

VISION WEST NORTH DAKOTA

Plains, Prairie and Problem-solving

Vision West North Dakota is the largest collaborative in the state's history, bringing together 19 counties, three Native nations, state and federal agencies and many communities that span hundreds of miles. Together, they're developing sustainable, community-based solutions to regional issues and proving that strong partnerships beat going it alone.

“People have to feel comfortable bringing forth their vision.”

Gontran “Buster” Langowski

Vision West North Dakota



INNOVATION

VISION WEST NORTH DAKOTA

Vision West ND brings together an unprecedented group of stakeholders to learn, listen, plan and act jointly to address pressing needs and opportunities across an entire region.

BREAKTHROUGH

Vision West ND brings the power of collaboration to solving unique problems in individual communities. From child care to transportation, housing to water quality, the organization's creative approaches have made measurable progress in a region facing the issues that arise from rapid growth and its aftermath.

LEADING BY LEARNING

Vision West ND helps to identify common challenges across the region, but recognizes that the solutions might look different in individual communities. The coalition offers resources and training that allow communities to grow their problem-solving capacity and create their own tailor-made approaches.

THE BOLD, THE BEAUTIFUL

Vision West ND's unincorporated consortium structure allows for creative solutions to surface. Their large semimonthly meetings can get messy, but the group's dedication to balancing inclusiveness and efficiency means that every idea — and every voice — gets heard.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



Overnight, the burgeoning oil economy seemed to turn life on its head in western North Dakota.

Towns doubled in size. Schools overflowed. For the first time, people had to wait in lines to get gas, groceries and tables at restaurants. When traffic hit its peak, more than 1,700 semitrucks barreled down Highway 22 every day, kicking up enough dust to force people inside for days at a time. Stretches of road began to buckle under the weight of the traffic, causing asphalt to cave in and form deep gouges in the road that made the earth look like it had been ripped in two.

The region needed funding to tamp down infrastructure issues — fast. Yet communication among the 19 counties in western North Dakota was nearly nonexistent. Divided communities spoke separately with state legislators about their needs but had little success to show for their efforts. “Everything was done in silos,” says Deb Nelson, the founder of DLN Consulting in Dickinson and administrator of the Vision West ND Consortium. “It was this huge smattering of people throwing their issues against the wall, and nothing ever really stuck.”

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CHARACTERISTIC **No 1**



Vision West ND's focus on community-designed solutions leads to a culture in which it shares, or in many cases gives away, ownership of projects. "The consortium's primary role is to provide the resources and education so communities can help themselves rather than us helping them," says Deb. "Our members don't want [us] to give them the fish; they want [us] to teach them to fish." By letting other organizations take over and run with projects, Vision West ND expands the impact of the consortium's work beyond its network. The approach also leads to more sustainable solutions that last. "If communities own it, they take responsibility for it. They'll work harder to maintain it and keep it going," says Deb. "It's all about community sustainability. They have to take ownership for it to work."

It wasn't until a broad group of partners from the counties banded together to form a consortium known as Vision West North Dakota that legislators took note.

Local governments and community partners started sharing information with one another at Vision West ND meetings and soon discovered the challenges they faced weren't unique but similar to their neighbors'. "They started realizing they might be more powerful working as one than working as 19," says Deb, whose consulting firm acts as the administrator for Vision West ND.

Another key lesson: problem-solving often requires cooperation from people in formal positions of power. Sometimes even the best grassroots efforts at creating change can fall short without the right partners. Vision West ND took that lesson to heart. It partnered with the North Dakota Association of Counties and the Western Dakota Energy Association in an effort to educate legislators about

the conditions in the region and hopefully create the momentum for a shift in funding priorities.

The three organizations worked together to catch the ear of legislators by setting up informational booths in the hallway between the House and Senate doors at the state capitol and putting a note on each legislator's desk that said, "Join us during break for coffee and cookies." Armed with home-baked treats, Vision West ND members grabbed senators and representatives as they walked out of their sessions to tell them about what life was like in the 19 counties of western North Dakota.

The cooperation among the 19 counties was unprecedented — and it worked. Just a few weeks later, the region had the extra financial support it needed from the state. "It wasn't one person or one county; it was everyone," says Deb. This solidified Vision West ND members' commitment to one another, too. They weren't just 19 counties spread over 300 miles anymore, but a cooperative set of minds using a shared voice to do what they couldn't accomplish before.

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Deb Nelson
Vision West North Dakota



DICKINSON, ND

LEADING BY LEARNING

Nearly 300 miles stretches between the northernmost and southernmost counties in western North Dakota.

While shared challenges originally unified the 19 counties, the consortium found that every community within that expanse needed to tailor its solutions to a unique set of economic and social factors that affected each area. For Vision West ND, education became the foundation for that kind of area-specific planning.

“Things are changing so rapidly that you can’t rest on the laurels of what happened yesterday,” says Gontran “Buster” Langowski, the vice president of Vision West ND and chairman of its foundation. “You have to get beyond the rhetoric behind the scenes. You have to tell people the facts so they can make a decision based on good information.”

When Buster first joined Vision West ND, western North Dakota faced a child care crisis. The oil economy had brought 12,000 new jobs to the western half of the state, but the growth of day cares hadn’t matched that pace. Parents wanted to work, but without enough child care facilities they had few options: leave their kids at home while they went to work,

rely on other parents who volunteered to watch kids on rotation or stay at home and let jobs go unfilled.

To help counties figure out how to increase the number of child care facilities in the region, Vision West ND started hosting presentations and informational sessions on the topic — at least 20 over two years. When the state set aside extra money to build new child care facilities, Vision West ND invited the leaders of those new programs to its bimonthly meeting to explain the requirements to members and outline how communities could get involved. The consortium hosted regionwide child care workshops in its three hub cities and smaller presentations designed to answer specific questions individual communities had about licensing or local regulations in their area.

Once Vision West ND connected communities to the information they needed, North Dakota residents took it and ran. In Hazen, eight organizations and businesses banded together to open a cooperative day care. In Dickinson, a new day care opened up in partnership with the college.

CHARACTERISTIC No 2



By 2011, the emergency medical services (EMS) system in western North Dakota had reached a crisis state. Emergency calls had spiked, and volunteer teams couldn’t keep up. Ambulances took up to an hour or more to respond to 911 calls. The EMS field needed solid data to redesign its system to fit the new landscape, but communities didn’t know where to start. “People had become paralyzed with the growth we were having,” says Daryl Dukart, a Dunn County commissioner and the former board chairman of Vision West ND. To guide the sector, Vision West ND stepped up in partnership with the Western Dakota Energy Association to conduct a feasibility study. The goal? To unearth where the biggest service gaps in the state were and determine how much it would cost to fill them. After the organizations completed the study, the region had the data it needed to figure out how to overhaul its approach to EMS. Today, more than 65 percent of EMS positions are paid instead of volunteer, and the former biggest service gaps no longer exist.



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Deb Nelson

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In Watford City, a nonprofit day care opened; in Killdeer, a public-private model. In all, six new child care facilities opened up within three years. Each model looks slightly different from the next, and that’s what makes each project sustainable.

“Communities have to own their own problems and solutions. The consortium can help them figure out what they might be able to do, but they have to own it themselves,” says Deb. “Vision West ND can’t do a cookie-cutter plan.”

While the consortium’s focus on education initially allowed members to react to challenging situations, it now allows communities to get ahead and gear up for what’s to come. In 2017 and 2018, the consortium hosted seminars and presentations on medical marijuana, natural gas and unmanned air systems,

or drones. Buster immediately saw potential in the latter of those ideas to make huge waves in North Dakota as an economic driver in the agriculture and energy fields. To spread awareness, Vision West ND first invited the owner of SkySkopes, an aerospace company in Grand Forks that specializes in drones, to speak at its meeting in December 2017. Since then, three other North Dakota communities have scheduled him to speak in their towns. The consortium’s executive committee even invited the SkySkopes owner back for a second session it offered to the entire region.

“These kinds of things start as a little idea,” says Deb. “It might be something as simple as an educational presentation that spurs our members to action.”

THE BOLD, THE BEAUTIFUL

During a Vision West ND meeting in 2015, a consortium member who belonged a local bicycle club stood up and told the group, “We need to make sure our state highways are safe for our bikes to ride on.”

At first, the idea was met with a few laughs. With North Dakota’s long winters, biking outside wasn’t necessarily the most feasible, nor a very typical, mode of transportation for most residents. With a host of other issues clamoring for attention at the North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT), some Vision West ND members thought the state wouldn’t take the bikeability of its highways seriously. Regardless, the consortium set aside time during its next three meetings to examine the issue.

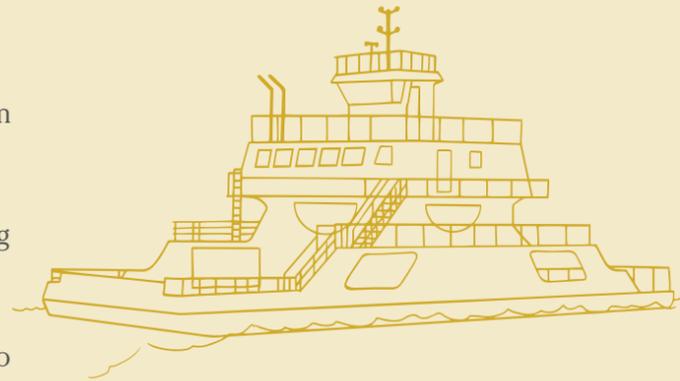
“People have to feel comfortable bringing forth their vision. It shouldn’t necessarily be our role to be critical of it,” says Buster. “We need to listen to folks with an open mind. No idea is a bad idea until you’ve had a chance to study it and understand it.”

After months of discussion, Vision West ND decided to write a letter to the NDDOT advocating for bike-safe highways. Now, three years later, the state department is actively pursuing the project. In 2017, the state even reached out to Buster to see whether his hometown, Hazen, wanted to become one of 14 test communities the state would use to explore how North Dakota could become more walkable and bikeable.

It’s the consortium’s structure that allows innovative and unexpected ideas — such as more bikeable communities — to surface. For years, Vision West ND members have opted against becoming a formal nonprofit. “They aren’t governed by a board of directors that makes all the decisions,” says Deb. “The consortium is a group of people that comes together six times a year, and every member has an equal voice.” With an average of 35 people from different backgrounds, sectors and counties at every meeting, that can sound a bit messy. Yet Vision West ND has found a way to strike a balance between inclusiveness and efficiency when it comes to funneling ideas through the consortium. Ideas often start out at the larger group level.

In meetings, members will bring up topics or issues they'd like Vision West ND to address. When the discussion gets too unruly to hammer down on the details of a specific topic with the full consortium, the idea will cycle to a smaller committee made up of a few passionate members tasked with doing additional research on the subject. That team then passes its findings off to the executive board. With only 11 people, the executive board can take even more time to research a topic, iron out challenges and discuss the pros and cons of an idea before giving recommendations to the wider consortium on how to proceed. That back and forth allows Vision West ND to gain a deeper understanding of new topics while making sure each member has an opportunity to voice his or her opinion on decisions before the consortium votes on whether to move forward with an idea or not.

The opportunity to have a say in the future of the state is what drew Buster to the consortium in the first place. He joined Vision West ND so his community, Mercer County, could have a voice in a grassroots organization whose members love North Dakota and are committed to dreaming up new visions for the state. "I didn't want us to miss out on what was going on, because you never know what might turn into something grand."



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Vision West North Dakota

CHARACTERISTIC **No 3**



Vision West ND meetings are designed to maximize connections and encourage learning between members from various communities. The day starts with 30 minutes of networking. "Because we're such a rural culture, everybody has to connect before they can start working together," says Deb. "Meetings never start on time because there's all this chatting, so the consortium has learned to start with a networking session." The location of consortium meetings constantly rotates, so the morning continues with introductions and a welcome address from the host city. Instead of giving a generic address, Deb directs hosts to share what's new in their county and what they're working on. "It opens up a dialogue and communication," says Deb. "It gives them the opportunity to fluff their feathers and feel good, and that makes everyone else feel good. It sets the meeting off in a good place." After that, there's an open discussion period and several one-hour presentations. Speakers get 35 minutes to share, with the remaining 25 minutes allocated for questions and discussion.



CONSORTIUM MEETING



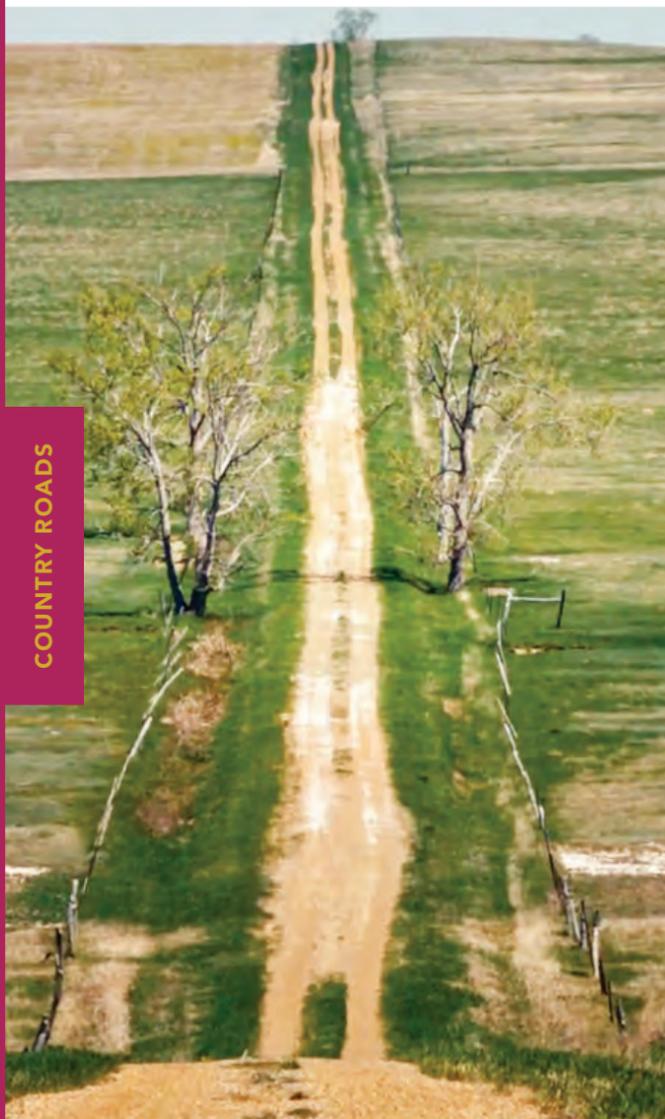
HEREFORD CATTLE



NORTH DAKOTA LANDSCAPE



VISION WEST ND TEAM



COUNTRY ROADS



CONSORTIUM MEETING



CONSORTIUM MEMBERS



BUILDING A HOME



HOUSING DEVELOPMENT



CONSORTIUM MEMBERS