

STUDY CIRCLES

Boulder Montana's community-wide dialog process to plan a future without Montana Developmental Center

May 2016

Making Boulder's Future Bright

The 2015 Montana legislature passed Bill 411 to close the Montana Developmental Center in Boulder. MDC has been the largest employer and a central part of Boulder's heritage and culture for over 120 years. Community leaders initiated a community-wide study circle process to help citizens come together to discuss this change and find ways to "Make Boulder's Future Bright."

Boulder Citizens Taking Charge of their Future

Six separate study circles were formed during this process and well over fifty Boulder citizens participated. Each participant committed to four two-hour study circle meetings. Most participants attended the kick-off event to learn more about the process. Over 100 people attended the Action Forum where groups shared the highlights of the study circle discussions. The Action Forum attracted all area legislators and representatives.

What is a Study Circle?

A study circle is a group of 8-12 people, led by two trained volunteer facilitators who meet 4-6 times to discuss an issue. Typically, many groups happen at once and all groups follow the same discussion outline for each of their meetings.

"I was most impressed with the positive attitudes of everyone involved. People seemed to be looking forward to an opportunity to redefine ourselves. It was a really good feeling."

- Mayor Gary Craft



Over 100 people attended the Action Forum to hear about study circle discussions.

Boulder showed up!

- Six study circles
- Average of 8 people per study circle
- 100+ at Action Forum
- 50+ at Kick-off event
- Over 570 total hours dedicated by citizens

A deliberate discussion of the issues

Each of the four study circle sessions focused on a separate part of the issue facing Boulder.

Session 1: Getting to know one another. What is my connection to Boulder.

Session 2: How will MDC closing impact Boulder?

Session 3: How can we build a stronger, more vibrant Boulder?

Session 4: Making a difference: How can we move from talk to action?

For a copy of the discussion guide, contact the Madison Jefferson Extension office at 406-287-3282.

Common themes of caring and cooperation

Common themes arose in each of the six study circles. Facilitators and scribes recorded thoughts of each group discussion and group spokespeople shared the main themes of each discussion at the Action Forum. What follows are some of the main themes from the study circle discussions.

Boulder has many assets on which to build

Study Circles use an appreciative inquiry approach where emphasis is made on the positive things that a community has in place. Participants were asked to examine Boulder's assets and each group created an impressively long list. Assets mentioned included basic services available, abundant natural resources, strong sense of caring, numerous community groups, community events, excellent location, peaceful, quiet and ample recreational opportunities. A full list can be found in the full report.

Vision: What are our hopes for the future

Boulder residents are very hopeful of the future. They want good jobs with good wages from manufacturing, mining, ranching or tourism but prefer to maintain the small town character of Boulder. They would like to make Boulder a destination location with more small businesses, a strong arts influence and excellent internet capabilities. Keeping something functioning at the MDC campus is important. They do not want sprawl or big business.

Boulder at its best

Residents love Boulder for its distinctive character. These themes included high levels of trust, caring for others, healthy, good location, abundant recreational opportunities, safe, accessible, diverse, friendly, inclusive, peaceful, friendly and quiet.

How will Boulder Change

People have many views about what will happen when MDC closes but with so little factual information, people had difficulty feeling certain about what changes may come. In general, people agreed that there would be fewer jobs, less money around town, lower revenues for businesses and some people will leave town. There were some that felt strongly that Boulder will be ok. True to Boulder's caring nature, there was concern about the future for MDC clients and the quality of care they will receive.

Ideas for MDC Campus reuse

Study circle participants were asked their ideas for reutilizing the MDC campus. Boulder's suggestions for the space included ideas that would continue Boulder's legacy of caring for others. Specific suggestions were as follows:

- Veteran's Retirement home
- Educational facility
- A center for artists
- Retain MDC as it is now
- Mental health center
- Vocational training center
- Senior center
- A place for perpetrators of lesser crimes
- An outdoor science school
- A research campus

Regardless of what happens to the campus, Boulder residents want to have a say in the decision.



Sticky dot voting at the Action Forum identified highest priority ideas for Boulder.

Priority Action Ideas

Many, many ideas for action were generated during the study circle discussions and each group shared their top ideas at the Action Forum. Once the ideas were shared, Action Forum attendees voted using sticky dots on the action items they thought should be the highest priority for making Boulder's Future Brighter. What follows are the top action ideas and the number of sticky dot votes each received.

Dots Action Item

- 50 Promote and market Boulder
- 46 Improve and develop the trails system and outdoor recreation*
- 40 Attract businesses to Boulder/promote economic development
- 35 Repurpose MDC facilities
- 29 Visitor center/rest area
- 19 Expand fairgrounds for additional activities
- 15 Increase affordable and other housing
- 14 Promote Boulder's medical facility
- 11 Value-added agriculture
- 6 Seek funding for infrastructure in Boulder from state
- 4 High Speed Internet

*24 votes for trails were specific to non-motorized, six were for motorized and 16 were for both.

Action Groups Formed

Once the sticky dot voting was complete, attendees of the Action Forum discussed the best way to address the top action ideas. Some are best handled by the existing BTAC group (see below) because of its connection to city, county and state government and some would be good for community members to tackle.

Easels were set up around the room specifying the top four community action ideas. Attendees were invited to meet at the easels to discuss how to get started on each action ideas. An easel was set up for BTAC and the chair of that group encouraged attendees to get involved. Other groups met on the spot, exchanged contact information, elected a chair and set their first meeting date. To date, groups have met and are working on taking action.

Boulder's new Action Groups

- Marketing Boulder
- Recreation
- Attracting new business
- Repurposing MDC

Partners

Support from the following organizations made the Boulder Study Circle process possible:

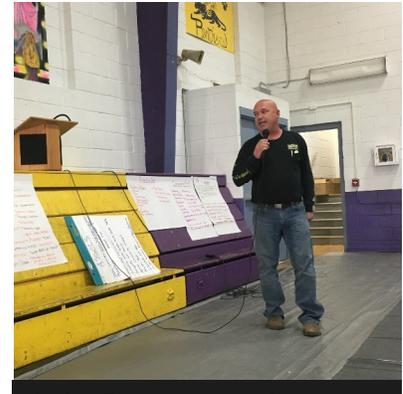
- Jefferson County Commission
- Madison-Jefferson Extension Office
- Local Government Center at Montana State University
- Everyday Democracy

Making Boulder's Future Brighter

BTAC

In an effort to facilitate discussion about how Boulder should address the closure of MDC, community leaders proposed a monthly public meeting process with all key stakeholders at the table. BTAC, which stands for Boulder Transition Advisory Committee, began in September 2015.

Boulder's mayor, members of the Boulder Area Chamber of Commerce, the Jefferson County Commission and other key leaders attend the meetings each month to discuss issues related to the closure of MDC. Madison-Jefferson Extension offers administrative support to the group



Action Forum presentation



Boulder residents attend the kick-off to learn about Study Circles.

including securing the meeting room, sending out the agenda and taking minutes.

Study circles was proposed by the BTAC group based on the good experience Boulder had with study circles during the Horizons process in 2006-2007.

BTAC members worked hard to make the effort a success which included promoting the idea in town, recruiting volunteer facilitators, planning the large group events and participating in study circles.