



MEAGHER COUNTY STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL

10 Practices for Rural Collaboration

A practical resource for rural nonprofit and community leaders

Developed as a Rural Ambassador resource for the Montana Nonprofit Association
White Sulphur Springs, Montana



A Rural Advantage: Knowing Who to Call

You do not need to be the expert in housing, childcare, conservation, healthcare, workforce development, grant writing, or every other issue that crosses your desk. One of the advantages of rural communities is that relationships are often close, sectors overlap, and the distance between a question and the right person can be short. A strong rural nonprofit can add value by knowing who has the expertise, making the introduction, and helping the right people get into the same room.

How to Use This Resource

Each practice includes the idea behind it, what it has looked like in Meagher County, one way to try it locally, and one practical consideration to keep in mind. Start with the practices that address a real need in your community; there is no reason to implement all ten at once.



01 Be the Connector, Not the Expert

Your value is not knowing every answer. It is helping the right people find one another.

Why it matters. Rural issues rarely stay in one lane. A housing problem may involve employers, local government, healthcare, schools, funders, and developers. A connector can reduce duplication and get expertise to the people who need it without trying to own every issue.

In Meagher County. MCSC often plays the link between organizations with technical expertise, local knowledge, decision-making authority, and community relationships. The role is frequently to make an introduction or convene a conversation rather than become the subject-matter expert.

Try this. Build a simple relationship map. For the major issues in your community, identify who has expertise, who has authority, who has lived experience, and who can help move resources. Then make introductions before creating a new program.

KEEP IN MIND *Being the connector does not mean becoming the default owner. If every question comes back to you, the network is not getting stronger.*

02 Invest in Local Leaders

Collaboration is more durable when leadership capacity exists across the community, not inside one organization.

Why it matters. Rural communities often rely on a relatively small group of people to serve on boards, lead projects, volunteer, and make decisions. This is sometimes called the Same Ten People, or STP, challenge: a handful of committed community members carrying most of the volunteer and leadership load, which raises the risk of burnout and limits the range of perspectives at the table. Investing in people, and developing the next group behind them, strengthens the entire local ecosystem.

In Meagher County. Examples include Leadership 47 through MSU Extension, the Meagher County Youth Leadership Program, MNA trainings, and sponsoring MNA conference registration so other local leaders can access professional development.

Try this. Identify five current or emerging community leaders and ask what training, exposure, or connections would make them more effective. Look for ways to bring those opportunities closer to home or help remove the cost barrier.

KEEP IN MIND *Do not limit leadership development to the people already at every table. Intentionally create entry points for newer, younger, volunteer, and less-connected leaders.*

03 Create Low-Stakes Spaces for Connection

Most collaboration starts with a relationship before it starts with a project.



Why it matters. People are more willing to share information, ask for help, and work across organizational lines when they already know one another. Not every gathering needs an agenda, deliverable, or formal committee structure.

In Meagher County. MCSC hosts quarterly Nonprofit Happy Hours, sponsored by individuals and local businesses, with free food and drinks and a short educational component, though the real value is the networking. These happy hours have sparked collaborations such as the Youth Center and the Golf Course Association partnering on a shared program. MCSC has also hosted the MNA Rural Community Builder Summit, creating additional recurring opportunities for nonprofit and community leaders to meet outside of a project-specific setting.

Try this. Host a quarterly coffee, lunch, or happy hour with a simple purpose: introductions, updates, and conversation. Keep the barrier to participation low and resist the urge to turn every gathering into a meeting.

KEEP IN MIND *Over-programming can defeat the purpose. Leave enough room for participants to discover shared interests and make connections on their own.*

04 Bring Different Sectors to the Same Table

The same community problem often looks different from government, healthcare, agriculture, conservation, business, or nonprofit perspectives.

Why it matters. Cross-sector collaboration helps communities see the whole problem instead of each organization solving the piece directly in front of it. It also exposes resources and constraints that may not be visible from inside one sector.

In Meagher County. Meagher County projects routinely involve local government, conservation and agriculture partners, healthcare, economic development organizations, youth and community groups, and private industry. Partners have included the City and County, NRCS, Montana Trout Unlimited, Meagher County Conservation District, Trust Montana, HRDC, GFDA, MBAC, the Youth Center, Mountainview Medical Center, and the Rodeo Club.

Try this. For one issue you are working on now, list every sector it touches. Invite at least one person from each relevant sector to an early conversation, before a solution has already been decided.

KEEP IN MIND *Getting everyone to the same table does not mean everyone will agree. The goal is shared understanding, clearer roles, and better decisions, not artificial consensus.*

05 Share Data Before Collecting More

A small community should not have five organizations asking residents the same questions.

Why it matters. Repeated surveys and disconnected needs assessments create fatigue and can leave organizations working from different versions of the same story. Shared data helps partners start from a common picture and use limited capacity more efficiently.



In Meagher County. The Meagher County Housing Master Plan used multi-partner data collection, while the Meagher County Childcare Survey was developed through the Childcare Coalition in partnership with Zero to Five. The intent is to share information across organizations rather than repeatedly recreate it.

Try this. Before launching a survey or assessment, ask three questions: What data already exists? Who else needs this information? Can we collect it together and agree to share the results? It is also worth asking whether the data already in hand has real gaps, or only tells a surface-level story in places that deserve a closer look.

KEEP IN MIND *Do not collect data without a decision attached to it. Be clear about what the information will help the community understand, prioritize, or change.*

06 Solve Shared Problems Through Coalitions

When several organizations are affected by the same issue, create one shared process instead of several parallel ones.

Why it matters. Coalitions can give complex problems a home without forcing one organization to carry the entire issue. They also make it easier to include different perspectives while keeping attention on a defined community need.

In Meagher County. Examples include the Meagher County Childcare Coalition, the Meagher County Housing League, and the Meagher County Fairgrounds Board.

Try this. Start with one clearly stated problem, not a broad mission. Invite the organizations and people already touching that problem, then define what the coalition will own and what should remain with individual partners.

KEEP IN MIND *A coalition without clear scope can become another standing meeting. Give the group a defined purpose, next step, and reason to continue.*

07 Share the Megaphone

In a small community, attention is limited. Partners do not need to compete for it every time.

Why it matters. A shared communications platform can help residents find opportunities, events, information, and ways to participate while giving smaller organizations access to an audience they may not be able to build alone.

In Meagher County. MCSC uses the Meagher County Nonprofit Network Facebook page to share happenings and collect letters of support, and also uses broader storytelling tools such as quarterly newsletters and the “Small Town, Big Sky” documentary. The film was created to show that collaboration in rural communities is really a patchwork quilt: there is no single model that works the same way everywhere, but similar processes can help any community sew its own quilt.



Try this. Choose one channel you can reliably maintain and invite partner organizations to use it. Create simple submission expectations so sharing community information does not become a constant one-off task.

KEEP IN MIND *Shared communications should expand partners' reach, not absorb their identity. Give clear credit and link people back to the organization doing the work.*

08 Engage Major Employers Without Becoming Dependent on Them

A major employer can be a genuine participant in community life, not just a funding source, when there is a clear structure for them to sponsor, collaborate, and show up.

Why it matters. Large employers often want to be good neighbors, not only funders. Creating structured ways for them to sponsor, collaborate on, and participate in community projects and events helps them engage meaningfully in the community they are part of, without putting the full weight of that relationship on one person or one project.

In Meagher County. MCSC has developed an MOU with Sandfire Resources America related to the Black Butte Copper Project and has worked on a framework for the nonprofit to serve as a neutral steward that connects employer sponsorship, collaboration, and participation to specific community projects and events.

Try this. Map out the different ways an employer can engage: sponsoring an event, collaborating on a defined project, or participating directly alongside community members. Be clear about who identifies priorities, who makes decisions, and how the relationship will be reported on.

KEEP IN MIND *Do not allow one employer to become the organization's entire funding strategy or public identity. Diversification protects both credibility and long-term stability.*

09 Build Relationships Beyond Your Community

Rural leaders need outside peers just as much as communities need local relationships.

Why it matters. A strong external network brings new ideas into the community, creates a place to test assumptions, and gives leaders access to people who understand challenges that may be difficult to discuss locally.

In Meagher County. MCSC participates in the MNA Mentor Program and uses informal executive-director-to-executive-director relationships to talk through issues such as burnout, board management, and community identity boundaries.

Try this. Identify one peer outside your immediate community and establish a recurring check-in. Trade tools, referrals, mistakes, and lessons, not just success stories.



KEEP IN MIND *Outside relationships are not a substitute for local trust. They are a way to bring perspective and support back into local work.*

Questions to Take Back to Your Community

- Where are organizations working in parallel on the same issue?
- What information are we collecting more than once?
- Who is affected by our current priorities but is not yet at the table?
- Which relationships should exist before the next major project or funding opportunity arrives?
- What are we doing for others that could be taught, shared, or systemized instead?



10 Build Capacity Without Creating Dependency

The goal of capacity building is more capable organizations, not more organizations dependent on you.

Why it matters. In a one-person shop, being helpful can quickly become unsustainable. The strongest support teaches, equips, or systemizes so that the same request does not have to be solved from scratch every time.

In Meagher County. Grant Writing Coffee Hours are designed to help organizations strengthen their own grant-writing ability rather than having MCSC write grants for them. MCSC also acknowledges the different realities of paid-staff and volunteer-led organizations and uses a nonprofit capacity-building calendar so support is more systematic and less reactive.

Try this. Notice which requests repeat. Turn the next repeated request into a template, training, office hour, shared resource, or referral process that other organizations can use independently.

KEEP IN MIND *If your organization has to remain involved for the work to continue, ask whether you are building capacity or simply adding another responsibility to your own job.*

Start Here

You do not need a new initiative to begin building collaboration.

1. Name five people or organizations working on issues that overlap.
2. Identify one place where effort, information, or outreach may be duplicated.
3. Create one low-stakes opportunity for the right people to connect.
4. Choose one thing your organization can stop owning by teaching, referring, or sharing the work.

Adapt, Don't Replicate

Meagher County's programs, partners, and challenges are specific to one place. The transferable lesson is not the exact structure of a happy hour, coalition, survey, or agreement. It is the habit of building relationships, sharing information, clarifying roles, and strengthening the people and organizations that already make a rural community work.

Developed from the experience of Meagher County Stewardship Council in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, as a Rural Ambassador resource for Montana Nonprofit Association.