

Custer brings community together to set and achieve goals

When the community of Custer began working with South Dakota Rural Enterprise seven years ago, bringing the **LeadershipPlenty South Dakota** program to town, they began a partnership that is still achieving goals today.

The leadership training program provided the stimulus for a first community assessment, which resulted in the achievement of short-term goals. That process created awareness among community members that a new vision was needed to take Custer to the next level. That's when South Dakota Rural Enterprise once again became a partner with Custer, through **Creating Value-Added Communities**, or **CVAC**.

Spearheaded by the Custer Chamber of Commerce, a coalition of Custer County, the City of Custer and the Chamber brought together participants from those groups along with community members, including three high school students. Kristi Wagner, South Dakota Rural Enterprise program developer, and Dan Oedekoven of the South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension facilitated the process.

"We wanted this community assessment to really pull together all parts of Custer," said David Ressler, executive director of the Custer Chamber of Commerce. "By including voices from all over our community, we were able to focus not just on one set of goals, but on those things that could make Custer the community we all want it to be."

Initially four initiatives were identified: business and economic development, community health and wellness, educational opportunities and maintenance and development of community resources (including human, natural and historical resources). At that point, a Town Hall Meeting took place and the greater Custer community was brought into the conversation on how to make those initiatives community goals.

Town Hall Meetings provided an opportunity for residents to sign up for specific initiatives and begin working. "People were enthusiastic from the very beginning," Wagner said. "The citizens of Custer drove the process."

One year after the first Town Hall Meeting, Custer hosted a community celebration to talk about progress. And real progress has been made. Not only are community members working on identified goals, but one of the major long-term goals has already been accomplished. The Custer Area Economic Development Corporation, a non-profit organization to drive economic growth in Custer, was formed. This group works with the Chamber's Economic Development Committee to raise funds to achieve the community's economic goals.

"This organization is a vital step for the future of Custer," said Patti Hauschildt, recording secretary and board member of the Custer Area Economic Development Corporation. "Everyone—from the business community to the school district to the Forest Service—came together in their desire to make Custer better and brighter, to keep this community a shining star in the Black Hills."



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“The great strength of Custer is the people,” Wagner said. “The citizens of Custer want to be progressive and get things done themselves, not wait for someone else to do it for them. They listen—and then they act.”