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“Building from the Best of the Northern Rockies” [published by The Sonoran Institute]

Executive Summary

The Sonoran Institute has studied dozens of communities in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho to identify the best practices for rural community development. This booklet examines several “Town Center” cases studies, and then reviews other developments at the “Edge” of communities, and finally, “Rural” development. Most of these community case studies also resulted in common lessons learned. The booklet concludes by making several policy recommendations and key questions that could be applied to any rural community facing growth and development.

Best Practices for Town Centers:

- Promote a pedestrian environment
- Promote historic preservation
- Create a mix of uses
- Achieve relatively high density
- Create public amenities
- Foster community pride and a sense of place

Best Practices for Community Edges:

- Provide a diversity of housing types for a variety of income levels
- Preserve open space and important natural features
- Protect surface and groundwater resources
- Use environmentally appropriate development and construction practices
- Employ sustainable energy strategies and passive energy design
- Provide recreational opportunities
- Create transit-oriented communities
- Minimize the cost of public infrastructure, construction and maintenance

Best Practices for Rural Communities:

- Engage the community in planning
- Preserve natural resources and community access to those resources
- Preserve and promote agricultural activity
- Preserve surface and groundwater resources
- Preserve wildlife habitat and migration corridors
- Preserve the visual character of the rural landscape
- Absorb the cost of government services

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Lessons Learned:

- Engage the community in the planning process
- Seek sound information from diverse disciplines
- Make development decisions predictable, fair and cost effective
- Seek diversity in master plans
- Recognize that there is a cost to innovation
- There is no one way to do the right thing
- Encourage early developer and neighborhood collaboration
- Look to the past to plan for the future

Policy Recommendations:

- All development issues are best considered in light of local circumstances
- Communities need to envision the future and promote appropriate development
 - What in our community should be preserved?
 - What in our community should be changed?
 - What do we desire for our community that we do not now have and will need in the future?
 - How will preservation be achieved?
 - How will change be promoted?
 - How will the new be accommodated?
- Those institutions that provide financing for development have a unique responsibility and opportunity to finance change
 - Assume a leadership role in the community visioning process
 - Develop a set of best practices (such as the Sonoran's)
 - Advocate development concepts that advance and implement the community vision and the lending institution's best practices policy
 - Review loan applications in light of the community vision
 - Provide incentives for development strategies that fulfill the community vision
- A flexible framework for change is necessary
 - Who will assume leadership?
 - Who is needed to provide expertise?
 - Who will absorb the fiscal, social and cultural cost of change?
- Strive to achieve predictable development
 - Protection of water ways, open space, agricultural lands, and views
 - Housing affordability
 - Alternative transportation systems
 - Appropriate local architecture
 - Sustainable water usage, energy consumption, solid-waste generation, light pollution and air pollution
- Encourage and insure a timely development process
- Development should pay its own way, so development goals must be economically feasible