**A Seat at the Table: shaping the community’s future**

By Randy Carpenter and Bridget Wilkinson guest columnists

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We love this community, like most everyone who lives here. Of course, the things we love are drawing more people to Gallatin County every day. At the rate we have been growing for the past few decades – about 2.8 percent a year – we will double our population to 200,000 in the next 25 years. That is like adding the equivalent of Boulder, Colorado, to the Gallatin Valley.

Think about it – half of the community that will exist in 25 years *has not yet arrived*. This may seem daunting, but this growth also presents a huge opportunity to shape our future. What kind of neighborhoods do we want to create? What does the rural landscape look like? How do we ensure that all community members have a chance to succeed here?

The Gallatin County nonprofit sector has a unique role to play in this opportunity. Consisting of hundreds of diverse organizations, our nonprofit sector is a powerful economic engine – employing over 3,000 people to the tune of $179 million in total labor income – with considerable social, human and political capital. Nonprofits help the community conserve our open spaces, prepare young people to be successful, create art to make Gallatin County a more beautiful place, support our aging population, provide opportunities for low-income people to secure the resources they need to live lives of dignity, and on and on. Our nonprofits help sustain and nurture what we love about this place.

The Bozeman Area Community Foundation and Future West are bringing Gallatin County’s nonprofit organizations together in an initiative called A Seat At the Table. The goal of A Seat At the Table is to bring more community voices to discussions about our future.

The timing is auspicious: the communities of Bozeman, Belgrade, and Gallatin County will soon start the process of creating new plans and “growth policies” (the big-picture, long-range, visionary blueprint for a community’s future). Creating growth policies are as important as anything local governments ever do. By law they are the basis for future community development initiatives, regulatory codes that determine growth patterns, and infrastructure investments. In other words, they set the stage for decisions about how this place looks and how it functions for people and the economy.

Experience from communities throughout the West has taught us that the best growth plans are a result of meaningful engagement from a broad array of citizens. But we have also learned that engaging citizens in these issues is challenging, especially these days when so many of us are busier than ever. And too often community planning processes seem abstract and fail to capture the imagination of citizens.

But it can be done. Creating new growth policies is not the dry and technical process of local government budgeting or infrastructure planning. Creating new growth policies and plans is about our collective vision and goals for the very character of our community. People of every background, age, political persuasion and income care deeply about their homes, their neighborhoods and their fellow citizens.

A Seat at the Table will give everyone an opportunity to participate in planning for the future. Over the next 18 months we will continue to expand the circle of engaged organizations, host conversations about our future, and work with local government leaders to develop the most effective ways to gather and compile community feedback.

Traditional community engagement techniques, while often effective, can’t always get the job done alone. That’s where A Seat At the Table comes in. It will empower nonprofit leaders to engage their constituents in conversations about concerns and hopes for the community and the choices we have in front of us. However, this initiative is not limited to the nonprofit sector. It will engage business leaders, city and county leaders and our neighbors.

Most importantly, by getting the perspective of thousands more citizens – many of those who typically are unable or don’t know how to participate – community leaders will be able to fashion better, more informed plans for our future. Will you join us for A Seat at the Table?

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