TWO excellent EcDev Directors in Tina Toyne and Lawrence Killsback), but it has also been a blessing for Beartooth in our work in Big Horn. Additionally, all the other State and Federal agencies are more tuned in to the needs and possibilities throughout the County.

RCAC (Rural Community Assistance Corporation) Grant in Columbus

* Monthly small group meetings will continue as we work to make goals a reality for 2+ years. A few projects in the early planning stages include a couple of murals, an interactive map for County tourism, possible rec center, housing efforts, and forming a Downtown Business Association. We are also providing support and TA to the Stillwater County Chamber as they are navigating recent budget cuts.
* Attending Governor’s Conference on Tourism April 27-29 as part of this grant.

Miscellaneous

* Beartooth is also assisting Carbon County & Belfry Senior Center to find/build/renovate/fund a new Center.
* Appreciation to our awesome staff for their extra efforts while I have been in AZ. Returning to the beautiful Big Sky on April 4th!

**Regional Roundup – led by Commissioner Roe**

**Holly Higgins, First Interstate Bank of Hardin**

* Electrical: 2 people are starting up electrical businesses and contracting, which is a huge need in the County.
* Education: FIB does a Teach to Save course every year. FIB-Hardin branch (Violet Hinkel) did 15 classes covering grades 3-5th and 290 kids. Cover how to “grow” money, basic money sense, etc.
* Still have our Dollar Stores!

**Mike Boyett, Billings City Councilmember**

* Mike volunteered to be on our board because of the 11 members, no one else wanted to and none of them knows anything about Beartooth.
* He recommended that Beartooth show up to Council meetings occasionally so they at least see us and know what we do. Politics 101.
* They also wonder why they pay for both BSED *and* BRCD – so we need to educate them.
* Everything is numbers for most of them, so show how much money comes into Billings due to Beartooth’s efforts.
* Mike will report back to the Council on Monday and say Beartooth is doing good work, but he wants someone from Beartooth to come to the meeting.
  + Joel said that sounds great. We will provide some numbers and figure out what works best for the Council – work session, regular meetings?
* Mike also talked about the new City Hall they are in. They bought it for 50 years down the line, 100 years . . . they had people in closets, a basement boiler room, etc. Now they have space – and windows!
  + If anyone wants to open a coffee shop, they have a ground floor space that would be perfect.
  + Also, if anyone knows kids who want to be police officers, let them know. They want to get more kids interested.

**Commissioner John Ostlund, Yellowstone County**

* Lot of projects going. Construction of 72-hour hold detention facility, a great addition. Criminals will get locked up for 48-72 hours, have arraignment hearing, go before a judge before you get out, and either have a bond, ankle bracelet, or be remanded to the jail.
* New County Administrative building is being built (Miller Building). It should be complete by November.
  + Moving Elections to the Fairgrounds where they will have a stand-alone office and a drive-through drop off for ballots.
* With different departments moving out of the courthouse, the courthouse will eventually be remodeled. District Court judges will be there.
* Building a new rodeo grounds and outdoor arena, construction in progress.
  + August Fair will include an upscale rodeo there. Nile gave up October rodeo and will participate in August. Big deal for the Ag community.

**Ryan Van Ballegooyen, Dept. of Labor & Industry/Job Service**

* Yesterday had Montana’s biggest Job Fair. Had about 1500 attendees, 110+ employers.
  + Sibanye-Stillwater miners were invited to come early, and 40 did so. 70 veterans also came in early.
* 2.8% unemployment in Feb. – unexpectedly low.
* Forest Service workers are anxiously waiting for Apr. 18th to hear if they will have jobs.
  + DLI does Rapid Response to help them get training, find jobs, etc. whenever large-scale layoffs happen.
* Efforts to put former inmates back to work. Legislature is passing bills to establish Montana Office of Re-entry.

**Kayla Vokral, SBDC**

* SBDC Day was yesterday – to celebrate SBDC and our businesses. Had QuickBooks Training and showed *Edge of the Plains* documentary.
* Had a few business closures in Billings – Favorite Finds, Wild Ginger, and Bin 119. All had their reasons & not necessarily that people aren’t spending money.
* Had some business openings, too! Frey is expanding her west end location to a downtown one, also. Prairie Animal Hospital built an emergency vet clinic on the west end of town ($3.2 million impact for that). Children’s Art Classes (west end business) offers many classes and will also include summer art camp. Field House on Minnesota has been vacant for some time, but the new owner is opening a pirate-themed bar called Captain Scurvy’s. There will also be a medieval-themed restaurant in the same location.
* Partnering with Joel on a Homegrown to Market Workshop.
* Partnering with MSU-B on some workshop series with in-depth knowledge of business ownership. If participants take all 3 series, they will receive some college credit. Par
* Partnering with Dept. of Labor on mine layoffs. Doing Start Smart workshops and workforce development.
* April 2nd is the Hive Competition at MSU-B. High school students pitch their business ideas to a large crowd & compete for cash prizes from Valley Federal Credit Union.
* Partnering with Beartooth on many projects – lots of loans and grants. Thank you to Beartooth team for all their help!

**Kevin Mitchem, Sibanye-Stillwater Mine**

* Hoping to see platinum/palladium prices go up soon; it’s not dropping anymore.
* Some legislation with Russian imports may provide relief, but it’s tied to the Russian-Ukraine war.
* The layoffs have been tough – watching good friends lose jobs and the uncertainty of everyone’s jobs, but everyone has been very helpful.
  + Commissioner Ostlund said Yellowstone County picked up several employees, and they’ve been great employees. Mike Boyett said the City picked up a couple engineers who have also been excellent.
  + Ryan said Dept of Labor has worked with 380; about 160 filed for unemployment. Anxious to see what happens when their unemployment ends.
  + Kevin said some have been called back already.
* Steve Simonson asked if Sibanye products can be differentiated from the Russian products? Kevin wasn’t sure, but he thinks the answer is no. He explained an issue of separating out recycled materials from the other ones.

**Tina Toyne, City of Hardin Economic Development**

* Hardin was awarded the Pilot Tourism Grant – “Big Horn Breakthrough Project” – to encourage tourism in Hardin and the County.
* County Housing Needs Assessment is complete; will receive final copy from Ayres soon.
* Cushing Terrell is working on the Infill & Redevelopment study, and they also look forward to seeing the final Housing Needs Study.
* Selected IMEG for a Master Services Agreement. They are currently working on branding.
* High Plains Architects began Monday on their PAR for the Hotel Becker.

**Lorene Hintz, Big Sky Economic Development**

* Community Development is working on Space2Place Grants. Received 26 applications and can only fund 6-7.
* Workforce Development: County Summer Jobs Program. Businesses can apply to have interns, and high school students can apply & interview for paid internships.
  + Also have a Campus Billings program for HS into college – if you have an internship, you can network and learn different skills.
* Steve Arveschoug is retiring. April 11th is a party at the Northern to say goodbye. Paul Green, former MT Dept of Commerce Director, will be the new BSED Executive Director. Paul starts April 1st and Steve’s last day is April 16th, so they will have a 2-week transition.

**Lawrence Killsback, Big Horn County Economic Development**

* Big Horn County would like the women’s prison & has the infrastructure for it.
* Decline of coal & challenging tax base became more apparent while applying for a Coal Board grant for the library’s boiler system & fire alarm system, which they were awarded.
* BHC is currently updating Growth Policy. Will be updating Capital Improvement Plan.
* New Planning Board has been appointed & Lawrence is coordinating different groups.
* Housing Needs Assessment: Recommendation is to look at a County-City Housing Authority. Possible opportunities to partner with tribal development and trying not to duplicate efforts.
* Workforce: Plenty Doors CDC has a great program & County is working with them. Biggest need will be housing; working with stakeholders including school districts. Working on recruitment and retention of teachers; send programs/info to Lawrence.
* Some nonprofits are shutting doors due to funding pauses. Tribes have made a strong stance: they do not fall under DEI; they have a sovereign government-to-government relationship, and many congressmen are in support of that.

**Martin DeWitt, SBA**

* National Small Business Week is May 4-10. Announcements coming soon.
* Superior Meats (Superior, MT) is being considered on a national level for the National Small Business Award.
* America First Manufacturing in America Tour: Montana selected as a stop, and that will be next Wednesday. SBA HQ is putting this together and will have roundtables in Bozeman. SBA will be coordinating this Manufacturing in America program.
* Submitted SBA Reorganization Plan on March 13th. Unsure about job security due to duplication in responsibilities & possible cuts.
* Tom White (lender specialist) moved to a position at a bank and Rena Carlson (lead lender specialist for MT) retired, so no lender relationship specialists in MT. Kelly Dixon is also retiring. Martin, Deputy District Director, & a District Director are the only managers left.
* Outreach: Martin has worked from home since COVID. To go to onsite visits, he must put in travel requests to be approved, so that is currently a hassle. Travel allocations are cut. So federal employees are having trouble with outreach now – just a heads up.
  + Use phone and email to communicate.

**Danny Choriki, BAFVTF, Ubet Post**

* Great to see a Billings City Councilmember at the table again. Thank you, Mike!
* The former mayor of Billings, Willard Fraser, used to call himself the Mayor of Billings and a 300-mile Radius. He understood this is a metropolitan market area and we need to think about the regional economy, not just Billings.
* Northern Lights Family Justice Center opened in January. Family Violence Task Force Conference topic is “Should I Stay or Should I Go?” Focuses on moments when families are caught, what are their needs, and how can we help? This includes needs for people who are being stalked, which is a huge issue right now.
* National League of Cities: people have told Danny that big corporations have been buying up houses over the past 15-20 years and are starting to sell off the housing. Is anyone seeing that start to happen in our region?
  + Ryan said to pay attention to Bozeman, who has had a high amount of corporate housing transactions.
  + Steve said Warren Buffet is looking at selling Berkshire Hathaway out of his portfolio, which may be a warning that the housing market will soon take a downturn. We haven’t had as many corporate buyers in MT as other states, but there is some of that happening.
  + Danny said the National League of Cities folks also said the rental market they were expecting to make money off of didn’t really happen.

**Commissioner Melanie Roe, Sweet Grass County**

* We are busy, lots going on. Possible west end development.
* 2-3 drafts through the process of Pilot Tourism Grant paperwork.
* Commissioners testified on a couple bills in state legislature – they were looking at pulling the bed tax and rental money out and using it for property tax relief, which we were against. The bill is still in play, but it has been pared down (SB 90).
  + Commissioner Ostlund said he thinks it will merge with SB 117. Yellowstone County commissioners also testified against SB 90, but with the amendments, it is better. They called it property tax relief, but it’s really property tax shift.
  + HB 308 is before Senate tomorrow morning – sunset of metal mines percentage, and the bill will extend it another 8 years. They will testify on that, too.
* Looking for a new road supervisor – send people their way!

**May 15, 2025 – Next Beartooth RC&D Board of Directors Meeting in Sweet Grass County**

**Meeting was adjourned at 2:33 pm.**