In Fall 2018, the Bozeman Area Community Foundation hosted A Seat at the Table conversations around Gallatin County. Nearly 900 community members participated. Overwhelmingly, participants love living in our beautiful location and value the plentiful recreational opportunities and open space in a friendly, safe community. Community members want to participate in preserving what they love about the area through responsible growth while making sure living here is affordable for everyone.
Topics of Conversation

Seat at the Table Conversations

Hosts posed three questions to participants:
1) What do you love most about your community?
2) What are the most pressing challenges in your community?
3) What are your ideas for making your community better?

After their conversations, both hosts and community member participants described their discussions and opinions through surveys. An independent researcher started by reading all open-ended survey responses to gain familiarity with the data. Next, responses were coded, which means that similar ideas were labeled based on themes identified in the initial reading. After coding all responses, each theme was checked for consistency; some similar codes were combined, and some responses were recoded during this phase. After coding was complete, areas of energy based on prominent themes in the responses were identified.

Overview of Report

Through Seat at the Table conversations, community members shared their opinions and ideas about how to preserve what they love in the face of some challenges. Relying on the participants’ own words, this report details six areas of energy that emerged through participants’ responses and highlights ideas to address challenges and raise funds.
Areas of Energy

Participants see a time of opportunity for their communities. They want to preserve what they love about living here while addressing the challenges brought by growth—like development, affordability, transportation, adequate public services, and preserving a sense of community.

Seat at the Table participants engaged in complex conversations and shared personal experiences. Challenges facing their communities were met with energy and emotion rooted in their strong sense of community and care about the area. Focusing on the topics most discussed based on host and participant reports of their Seat at the Table conversations, these areas of energy come from what community members love, challenges they see, and ideas they have.

In their open-ended responses, participants described conversations and ideas that focused primarily on the following topics:
- Growth
- Transportation
- Affordability
- Ideas to generate funding for community needs
- Spaces to build community
- Improved public services
- Improved partnerships

(listed in order of prevalence in open-ended participant responses)

“What are people willing to do? Not, what are our ideas to make the community better...but instead ask what are you willing to do to make the community better? It takes work of all of us...”

Areas of energy are described in participants’ own words in this section. Community members have energy to engage with these challenges and some ideas about how to get started.
Affordability

Participants are concerned about preserving and expanding opportunities for everyone. Community members identified affordable housing and good paying jobs, economic security, and upward economic mobility in the survey as the top two challenges. In survey responses, nearly 75% of participants chose affordable housing as a pressing challenge, while good paying jobs, economic security, and upward economic mobility ranked second with nearly 30% of responses making it a rather distant second highest rated challenge. Nearly 50% of participants feel that our community does not provide opportunities for everyone.

In Seat at the Table discussions, community members talked about the issue of affordability in many related ways. Most of the discussions seemed to come down to the related issues of housing costs and wages. Here are some stories shared by participants that elaborate on the challenge.

• Housing is huge, we moved three times in 5 months and still live in a 2bdrm 1 bath with 4 children and 2 adults for $1000/mo. We couldn’t even consider a larger place with two adult members working multiple jobs due to the rent cost.

• $12-14/hr. is NOT a living wage. $14/hr. FT nets an income of $1800. For a single person, rent in Bozeman is slightly less than this ($900-$1400 if you can’t get on a waiting list for rental assistance). As a result, our community is becoming homogenized to the wealthy. Or the student. Or those that were fortunate enough to buy 5-15+ years ago before things got out of control. The rest of us will be leaving.

Community members had many ideas about how to address these interrelated issues.

• We really need to focus on wages being better. We were able to raise pay for the government employees, so I believe we can for everyone by working towards a higher minimum wage. The housing issues are harder to combat, but I do think we tend to over build new housing and due to the lower wages people are unable to afford the houses being built, yet they do not qualify for low income housing, because they make too much (30-50k but strapped with student loan debt).

• Allow a tiny house community with community gardens.

• Incentives for landlords to provide adorable housing for young families and students

• Incentive builders to create affordable for sale housing

Growth

Participants are concerned about growth and change. While the majority (41%) feel their community is changing for the better, a significant minority (26%) disagree. The topic of growth and its related challenges and opportunities seems to have dominated many Seat of the Table conversations. By far, these issues were the most commonly discussed in community member survey responses.

In Seat at the Table discussions and open-ended responses, community members talked about the issue of growth in many ways. Here are some thoughts from participants that elaborate on the challenge.

• The Bozeman that existed 25 years ago is no longer feasible, and we need to plan for a future that includes a booming population that will need housing and transportation.

• Prioritize action on climate change, renewable energy, sustainable infrastructure, equity, natural resource conservation and minimizing sprawl and “growth at all costs”

Community members had many ideas about how to handle issues associated with growth. These ideas were incredibly diverse; here is one example of those ideas.

• I would like to see developments come second to our community values of open space and health. The developers could put in an agricultural parcel for each subdivision that would provide space for the community members or farmers to grow food for that section of town. I also would like to see environments sustainability be a top priority to mitigate the soon-to-be disastrous effects of climate change that the IPCC warned against. This could include more bike paths (not just lanes on busy roads) and biking connectivity between all parts of town; land put towards installing solar farms; water conservation efforts and fines for too much water use; limits on watering lawns and installation of lawns.
A Seat at the Table: Conversation Summaries

**Transportation**

Related to discussions about growth were discussions about transportation challenges in the area. Participants were vocal about the need to more effectively connect all parts of our communities and the need for infrastructure for multiple modes of transportation around the area.

In Seat at the Table discussions, community members talked about transportation issues related to traffic and parking, trails and bike paths, and public transportation. Here are some thoughts from participants that exemplify these challenges.
- Our community will have an ever-growing need for transportation and housing solutions that leverage public/private partnerships such as housing co-ops, community housing funds, and business sponsored bike-share and car-share services, to help those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder become more active participants.

Though the issues related to transportation were straightforward, much more consideration was given to how to address these issues. Here are a few ideas provided by community members.
- Charge a nominal fee for the Streamline Bus and add more routes to Belgrade, Livingston, and Four Corners.
- Connect all the trails/path and create pedestrian/skier friendly paths across valley.
- Consider making downtown walkable and bikeable only with no street-side parking.

**Spaces to Build Community**

Participants expressed their love for their communities and recognized the need to continue to cultivate a sense of community through community spaces as the area grows in population.
- In order to make our community better and continue to improve our community is for people to continue to stay involved and connected. We need to remember that we’re not islands that stand alone. The people who live in our community all have different areas of interest and influence. But it’s when we come together that we all thrive.

Specifically, some events and facilities to gather the community were proposed.
- The conversation here gravitated heavily towards developing smaller “community hubs” beyond main street to connect people to their neighbors and homes. We believe that when people know their neighbors and the issues that their community faces, they will be much more likely to take an active role in their future. These centers should have better options for our youth to stay busy out of school and better ways for people to meet their neighbors.
- More activities and recreational activities for children, families and “after hours” that doesn’t include alcohol. Indoor public pool, free splash deck at a park/playground, indoor play area for little kids.
- For Seniors upgrading the Senior Center with more activities (Computer available, book club, etc.)

**Improved Partnerships**

Concerns about local government planning and coordination were the third ranked challenge identified by participants (26%). In Seat at the Table conversations, the primary focus seemed to be on city/county collaboration. Others talked about the need for MSU to be part of planning. Better coordination among service and nonprofit groups was also a need identified by community members.
- Cooperation of city and have representatives sit down together (quarterly) from the city commission and county officials and MSU to collaborate about issues.
- A more holistic picture of Gallatin County, where the municipalities are not viewed as separate from County-level decisions, and vice-versa.
- Support the neighborhood associations and create better communications with local government so that citizens are more informed and engaged in creating better neighborhoods and more socially connected.
Improved Public Services

With community growth comes additional demand for public services. A common topic of conversation was the need to expand existing services and add new services. Most comments on this topic focused on recommendations for improvement and identifying specific needs.

- We should make recycling easier and less expensive and encourage more use
- City-wide composting
- Police on foot and bikes to engage with the community more
- Improve mental health access and support
- Support groups based in different parts of town where needed for people struggling with depression, grief, alcohol and suicide...need to reach those that are isolated and not connecting with others.
- The county/city must address the lack of accessibility for all physically and intellectual disabled persons. A plan must to be adopted and implemented.
- Have a homeless shelter open year around instead of seasonal.
- Community centers that share essential services and tools.
- Schools need more resources. They need more teachers who have the experience to work with kids of all backgrounds, they need more counselors, they need to be teaching children emotional intelligence, and they need more Thrive parent liaisons.

Potential Funding Sources for New Programs and Services

Of course, many of the ideas to address these challenges would require funding to implement. Community members shared ideas to generate funding as well. The general sentiment seemed to be captured in this quote, “We have got to make growth pay its way! No more incentives for growth when we are growing as fast as we are.” Most ideas were meant to generate funds to address multiple issues.

- Impact fees
- Local sales tax
- Resort tax
- Lodging/bed tax
- County sales tax
- County fees on large construction to cover affordable housing
- Commercial zones
- Tourist tax
- Pay for parking
- An extra property tax fee to new homes being built in forest fire areas
- Raise taxes on the wealthy, including second- and third-home owners
- Recreational impact fee changes
- Luxury tax
- New resident tax
- Newcomers and part timers should get MT license plates...that generates funding.
“More grass roots listening like this and then action to create workable, enforceable plans.”

“More conversations are necessary. More events like Seat at the Table where they can voice their opinions and feel heard.”

Overwhelmingly, community members want to continue to engage with these issues through small groups - like future Seat at the Table conversations and other opportunities to connect with people interested in the same issues. Seat at the Table participants are involved in the community and believe that they can make an impact.

“To continue engaging in open dialogue like this that so that we can start making a bigger change by just making smaller changes in our own community.”

“Our ‘table’ individually and as a group was inspired to take action and do something to improve their neighborhood like cleaning up around the neighborhood on a regular basis. We talked about doing something as a group to help someone else or improve the community in some small way and not wait for the local government or "someone else" to do it; one idea that came out of this was to inspire all the ‘seats at the table’ groups to commit to doing something positive in their community.”