



**LEADER**  
Rita Anderson

**BUDGET**  
\$1M — \$4,999,999

**GEOGRAPHY**  
South Dakota,  
Native Nations

**YEARS ACTIVE**  
Founded in 2012

INNOVATION STORY **No 4**

# DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



## SMALL TOWN, BIG VISION

The De Smet Community Foundation was founded to prevent what was happening to small towns all over South Dakota—population decrease, lack of housing and diminishing employment opportunities. Working closely with their community, the Foundation created a 20-year plan to grow the population while maintaining the things that made De Smet a great place to live.

**“IT’S A GREAT PLACE TO HANG YOUR HAT AND CALL HOME.”**

— BOB MONTROSS, DE SMET, SD



STORY BY MORGAN MERCER

# INNOVATION

## DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

DE SMET, “THE LITTLE TOWN ON THE PRAIRIE,” AND ITS FOUNDATION HAVE A PROVEN RECORD OF CREATIVELY BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF ITS RESIDENTS

### BREAKTHROUGH



The De Smet Community Foundation encourages the community to celebrate its history and heritage, but always recognizes that to sustain those traditions, they need to build a vision for the future. Change can be daunting, but they've helped the community push beyond the status quo.



### Multimillion-Dollar Magic

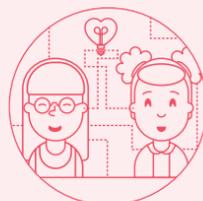
The De Smet Community Foundation gave residents flexibility in how they could contribute—pledged donations spread over time, scheduled annual contributions or traditional lump-sum donations. And they did so with a personal touch, ensuring they recognized the people behind every single contribution, regardless of the dollar amount.



### A Place to Call Home

To address a looming housing crisis in De Smet, the Foundation formed a new committee called the Home Address team to lead a community-driven effort, as opposed to asking neighbors to sign off on a predetermined plan. Neighbors identified the most pressing needs, and the areas where they could lead toward a solution.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



COLLABORATION



SHARED VISION



SHARING OWNERSHIP

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 4

### DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



A few years ago, De Smet didn't look that different from its rural neighbors.

The football field didn't have bleachers. The track was so small and run down the high school team couldn't host meets. There was no event space, soccer team, fitness center or recreation director, and the only community theater in town was a stage at the school gym. For years, De Smet relied on a steady tourism industry thanks to its claim to fame as the hometown of *Little House on the Prairie* writer, Laura Ingalls Wilder. The town knew it couldn't keep moving forward if it was always looking back, so De Smet residents channeled their small-town pride into building a new future.

**“I LOVE THE HISTORY OF OUR TOWN. IT'S MADE IT WHAT IT IS, BUT YOU ALSO HAVE TO LIVE IN THE WORLD TODAY.”**

— NANCY MONTROSS, DE SMET, SD

Nancy Montross grew up in De Smet and recently celebrated her 50th high school class reunion. “The future isn't Laura.”

While other small towns around it started to fade away, De Smet saw the opportunity to become something more. Today, the town of just over 1,000 people has turned into a community with amenities that rival cities ten times its size. There's an expanding industrial park, a renovated hospital and a busy main street. De Smet's crowning jewel? A brand new \$4.3 million event center the community built and paid for without raising local taxes. For miles around, there isn't a building like it.

"So many little towns don't have anything going on, but you drive around [here] and something is going on every place you look. It's just nothing but positive," says Bob Montross, Nancy's husband of 50 years.

The new event center gave the farmer a reason to make regular trips to town outside of daily errands. Along with hundreds of neighbors, Bob and Nancy regularly pack

into the theater at the event center for sold-out concerts and plays. The couple even caught a performance by a former White House pianist.

"It has become a nucleus for the community," says Rita Anderson, who led the project as the chair of the De Smet Community Foundation and director of the De Smet Development Corporation. It changed people's attitudes.

**"IT BROUGHT YOUNG PEOPLE TO DE SMET. IT BROUGHT THE WHOLE COMMUNITY TOGETHER."**

— RITA ANDERSON, DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

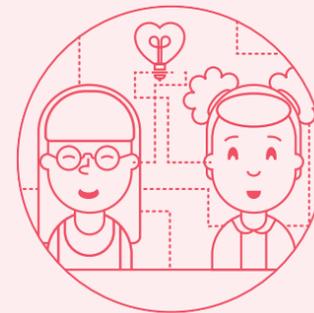


DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION STAFF

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 4

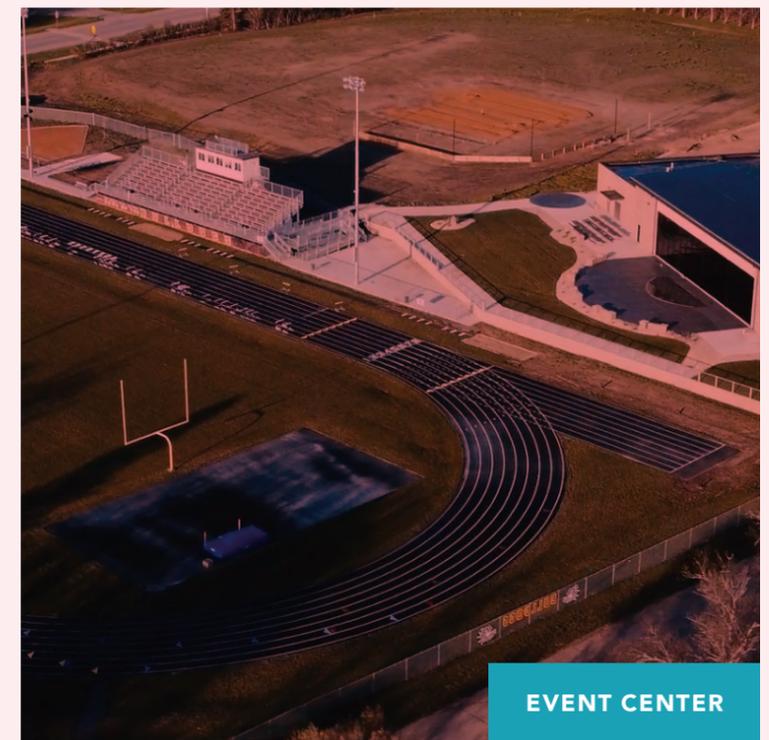
### DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

#### CHARACTERISTIC NO 1



#### COLLABORATION

When representatives from other towns tour De Smet's event center, they often ask Rita, "How did you get everyone to work together?" Her answer: Joint meetings. From the get-go, partners viewed the event center as a community project that required teamwork. Throughout the year, the community foundation hosted two or three meetings that brought the school board, city council and foundation trustees together in one room. The purpose was threefold: First, it let stakeholders ask each other questions directly. This sped up the project's timeline and prevented the foundation from turning into a middleman between the school and the city. Second, group meetings thwarted miscommunication and kept attendees on the same page. Third, everyone felt included in the project and more invested in the result.



EVENT CENTER

On Friday nights, the event center fills up when nearly 80 kids (and a few brave adults) strap on skates and turn the place into a roller rink. Regional businesses and soon-to-be-married couples throughout the state rent out the space for conferences and weddings, bringing new business to De Smet's hotels and restaurants.

But the South Dakota town couldn't have pulled off the project without the De Smet Community Foundation.

**"IT MAKES YOU PROUD TO SAY YOU'RE FROM DE SMET."**

— BOB MONTROSS, DE SMET, SD



### SHARED VISION

De Smet Community Foundation doesn't skimp on details. "We like it memorable. Everything we tried to do is one step up," says Rita, whether that meant serving fine wine and fancy hors d'oeuvres to donors, hosting prime rib dinner fundraisers or hiring a second architect to make sure the blueprint of the event center turned out to be inspiring. Rita and her team are proud of De Smet, and it shows in the details they pay attention to. When it came to fundraising for the event center, the steering committee focused on the giving capacity of each major donor. The team established a specific amount it wanted to ask each person to give. Without that extra consideration, donors might have assumed the committee was only asking them for \$1,000, when in reality the team was hoping for a \$25,000 donation. Each small detail Rita and Nancy poured extra effort into paid off. "When they're proud of what they're doing it rubs off on you," says Bob, Nancy's husband. When the steering committee asked local businesses and residents to donate to the event center, more than 75 percent of the town gave to the project.



WARD'S STORE, DE SMET, SD

## Multimillion-Dollar Magic

In some ways, it all comes down to a brownie. No meeting in De Smet is complete without one. The South Dakota community's small-town hospitality has deep roots in the kitchen. To raise money and strengthen community support for the event center, the foundation hosted sloppy joe suppers, prime rib dinners and hot beef sandwich lunches.

"It's a farming community and that's how people grew up," says Rita, who keeps bowls of nuts, candy and caramel corn on the counters at her house for visitors to graze on when they stop by.



BUILDING COMMUNITY

**"I FEEL LIKE I JUST CAN'T DO ANYTHING UNLESS I FEED THEM."**

— NANCY MONTROSS, DE SMET, SD

When the foundation first started fundraising for the event center, it put together a steering committee of locals. In matching plaid shirts—his red, hers pink—the couple doesn't fit the image of big-city powerhouse fundraisers; however, the duo is responsible for bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars. When it comes to De Smet, they're experts.

"It all boils down to how you approach the people," says Nancy, who reached out to high school alumni, local businesses and neighbors for donations. "You have to play each one separately. With each individual you find their soft spot and you work on that."

After living on a farm just outside of town for decades, the couple knew what values would resonate with different residents. When Bob and Nancy talked to grandparents like themselves, they described the event center as a project that would transform the community into a place their grandkids might want to return to one day. For employers in De Smet, the couple painted the event center as a major attraction that would bring new employees to town.

The steering committee dug into its personal networks to figure out which die-hard football fans in town would want to bankroll the new field, and which residents would rather help finance the theater in the complex.

# WHEN THE DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION LAUNCHED IN 2012, IT REDEFINED THE WAY RESIDENTS COULD GIVE.

For the first time ever, the nonprofit allowed community members to spread out their donations over a period of time. Instead of paying \$10,000 up front, families could pledge to give that same amount of money over three years. The small shift proved pivotal in moving forward major financial investments like the event center. Instead of having to ask residents to donate year after year, the steering committee was able to capitalize on the initial excitement surrounding the project and ask residents for one long-term commitment up front. With the flexibility to budget contributions over multiple years, many donors were able to commit more money toward the future they wanted to see in De Smet. Through pledged donations, the foundation was able to raise the full cost of the project faster, giving the city council the confidence it needed to vote the project through, rather than delaying it until the foundation had all the actual money in hand.

Whenever someone donated, the steering committee made sure to recognize each individual contribution.

“No matter what you gave, you were made to feel part of it,” says Nancy, who wrote 1,500 thank you notes—one to every donor. “It’s important for people to feel ownership in something.” In a year, the Foundation managed to pull off the extraordinary: raising \$4.3 million.

## A Place to Call Home

Just hours before the community housing meeting was set to start, a terrible wind started to blow. Snow swirled across the road and the asphalt slicked over. But not even the first snowstorm of the year could stop nearly 60 people from showing up to the soup supper at the high school gym that November afternoon in 2014.

# DE SMET FACED A HOUSING CRISIS, AND PEOPLE WANTED TO TALK ABOUT IT.

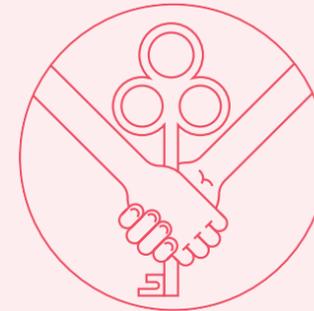
Despite increasing numbers of people commuting to De Smet for work, rental options were slim. There weren’t any three-bedroom units for rent in town, and only a handful of two-bedroom apartments were available. By the end of 2011, the need was hard to ignore.

To tackle the problem, the foundation first tried pulling together a committee of local contractors, realtors and bankers. They

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 4

### DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

## CHARACTERISTIC No 3



### SHARING OWNERSHIP

In November of 2014, the De Smet Community Foundation organized a soup supper community meeting to talk about the local housing crisis. At the start of the meeting, Kris Warne, from the Foundation’s Home Address team, announced that his team hadn’t made any decisions without public input leading up to the meeting. “You could feel the tension leave the room and see it on people’s faces,” he says. “It opened up the whole discussion.” Crossed arms quickly turned into enthusiastic discussion and eager volunteers. At both the foundation and the Development Corporation, keeping secrets from the community is off the table. Instead, each organization often consults with residents before making decisions. “It’s important to ask community members to volunteer or share ideas at meetings,” says Rita. “That way residents feel a stake in the outcome of projects, too.”



agreed to meet every two weeks to work toward a solution, but after almost a year the group had little progress to show. “It seemed like we couldn’t focus on one thing. Everyone had a different idea of what we should do,” says Rita, who disbanded the effort at the end of 2012.

In 2014, the community regrouped with a fresh approach. Thanks to coaching and a grant from Dakota Resources, the Foundation formed a new committee called the Home Address team to rethink its tactics. This time around, the group decided the effort would be community led.

In addition to major stakeholders, the Home Address team invited residents and local employers to its snowy November meeting. Instead of a town-hall-style discussion, Rita and the team broke participants up into smaller groups that rotated through various housing-related topics throughout the evening.

“It was less intimidating,” says Kris Warne, a 29-year-old member of the Home Address team.

**“IT WAS A CASUAL SETTING WHERE SOMEONE WHO WOULDN’T GET UP AND SPEAK IN A WHOLE ROOM OF PEOPLE WAS COMFORTABLE LENDING THEIR OPINION TO A SMALLER GROUP.”**

— KRIS WARNE, DE SMET, SOUTH DAKOTA

Toward the end of the afternoon, the Home Address team asked attendees to write down ideas they thought the group should pursue next—with one catch. “If you put a new project on the board, you had to be 100 percent behind it,” says Kris. “You had to spearhead it. It was your baby.”

That action-centered approach forced attendees to hone in on the ideas they were willing to lead and felt most excited to put their names behind. It also helped prevent arguments and petty disagreements. If residents wanted to share a negative opinion with the group, they had to figure out how to follow through on it in a way that moved the group forward.

**“PEOPLE GOT FIRED UP AT THAT MEETING.”**

— RITA ANDERSON, DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

“People said, ‘This is what we need so I’m going to work on that,’” says Rita, who was moved when people volunteered to join committees at the end of the meeting without being asked.

Residents felt a new sense of agency when the foundation asked them to design the agenda, not just give feedback on a predetermined plan.

By the end of the afternoon, attendees formed five new committees to explore a range of specific topics, like increasing the number of multi-bedroom units in town and developing a centralized online resource for housing. About a year and a half after the snowstorm, De Smet broke ground on several two- and three-bedroom townhomes. When construction wrapped up, the city welcomed four new families home to De Smet. Everywhere she looks, Rita sees opportunities like these to move the town into the future. De Smet won’t be a community that fades quietly into history.

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 4

### DE SMET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



DOWNTOWN DE SMET



RITA ANDERSON (RIGHT)