



# Plains Talk

An Exploration of the Possibilities and Promise  
of the Northern Plains Region





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June 2007

## Rural Dynamics

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Montana was founded in 1968 to provide for the credit needs of residents of Montana and Wyoming. Now known as Rural Dynamics Incorporated, the organization provides programs and establishes partnerships to help youth, individuals, and families achieve economic independence. Our vision is to develop and maintain a new generation of financially educated and responsible consumers.

We are a private, nonprofit corporation, dedicated to providing confidential and professional counseling in aiding and rehabilitating financially distressed families, and individuals regardless of race, creed, color, sex, social position, or financial status, and in fostering community. We provide consumer education on money management and the intelligent use of credit.

In recent months, as we refined our services and expanded into new regions, we recognized that credit counseling, while a crucial step in the road to achieving a full and rewarding life in our communities, was only the first step. The Northern Plains are a unique collection of regions bound by a set of common experiences that requires a special awareness of the values, strengths, and challenges of rural communities. Through this document we hope to spark greater collective efforts on behalf of our Northern Plains region. For more information about our organization, please visit our website at [www.cccsmt.org](http://www.cccsmt.org).

This document is the reflection of voices of the Northern Plains states, who in the summer and fall of 2006 gathered throughout Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, in a unique style of public conversations designed to learn what potential exists for building a stronger Northern Plains community. It is the story of the people, their values, their aspirations, their innovative ideas for a healthy future, and the institutions that can enable that transformation.

Our intention in producing this document is to inspire new ideas about the future of our region, encourage more conversation about fulfilling the possibilities inherent in the Northern Plains, and propose a potential course of action that might catalyze positive progress in improving the lives of our families and future generations.



## Understanding the Northern Plains Region

Developing a clear sense of the forces that shape life on the Northern Plains will help us develop a joint understanding of the opportunities and challenges that lay ahead as we begin to discern a new vision for the region. Some of this knowledge is commonly held by the region's inhabitants and analyzing the data provides verifiable evidence of the issues requiring collective action.

We know from our Plains Talks that communities want stability and basic services in the form of health care, recreation opportunities, home ownership, and jobs. Our preliminary assessment reveals the intense impact that the expansive geography of the region creates, the distinctive sub-regions that begin to emerge from the larger Northern Plains super region, the clear differences between population centers and rural/frontier settings, and consistently troubling disparities between native and non-native communities.

**Geography, Population, Income, and Employment.** The Northern Plains states share similar population, income, and employment patterns that vary by geography and race. All four states are characterized by some of the nation's lowest population densities, lowest per capita incomes, and greatest geographic distances between centers of community institutions and commerce. There are large areas within each region that are called "frontier," meaning they have fewer than seven individuals per square mile. The impact of such vast distances between population and commerce centers is enormous. These distances affect business, social networks, communications, and the assets available to communities trying to establish sustainable economies.

Preliminary data indicate several pockets of frontier settings with low income, high poverty rates, low educational attainment, and considerably limited access to community. Any policy vision for the Northern Plains will have to include strategies that are sensitive to these distinct demographic regions.

**Education.** The data points to a distinctive educational profile of above-average high school achievement but below-average college completion in all four Northern Plains states. Further, it appears that barriers exist to higher education that may be a focus of any educational strategies for the region.

Existing high educational attainment could serve as a potential anchor to attract business and bolster community development strategies. A consistent need for increased educational attainment in all tribal communities, and the surrounding rural counties, exists in the region.

Further study is needed to answer such questions as: How does educational attainment affect employment patterns in Northern Plains' communities? Where do high poverty tracts align with poor educational attainment? What barriers lead to low educational attainment?

**Health.** In every Plains Talk, community leaders and health advocates described challenges of access to quality health care, a dearth of sophisticated trauma centers, and persistent community health concerns such as alcoholism and chemical dependency. Much of this was exacerbated by the vast distances between communities and the isolation of certain frontier towns. Evidence of such conditions is seen especially among many Northern Plains tribal communities, where poor health and high mortality rates coincide with high unemployment and poverty.

Additional research and consultation with leading health advocates in the region will be needed to address several important health questions, including the status of 148 hospitals and health clinics spread across the region, the role that more than 160 health-focused nonprofits play in expanding access to health care, emerging consensus on the cause of chemical dependency in rural areas, and the ways in which people receive treatment in different communities.

**Homeownership.** Northern Plains residents own their homes, but this may not prove to be the asset that it is known to be in other regions of the country. Rates of homeownership in the region are relatively consistent with the national average of 66 percent. Higher rates of homeownership tend to cluster near significant population centers and economic corridors. Important questions for further analysis focus on quality and impact of housing for plains residents. A high proportion of the housing stock in the region is substandard, much of it outdated mobile home construction that has not been adequately maintained or that has outlived its intended lifespan. While people may own these units, they are not accumulating an appreciating asset in the traditional sense associated with homeownership. Our experience in credit counseling demonstrates the dangers of a family over committing beyond their means in order to own; in this region, predatory lending is alive and well.

**Nonprofit Infrastructure.** The nonprofit infrastructure in Northern Plains states is rich and diverse, but does concentrate slightly in more populated regions. The more than 8,000 nonprofit entities that were documented when we completed our preliminary data analysis run the gamut of potential services provided, from human service (10 percent) to education (18 percent) to arts and culture (12 percent) to health and medical (8 percent), and other public benefit (9 percent). The distribution of these community institutions is concentrated along major transportation routes and population centers as might be expected, raising the question of access to services and amenities provided for residents in more isolated frontier and rural settings.

**Economy.** The regional economy is tied to its human resources and potential for flexibility in a changing marketplace. Much of the conversation at the Plains Talk considered ways to build an economic future for the region that was innovative, equitable, and sustainable for the environment. To understand where to go for such a division requires an understanding of where the economy has been, and where current forces are taking us unless we intervene.

## The Values of Rural Dynamics and Its Allies

If we accept these premises about the Northern Plains—its scale, diversity of regions, economic peculiarities, and distinctive challenges—where do we begin to build the brighter future for our children and their children?

*We believe it begins with values.*

As inhabitants of the Northern Plains, each of us has some awareness of the values that define this region. They emerge from a shared experience, from generations of connection to the land, for a feel for what it takes to survive, to thrive in this remarkable environment. We began to wonder: What if enough people shared a set of values that would empower them to redefine the region in a way that holds on to the richness of our past, but embraces the unknowns in our future? To us, it seemed such a collection of people would be limited if they lacked commitment and determination. Possessing both, these assembled individuals and organizations would surely emerge as a potent force for positive change in the Northern Plains.

As a single organization, Rural Dynamics cannot begin to presume that it could lead such a conversation. But our experiences in building relationships with partners in order to deliver our programs more effectively, our expanding involvement in issues of public policy, and our growing sense of the opportunities that can leverage positive economic impact for rural and frontier communities, all pointed toward assuming a role in beginning the conversation.

During the past several months, we have been engaged in a process with our staff, board, and current organizational allies to determine if there might in fact be a set of values that could guide our exploration with a widespread collection of community leaders and other concerned residents from the four states that comprise our region. Some important common themes that emerged from these discussions helped us pose the questions that form the basis of this analysis. They involve supporting our communities, respect for our neighbors, building the capacity of our institutions, and a firm belief in the possibilities for the future. With these themes in mind, we set forth to find out if others share those values.

## The Kellogg Interest in Rural and Frontier Communities

Having a conversation with neighbors about their values is no small task. Especially when they are spread across 392,000 square miles in some of the nation's most sparsely populated towns and counties. We realized early on that we would need the support of our partners to make this public discussion possible, as well as resources to reach across such a broad region.

As it turned out, our approach attracted a very powerful ally without whom this process, and this document, would not have been possible. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, based in Battle Creek, Michigan, has a long tradition of service and philanthropy in America's rural communities. They believe that it is a foundation's role "to help people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge and resources to improve their quality of life and that of future generations." Their rural development program funds collaborative, comprehensive, and inclusive approaches to rural economic development that emphasize community visioning, leadership development, entrepreneurship development, and delivery of human, social, and economic services. They enable rural people to raise the national awareness of rural communities' potential and challenges. Kellogg was a natural partner to help us hold this conversation with our neighbors in the Northern Plains about their values, concerns, and aspirations for the future.

## The Plains Talk Process is Born

Because we sought to sample what the potential was for collective action in the Northern Plains states, we determined that we needed a way to get a sense of community perspectives that was more representative than exhaustive. If it turned out that there was strong sentiment in favor of moving forward, then a deeper investigation would prove appropriate. So the Rural Dynamics team charged with facilitating this conversation began to look for a way to engage leadership in communities that would reflect the concerns and interests of their constituencies. The approach needed to be flexible enough to overcome the extreme challenges of gathering people across such vast territory, general enough so that participants could reflect their witness of many of those they represent, and personal enough to solicit meaningful discussion and thoughtful exchange. A proven facilitation technique held the answer.

**About the World Café.** The World Café is a flexible, easy-to-use process for fostering collaborative dialogue, sharing mutual knowledge, and discovering new opportunities for action. Based on living systems thinking, this innovative approach creates dynamic networks of conversation that can catalyze an organization or a community's own collective intelligence around its most important questions. The café is based on *iterative inquiry* – a series of questions posed to a collection of people, who are then prompted to dig deeper and build on the information generated within the group for a more nuanced understanding of the issues. More specifically, during these

conversations, small groups are formed to discuss a set of six questions about a topic of common interest. Each question builds upon the last, and there is intentional mixing of the participants so that all of the threads of conversation have the benefit of the entire group's thinking. The questions can vary by setting, but because of the desire to assess common values and potential for a region, question consistency was maintained through all of the conversations during the research period.

The questions that were put before participants in the conversations during the summer and fall were developed through extensive reflection with staff as well as consulting partners who have considerable experience in facilitating World Café conversations. The following questions reflect the reality of life in the Northern Plains:

- What future do we want to create together for our children and grandchildren in this region?
- What values do we need to hold to create the future we want for our region?
- What relationships must be in place to make this vision a reality?
- What are other possibilities that may exist for this region?
- What actions, policies, or conversations are critical to achieving our collective vision?
- What commitments am I willing to make to achieve this collective vision?

## Applying the World Café Model to the Reality of the Northern Plains

To make this model effective for use in the Northern Plains, several steps were necessary: First, a determination was necessary on the types of organizations and residents that would be invited to such conversations. Second, a plan had to be devised to account for the vast distances people would have to travel in order to take part in any discussion. Third, our organization had to think differently about its function and structure to accommodate the unusual activities that were central to performing the tasks that result from such an outreach. Fourth, we had to identify organizational allies who were willing to partner with us in the delivery of this series; and finally, the process needed a name. The nomenclature for the methodology, World Café, just did not seem to resonate as evocative to people on the plains.

In short order, we addressed all of these tasks. Because of the five-month window in which the conversations were to be held, it was determined that the most representative of perspectives from across the four plains states would come from discussions with leaders of community-based organizations and other important local and state institutions that serve large numbers of residents. Beyond this core of outreach, other efforts to reach residents were pursued as possible. Sessions were planned in each of the four states, spread across the study period to provide maximum opportunity to participate. A team was assembled within Rural Dynamics to coordinate the

conversations. Longtime allies of Rural Dynamics were joined by new organizations that were excited, or at least curious about the possibilities that this conversation held. These organizations were crucial to the smooth function of the process, helping to identify participants, recruit new voices, and even support the complex logistics of pulling together interrelated discussions across four states.

And somewhere in the hustle of pulling it all together, a name emerged that seemed symbolic of the effort, the intent, and the people it sought to empower: Plains Talk. It represented where the conversation was to occur, but also what we wanted to hear – straight talk about the region, its peoples' concerns, their challenges, and their hopes for the future.

## Sessions, Outreach, and Vision of the Plains Talk Process

More than 1,200 organizations and individuals were contacted about the possibility of participating in a Plains Talk, and though some were not interested, most expressed appreciation for undertaking such an effort. Many had suggestions of other people to contact, and more than 200 people agreed to participate in the formal Plains Talk sessions.

Eventually, a schedule was set. Each month, the Plains Talk team would journey to a designated site to conduct a discussion in the iterative inquiry format of the World Café. They were joined by consulting support from PolicyLink, a national nonprofit that advances social equity and economic opportunity throughout regions across the United States; and by the National Congress of American Indians, the oldest, largest, and most representative national organization that advances the interests of American Indian and Alaska native tribal governments.

## Beyond the Plains Talk: Alternative Outreach Structures

There was interest in taking part in the conversations that extended beyond the capacity of the Plains Talk to accommodate; this was an encouraging sign and indicated that there may in fact be an appetite for a larger collective effort to improve the lives of residents of the Northern Plains. While this was good for the longer term, some strategies were necessary to ensure that voices anxious to participate during this initial phase of conversations were clearly heard. To that end, several specific activities were held to capture those perspectives, coordinated largely by a talented team of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers who were posted to Rural Dynamics in 2006-2007. The team:

- contacted community members in each of these community sectors via email or U.S. mail with invitations to a Plains Talk session regarding health, government, education, business, faith-based community, public safety, and financial issues;

- made follow-up telephone calls and sent emails to those invited to each Plains Talk session to encourage registration, spark interest, and further explain the process;
- traveled to Rapid City, South Dakota, and Dickinson, North Dakota, to meet with potential Plains Talk participants to attempt to engage them through personal contact and establish legitimacy in these regions for the Plains Talk conversations;
- sent thank-you emails to Plains Talk participants with the promise to keep them involved in the process through updates on our progress, and encouraged them to visit the Plains Talk website, [www.plainstalk.org](http://www.plainstalk.org);
- organized smaller Plains Talk sessions with interested participants;
- and traveled deep into rural communities in Montana to conduct informal outreach by way of unstructured interviews, in casual settings, within communities.

While not formal Plains Talk conversations, the efforts of the AmeriCorps team allowed several other conversations about the values and futures of the region to take place. Discussions included a large general gathering in Sidney, Montana, a discussion with tribal members in Browning, Montana, dialogue with staff of a youth center, and a conversation held directly with young people who frequent a local Boys and Girls Club. Their input was thoroughly recorded and has been incorporated into the summary of themes that will follow.

## The Conversations

This document is intended to reflect the voices we heard throughout the Northern Plains, telling their stories, and sharing their hopes for the region. In what follows, we try to accomplish this by summarizing each session and the lessons learned each conversation produced.



## Great Falls, Montana. June 14-15, 2006

This session featured a great deal of optimism about the possibilities inherent in developing a common set of values around which concrete action could be focused. There was significant interest in identifying public policies that impact rural communities, and a solid commitment by several present to work in the future to help make some of the ideas that emerged reality. Conversation was sincere and fluid, and a reflection of the strong relationships that already existed among many of the participants and the experience they had working with Rural Dynamics. Participants in this session also helped the PlainsTalk team refine their facilitation and the wording of questions utilized in the conversations for subsequent dialogues.

**A preferred future.** Participants held a wide range of views about the most important aspects of a positive future for the Northern Plains, but there were common themes: They sought a sustainable future, where there were opportunities for individuals and families to improve their lives without exhausting work schedules and where the economy could thrive without relying on extractive industries that damage the environment. Participants sought healthy communities that allowed each child's full potential to be realized, and where addiction did not threaten to destabilize the neighborhood fabric; and they wanted a place where people did not have to move away to have opportunities for decent employment, quality education, and the ability to enjoy the assets of a rural lifestyle.

*People should not have to move out of the region to seize opportunities.*

Still, there were concerns. Many felt that children and adults were often disconnected, and that the multigenerational fabric that had characterized Northern Plains lifestyle was disintegrating. A holistic and affordable healthcare system has yet to emerge. There was still a large gap between the possibility of a region that fully embraced the diverse heritage of its different peoples and the reality of those relationships today. Communities and regions within Montana can be isolated and unresponsive to the implications of a global economy and there was the acknowledgement that there are certain assets needed to compete in the economy that simply are not in rich supply in rural America.

**Core values.** Montanans value respect, hard work, strong ethics, and community. Family is an essential component of rural life, providing deep roots across generations into local communities. Those present also noted the importance of being responsible for one's actions as fundamental to

the balance of frontier living. Respect extended beyond that accorded to people to include respect for the land and environment, and to other's individual choices. An interesting discussion emerged regarding how to balance a notion of personal independence with service and relationship to the larger community. Those present acknowledged that individuality is core to one's identity as a Montanan, but that the survival of the region depended upon the interdependence of people within a community and those communities to one another.

**Important relationships.** The future desired for the region can only be achieved through collective action, and that makes relationships crucial. Those relationships start with neighbors. People believe that neighborhoods where people know one another build a strong base for civic engagement. This concept expands to connect communities, and ultimately extends to elected officials who need to relate to those places and be accountable. Relationships with young people are essential to undo stereotypes that result when generations are not connecting. Some people felt that the grandparent-grandchild relationship is essential and that stronger relations between Native American nations and other communities are also essential. These are examples of some of the several types of collaborative relationships that were described that could be enhanced throughout the plains to bring people to a common table for co-creating a different future. Finally, participants in this conversation found intergovernmental relationships among federal, state, local, and tribal governments to be a place where much growth would be necessary. Collaboration between public and private entities, better relationships with the press, and companies that can boost economic opportunities for the plains are also important elements of the relationships that will fulfill the kind of vision groups imagined in Great Falls.

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*Our future can be sustainable, with children connected to elders, respect for diversity, pride in our culture, a sense of family, and connection to the land, languages, and history.*

**Undreamt possibilities.** These brainstorming sessions consistently proved to be far-ranging and informative and the first conversation was no exception. Some suggested possibilities to consider are to:

- rethink the presence of the military in the Northern Plains and what its implications may be for our future;
- bring the rural and reservation communities on par with the rest of the state;
- promote regional equity, which will improve access to jobs, services, and justice for our communities;
- find consistent support for small business development and artist's concerns; and
- capitalize on the untapped potential of alternative fuels.

**Critical actions, policies, and conversations.** For the purposes of the Plains Talks, a policy was defined as a course of action (or inaction) chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or set of interrelated problems. Most participants agreed that conversations with policymakers, foundation representatives, and allies across the region would be critical in achieving outcomes that these values and ambitions for community represent. First and foremost, policies that support family stability and break cycles of dependency on public systems should be pursued. Increasing the living wage and other policies that protect low-income families are important as well. Families are also strengthened through a stronger economy, and to that end, more support for products described as value-added prevents the shipping of raw materials out of state to be transformed into finished products that have to be repurchased by local consumers. By the same token, policies that help promote universal access to high-speed telecommunications can expand needed infrastructure to unserved areas.

There was additional discussion on actions that could improve the health of the community, including more investment in prevention over treatment, improved education, and financial education for an entire generation of youth and young adults just beginning to shoulder the responsibilities of supporting themselves and their families.

**Commitments.** As the conversation closed, there remained surprisingly fresh energy in the room after two days of dialogue. Many were inspired by the honest dialogue that resulted from the World Café process. That inspiration was reflected in the commitments that emerged from the conversations. People were willing to offer their time, energy, contacts, technical expertise, and specific skills in outreach and advocacy to make this possibility more real. People identified others who should be involved in the dialogue, some were willing to provide research or deliver written materials that would clarify the process, and others offered their gifts in public education. However, despite the optimism that resulted from the two-day conversation, this was not a collective vision. Instead, it was a place to start and a barometer of the potential inherent among people with common values spending time having real conversations and think together about the future.

Taking that advice, the Plains Talk team committed to sharpen their listening skills even further as they approached the subsequent conversations.



## Casper, Wyoming. July 6, 2006

The holiday weekend did not deter the participation of Wyoming representatives who wanted to provide input into this round of conversations. The conversation highlighted the longstanding efforts of some of the state's most dedicated community organizations, and the sense of possibility for improved coordination or even collaboration on strategies. It also underscored the challenge of securing meaningful engagement from Native American nations.

**A preferred future.** The economy was heavy on the minds of Wyoming respondents. Jobs were the centerpiece to a future worth creating for subsequent generations. Thinking was systemic, however jobs had to be diverse, self-sufficient, pay livable wages, have career ladders, be mutually reinforcing, and provide economic opportunities for the workforce. For this to happen, people recognized the value of a healthy, drug-free community, with strong educational centers, high civic involvement, affordable housing and health care, and a banking system with fair lending practices. A work ethic should be instilled through solid K-12 education and reinforced in lifelong learning opportunities for workers.

When the workday ends, people hoped that a stronger community would exist for everyone returning home. That community would value diversity, retain small town values while connecting to modern technologies, have a strong sense of social and economic equity, and inspire its residents to meaningful volunteer opportunities. New cultures would be explored, welcomed, and embraced and would allow for the preservation of Wyoming's wild territories, and preserve the flavor of the state. The goal is to see the gradual erosion of poverty in rural and frontier communities.

**Core values.** Wyomans value dedication, passion, ethics, personal responsibility, and honesty. Integrity, in communications and personal relationships, is seen as fundamental to building the ideal community. Family was also seen here as an essential component of rural life, connecting generations and even entire communities through their relationships. Generosity, social justice, and the acknowledgments of the needs of others were all cited as crucial and led to a discussion about the values applied to addressing the history of indigenous peoples in the state. Ultimately, it was believed, every Wyoman has something to contribute.

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*Can we teach our children, maintain affordable housing, strengthen families, and eliminate drug dependency?  
I think so?*

**Important relationships.** In a state with such great expanses between inhabited places, relationships between people become hugely important. But those gathered also acknowledged that they needed their state's institutions—economic, educational, and governmental—to have strong relationships as well. These relationships need to have characteristics that encourage cooperation, creativity, and responsibility to the community. Suggested characteristics included open-mindedness, mutual respect, empathy, courage, energy, straight talk, and willingness to change. As in Montana, there was strong belief that intergovernmental relationships—between federal, state, local, and tribal governments—are essential.

*Education is the glue that holds our region together.*

People also saw the value of using quality relationships as a way to reach those often disenfranchised in the state: young people, low-income residents, even some Native American communities. The power of the private sector was not underestimated in realizing these relationships. Banks, small businesses, community foundations, museums, insurance agencies, and others were cited as institutions whose improved community orientation could build a stronger community.

**Undreamt possibilities.** Several suggestions were broached about new possibilities for the region, and four of them garnered considerable interest:

- provide an exchange of cultural views that involves the smaller communities in the state, build a strong collection of nonprofits and for-profit agencies, and begin a real regional dialogue including representation from Native American nations;
- build a stronger relationship with significant military presence spread throughout the state and begin to have those communities feel like a part of the broader community;
- initiate bus circuits that can build the relationships between communities and even residents of different states; through outdoor activities, hiking, camping, and ranching experiences; and
- inspire collaborative grantmaking in local and national foundations, and engage corporations in philanthropy.

**Critical actions, policies, and conversations.** In Wyoming, most participants agreed that conversations with policymakers, foundation representatives, and allies across the region were the basis for real progress. Making government more accessible was seen as a core priority. To do that, government agencies need to spend time with nonprofits to understand community needs more directly. K-12 literacy was considered a fundamental point of departure for achieving any kind of sustainable future for the state. Another thought was to identify the proponents of a collective vision and work to draft a set of policies that could build an agenda reflecting the values of a conversation like this. Involving policymakers in the process was also considered essential.

**Commitments.** As the conversation closed, attendees had specific suggestions on how the Plains Talk process could build momentum. Time, follow-through with partners, continued involvement in these processes, public speaking, reaching out to young people, and identifying new people and constituencies to participate were all offered by those in attendance.



## Rapid City, South Dakota. September 14-15, 2006

A collection of some of the more experienced community advocates and service providers gathered to reflect about their regions future. But the challenges of previous collaborative efforts did not deter the leaders present from pushing their collective thinking to new limits and coming up with a new wrinkle or two to consider for improving the future for South Dakotans. Their experience in working together was reflected in succinct, direct responses to the iterative inquiry that the Plains Talk process evokes.

**A preferred future.** South Dakotans want choices. For those present this meant economic choices, educational choices, and personal choices. To achieve these choices, several components were considered essential. Educational opportunities would stop the brain drain experienced by many local communities. Good jobs would provide livable wages and economic security for a generation of families that have increasingly been at risk. Quality of life measures would improve living standards in communities, eliminate drug use, and retain the small town atmosphere of the state. Also, financial education and policy changes would create a culture of wealth building and financial stability.

*We want to maintain good jobs with benefits, a positive business climate, life-long learning opportunities, and a small town atmosphere. We have to.*

**Core values.** Respect, respect, respect. Without fail, participants felt this was fundamental to the region in order to achieve its desired future. Respect for one another, for one's own responsibilities, for the views of other cultures, and for the place that each South Dakotan has in the broader community were all tantamount to building a stronger state and meaningful outcomes for everyone. With respect for each other comes understanding, valuing diversity, cooperation, and ultimately, real community.

**Important relationships.** For these values to manifest themselves as real standards in communities, several relationships will be needed. Schools, parents, and families will have to find new ways to cooperate to improve the education of young people, and they will need to be joined by congregations, government agencies, elected officials, and law enforcement. Congressional delegations will need to build more meaningful relationships with their constituents that are not based solely on addressing crises. Large employers such as universities will have to recognize their responsibilities to the broader community and find meaningful ways to contribute.

The state and tribal governments will need to find common ground for cooperation, even as both parties struggle with the nature of the relationship in native nations' continuing quest to maintain their sovereign status. And diverse collections of individuals—by age, economic status, race, and belief system—must communicate in honest ways to create a culture of knowledgeable, respectful people.

**Undreamt possibilities.** Surprisingly, two issues dominated the discussion of undreamt possibilities, primarily because of current situations that seemed attainable with the proper advocacy and action. They are to:

- build a comprehensive initiative that reinvests significantly in the water, sewer, telecommunications, transportation, and virtual infrastructure of the state; and
- pursue opportunities to establish a high technology corridor that incubates quality jobs and businesses and stimulates investment in alternative industries while connecting local residents to the resulting economic opportunity.

**Critical actions, policies, and conversations.** As with most of the discussion in this Plains Talk, participants were no-nonsense in listing their priorities for conversation, policy, and action:

1. Involve people by pushing the conversation beyond appointed and self-appointed leaders.
2. End the reliance on government to take the proactive role in solving problems.
3. Bring solutions to government, and solicit their cooperation in making them reality.
4. Move past the personal agendas that often cloud interagency or interdepartmental efforts at serious social change.
5. Build a citizenry that is informed, knowledgeable about its options, willing to do its own work, and to push collective attitudes to get at positive community change that reflects values demonstrated in these conversations.

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*I want a community  
open to change,  
inclusive and  
comfortable, with no  
turf wars or ego,  
where people are  
willing to learn.*

**Commitments.** Within this group, commitments were based in large part on what the commitment was to continue the Plains Talk process. If we were willing to steward a sustained conversation that built momentum across the states, then others were prepared to participate. To the effort they promised to bring their time, their willingness to remain informed and share information, access to new communities and facilities, and perhaps most importantly, their presence.

It was noted that this endeavor, to be successful, would require significant contribution from a wide array of partners and that some of these partners would struggle to participate without some resources to enable their continued engagement. With this advice in mind, the Plains Talk team continued north.



## Dickinson, North Dakota. October 3, 2006

A feeling of optimism permeated the session as representatives from service, advocacy, and government agencies seized the opportunity to hold a progressive conversation about the future of their communities. The spirit of cooperation continued throughout the day, leading to several new relationships and possibilities that might blossom even before any subsequent phase of the Plains Talk process. The group also made several significant contributions to the ongoing regional dialogue, re-energizing the Plains Talk team as they came in to the home stretch of group conversations in this preliminary phase.

**A preferred future.** The Dakotans present at this session had a wide-ranging conversation about the future for their state, but several clear themes emerged. Good jobs would provide a future filled with opportunity. Economic opportunities would increase in a way that kept the region affordable to existing residents. Clean water and air would make the environment a pleasant one in which to live, with residents confident that the state's natural resources were under good stewardship. Communities would be safe, beginning with the school environment. Safe schools would be the beginning of quality education that would provide an educated and well-prepared workforce that attracted quality employers and reignited the cycle.

*We need to create opportunities for our children to be able to live here, so that they can go to school, find work, have health insurance, and build lasting social networks.*

Such a community would benefit from solid health care services, reduced drug dependency, and the elimination of all forms of abuse. It would inspire heightened community service, connect neighbors, and inspire socially responsible businesses—leading to a creative community.

**Core values.** Those in attendance felt that integrity and honesty had to be core values that drove the building of a better future. With core values in place, residents could trust their leaders, individuals could have confidence in the actions of others, and there could be a dedicated effort to building inclusive communities. In an ideal setting, these values would be provocative and would be something worth standing for. People were content living in a state with predominantly rural character, but that did not stop them from wanting to encourage initiative, innovation, and risk-taking. The spirit of these values were embodied in the very history of North Dakota.

**Important relationships.** There were no shortages of suggestions for relationships that would be central to realizing a new vision for the region. Indeed, the idea of relationship-building as a driver of social change seemed to resonate deeply with participants. The multitude of ideas for more aggressive efforts to connect people could fit into three principal categories: 1) human services agents and organizations, such as congregations, community service agencies, and health care providers; 2) educational institutions, in a coordinated swath from pre-school to graduate studies and on into continuing education entities; and 3) private industry, including the trade and vocational training organizations that prepare people for the workforce.

There was considerable discussion about the possibilities of local governments being in a relationship with one another, with the desired outcome of achieving regional government that recognizes the vision of the community, allows for diversity in its leadership, takes strategic risks, and engages the public positively rather than in a confusing matter.

**Undreamt possibilities.** Participants had no trouble translating their lofty concepts for an ideal community into very tangible actions that could contribute to that desired future.

- expand entrepreneurial opportunities into the school systems, providing reality-based, cross-disciplinary education, financial literacy, and social interaction;
- address mobility issues for individuals in rural settings, particularly for those who face additional challenges because of disabilities;
- establish a mentorship initiative that allows every high school student to shadow five different professionals to discern potential careers of interest; and
- begin an initiative to transform the state from a commodity-based economy to a product-based economy in order to retain the value added in state production.

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*We find contentment living in a rural state, where we can trust our leaders, build a safe and nurturing environment, and create equal opportunity and equity for all community members.*

**Critical actions, policies, and conversations.** Participants in the Dickinson discussion distilled this part of the conversation to three simple guiding principles for changing the course of the state's development:

1. Be willing to help create a climate where innovation and new strategies have merit. That climate would encourage creativity throughout numerous sectors and build an energy for change that would be palpable from community meetings to legislative briefings;
2. Hold more community conversations that will build the groundswell for more participatory government and greater accountability to local towns;
3. Change the nature of the conversations about the future of the region to be more forward thinking and allow people to shake free from the self-perception of "the Prairie Dog state," to a vision that embraces rural life while carrying forward into a rapidly changing twenty-first century. Participants were also willing to promote the Plains Talk process in their own peer circles and local communities—many were stirred by the meeting to rethink their collaborative behavior within their existing circles of influence. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the participants were prepared to lend their time and creativity to a subsequent discussion to advance the ideas initiated during the session.



## Billings, Montana. November 13-14, 2006

As the Plains Talk team returned to its home state for the final conversation during this round of dialogue, all ears remained as sharply tuned as ever, but there was some curiosity about whether another discussion in Montana would yield new information. Billings participants did not disappoint—they brought an intensity, clarity of commitment, and depth of inquiry that reenergized us as we prepared to step back for a moment and contemplate just what this collective conversation really meant for the future of the region.

**A preferred future.** “I can do that.” Those gathered in Billings wanted to create a future where the children and their descendents had the support to develop a belief in themselves that anything is achievable. That meant that a number of conditions would have to improve in the region.

*We should be proud of where we are from, and share why we enjoy Montana – clean air, fresh, water, and natural beauty.*

Adequate housing would have to be available and affordable to a full range of family incomes. Good jobs with solid wages would be necessary, public infrastructure would need to be more sustainable, and history and culture would have to be embraced. Natural resources would need a heightened degree of stewardship. Mental and physical health would have to be sustained by eliminating abuse and dependency. There would have to be investment in people to help them envision their lives in new and different ways. People would have to be respectful of themselves, each other, and neighboring communities.

Such transformation would create a condition of hope that would permeate through the region. Most gathered in Billings felt that this hope would instill a robustness to those who allow for positive, optimistic values that would invigorate local communities and promote innovation.

**Core values.** Unless the vision can raise the bar for everyone, it is not one that can elevate the region. This belief underscored the values—integrity, equity, balance, and remembering those who have less among us—expressed during the Plains Talk to create a desired future. Many present felt that respect must be the overarching, undisputed value.

**Important relationships.** Participants were clear that the cycle of hope starts early. They wanted to instill the values of democracy in children at an earlier age. As such, relations with educational institutions were important, as were state institutions willing to work together for the improvement of rural communities. Opportunities to create learning exchanges were also valued.

Any relationship that serves the region should be transparent, candid, and engaged. It was also pointed out that even though regions do not share a border, they may still share inherent similarities.

**Undreamt possibilities.** The work ahead is long and challenging, but Billings participants saw specific opportunities to try new strategies to improve communities.

- provide an off-season academy for legislative officials that improves the efficiency of the short legislative season by better preparing elected leaders for their responsibilities; and
- use technology as a communication vehicle that keeps residents consistently connected to opportunities for involvement in community activities and in neighboring regions.

**Critical actions, policies, and conversations.** One of the most important steps in advancing a positive future for the region from the perspective of many Billings participants was finding ways to establish meaningful conversations between resource-rich and resource-poor areas of the plains. There is often tension between such communities that inhibits greater cooperation. That cooperation could lead to efficiencies in public service provision, health care delivery, and infrastructure investment. A lot of the discussion that is not happening now but that could improve outcomes for families needs to be cultivated between elected officials, within legislative circles, or between legislators and county commissioners. The commissioners have an ongoing witness to the concerns and challenges of rural peoples that could greatly improve the policymaking practices of the legislature. Old and new technologies will be needed to reach a diverse range of participants in the change process. It is important that people build credible relationships and that they are committed to solving and looking for lasting solutions. People noted that while it is important to think with a broader regional perspective and connect to the international economies that have definite impact in the Northern Plains, it is equally important not to lose sight of what is important locally and to maintain the neighborly approach synonymous with rural life.

**Commitments.** In addition to offerings of time, outreach, and access to new communities of interest that were offered at other Plains Talks, Billings participants also suggested a willingness to review documents that emerged from the planning process to provide additional insights on how to move forward.

## Themes, Connections, and Threads of Future Work

While these session summaries only begin to touch on the richness of the thoughtful conversations that transpired at each Plains Talk, there were some common themes that emerged that will drive the next phase of outreach and strategy development. An ideal future for the region would have several core elements.

**Opportunity.** People in the Northern Plains deserve the chance to live balanced lives that do not require unreasonable work schedules to achieve economic stability and provide the means to retain local talent within the region.

**Health.** Communities should be able to emerge from threats such as drug dependency or environmental hazards to create healthy places where each child's full potential can be realized.

**Character.** Communities throughout the region must meet the challenge of connecting to the global information age while retaining their small town attributes that are the cornerstone of rural America.

**Diversity.** Only when the region can embrace the distinctive heritages of its entire people and welcome new stories to join that rich tapestry, will it be prepared to engage the challenges of this new century.

**Intergovernmental Cooperation.** The Northern Plains features one of the more unusual array of government entities because of the confluence of four states, county commissions, local governments, and tribal sovereignties—all imbedded in a region where people prize their independence. Navigating these complex institutional and personal dynamics is crucial.

**Economic Versatility.** Regions in the Northern Plains have to adopt to the realities of a changing world economy by creating flexible systems for its people to participate the economy, establish career ladders, and build personal assets.

**Stewardship.** Future generations will rely on today's leaders to maintain the tremendous asset that each state possesses with regards to clean air, water, and natural resources.

**Safety.** Communities free from the threat of violence are the first step in creating nurturing communities that cultivate creativity, cooperation, and innovation.

**Education.** Providing a world-class learning environment for young people initiates a cycle of lifelong learning that provides an educated and well-prepared workforce that will attract quality employers and reignite the cycle.

**Respect.** When people believe in themselves, each other, and neighboring communities, they will begin to understand that within this amazing region, all things are possible.

## Common Values, an Emerging Vision

Perhaps the most important thing, and there were many, that occurred during the Plains Talk process was the opportunity to listen. In all four states, in a dozen or more venues, with community leaders, young people, with residents at diners—with more than 200 people in all—we listened, and we heard. What emerged was a set of common values that may be the starting point for something special to happen in the Northern Plains. We have tried to do the impossible with what follows, by capturing the essence of the ongoing dialogue in 200 words or less. We did not take on this task lightly, nor did we take it on alone. More than a dozen organizations agreed to take part in training provided by the Kellogg Foundation specifically designed to help organizations articulate their values and find common cause. The organizations that participated have expressed interest in helping advance a collective conversation about the future of the Northern Plains. Almost all of them took part in at least one Plains Talk conversation. They recognized the importance of building a consistent way to describe our vision and the opportunities that we see for improving our communities.

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*Health and happiness  
is a human right.*

On three occasions we gathered for responsive discourse, values testing, and consensus building around the basic points that would frame the statement. It was a significant commitment on the part of our partners, for which we are deeply appreciative. To the conversation, we brought the messages we were receiving loud and clear during the Plains Talk process. We offer this statement as a succinct reflection of the collective voices thus far engaged in this innovative regional dialogue.

## **The Plains Talk Value Statement**

Rural life has value to the region and the nation. We are creating a region where all people have the opportunity to thrive in the community they choose, where diversity is cherished, the environment is respected, and where community pride leads to remaining in the region for generations to come. We recognize the importance of regional interconnections, and we value personal, community, and organizational relationships that are built upon integrity. We seek to nurture a continuing sense of pride, hope, and belief that both community and regional potential is being achieved.

### **COMMUNITY**

We understand that relationships based on honesty and integrity will raise the quality of life and we recognize that we are all interconnected.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Each community member and every community has an individual and collective responsibility to the region.

### **RESPECT**

We embrace the diverse interest, strengths, and cultures that result when individuals' rights to choice are respected.

### **CAPACITY**

We believe that the region has the inherent vision, leadership, and resources to maintain sustainable rural communities.

### **HOPE**

We see the power of hope in the positive possibilities for the future.

## Moving Forward

A process of this nature undoubtedly has implications for future work. It has already led us to rethink how we conduct our business, and look for ways to incorporate important lessons into our existing programming.

Beyond that, however, we see a larger opportunity. If the vision that we have surmised from our conversations to date has merit, if our partners are willing, and new allies are open to the possibilities, if the resources can be leveraged to continue this discussion and expand its scope, then there may be the beginnings of a movement for positive change in the Northern Plains. This movement will embrace our common interests, engage the challenges we face, and establish creative ways for us to realize our collective hopes for the region.

**Opportunities for Immediate Action.** During our initial engagement with representatives from the plains states, there were several action steps that were repeatedly identified as high priorities to initiate. We will commit the resources to investigating these opportunities and mobilizing allies to make them reality. Such opportunities will reinforce the values that this process has articulated and provide new ways for other individuals and organizations to join in this effort.

**Continuing the Dialogue.** The 2006 Plains Talks were a very strong start for this much needed dialogue. We recognize that this is a vibrant, changing region, and are committed to continuing an active conversation with a broad range of the region's actors as we move forward. However, there are important questions that remain to be answered: how do we grow this conversation so that it has sufficient momentum to influence public policy? What are the arenas in which we must work to achieve the change that we want to see in communities? Will our strategy build on concerted efforts at the state level or target collective action at the federal level? We will need your help to resolve these questions. During 2007, we will reveal new mechanisms for individuals, organizations, and institutions to guide and shape this budding conversation, greatly increasing its potential to alter the future of the Northern Plains in positive—and dramatic—ways.

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*Growth does not have to  
be at the expense of the  
environment.*







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