

PLANNING IN THE WEST: BEST PRACTICES

Rocky Boy's Reservation Plan Works to Conserve as Much Land as Possible

By Contributing Writer, 9-16-06

Editor's Note: We looked around the West for examples of successful planning processes and found plenty to be proud of. This is part II of New West's multi-part series on the best practices across the region in our ongoing "Planning in the West" package. The project was underwritten by the Orton Family Foundation in conjunction with the PLACEMATTERS06 conference to be held Oct. 19-21 in Denver.



Caption: Sketch courtesy of the MSU School of Architecture.

The demographic story in Eastern Montana, as in much of rural America, is one of rapid population decline – except, that is, on Indian reservations.

The Rocky Boy's reservation, which straddles Chouteau and Hill counties in Montana's northern Hi-Line, is a good example. The home of the Chippewa-Cree Tribe forecasts that its current population of 3,000 will hit 15,000 by 2050. That reality has prompted something that's surprisingly rare on reservations: a serious planning process that was driven not by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but by the tribe itself.

The process began in 2005, when the tribe, working with the California-based Walking Shield American Indian Society, began receiving surplus buildings from Malmstrom Air Force base. Eventually more than 100 arrived, but tribal elders began worrying about home placement.

The Rocky Boy's is small as reservations go at only 115,000 acres (compared to the Crow or Ft. Peck Reservation, both roughly around two million acres each). Rodger St. Pierre, now retired as assistant housing director for the tribe, said the elders expressed concern about “people being scattered around the country. We wanted to conserve as much land as possible.”

Tribal natural resources director Sonny Belcourt added: “The tribe did not like what they saw, I tell you what.” The elders contacted the Center for Community Design at Montana State

University's School of Architecture.

Where, the tribe asked the architects, are we going to put the additional 4,000 homes required during the next 40 years?

It quickly became apparent to both the tribe and the architects that home placement was secondary to a master plan. Under the guidance of professor of architecture Ferdinand Johns and fifth-year architecture student Allison Orr, the center and the tribe began a plan to accommodate 50 years of tribal growth.



As growth in the West continues to accelerate, the importance of good planning becomes ever more obvious. With the Orton Family Foundation, New West and Headwaters News have teamed up to produce this special editorial project on planning in the West.

Measure 37: The History, the Future

When Oregon voters approved Measure 37 two years ago, they made a loud statement against heavy-handed planning, and set the stage for both a comprehensive review of the state's land use regime and copy-cat initiatives across the West. In this three-part series, Dan Richardson and Sam Lowry look at the history and future of the measure and its children.

- [Part I: The Legacy of Oregon's Measure 37](#)
- [Part II: Oregon's Hood River Valley: Life After Measure 37](#)

The big challenge was to get buy-in from the community. The Chippewa-Cree, said Johns, “like many native peoples, have been studied and 'planned for' many times, typically with minimal tribal input. The only evidence of the planning process to date are memories of intrusive interviews of a private people by institutions and individuals whom they had little reason to trust. The majority of tribal members have grown accustomed to not being heard and tend to be very reticent in the presence of strangers.”

Johns and his staff tried various approaches to involving the tribe, including leaving tape recorders around the reservation and asking people to tell stories when not in the presence of outsiders. “We didn't record one word,” he said.

Finally, Johns and the students drew up a master plan depicting what he describes as the typical planning mode for western towns: “You stick a bunch of buildings in the middle of a field.” But he also provided four overlays, a photomontage, that superimposed over the plan, each providing a different scenario.

This gave the tribe the benefit of comparison. “We put all five out there. There was no immediate reaction. We didn't say don't do that one or don't do this one, but here are the pros and cons. What's your vision of the future? They felt they had a choice. And yes, I guess you could say we pushed them, but they came to the conclusion on what plan they wanted all on their own.”

- [Part III: The Campaign Against Land Use Planning](#)

Best Practices in Planning

We looked around the West for examples of successful planning processes and found plenty to be proud of. Watch this space for a series of five case studies of people and places that have made things work.

- [Part I: Land-Blending in Breckenridge Creates "Tasteful Goulash"](#)
- [Part II: Albuquerque's New Urbanist Central Avenue: Citizen-Driven Design](#)
- [Part III: Rocky Boy's Plan Conserves as Much Land as Possible](#)
- [Part IV: Boise's Harris Ranch Moves Forward With Structured Collaboration](#)
- [Part V: Boulder Weighs the Price of Open Space](#)

Headwaters News: A Western Perspective

Daniel Kemmis, a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Rocky Mountain West, looks at the politics of growth management policy and University of Colorado-Boulder and Orton fellow William Travis writes about watch-dog groups and bridging the disconnect between concept and reality.

“We were a little surprised,” said St. Pierre said of the presentation, "but we realized that the one thing all of us wanted was to protect as much land as possible. We also needed to save costs, too, with putting in roads and sewer and water. That meant putting houses closer together.”

Johns says the master plan concentrates growth around the central town of the reservation, Rocky Boy's Agency, and its two-year school, Stone Child College. In general, the plan stresses four ideas:

1. Allowing the land itself to speak.
2. Weaving an interdependent tapestry of the natural landscape and manmade development.
3. Treating the land and the culture as commonly shared gift.
4. Encouraging education as the best hope for a better tomorrow.

The resulting 50-year master plan includes zoning ordinances, a first on any American Indian reservation, says Johns. The effort also caught the eye of the American Institute of Architects, who named Johns and Orr as one of eight national winners of its 2006 Institute Honor Award for Regional and Urban Design.

“It’s all about process,” said Johns. “That’s the only thing that counts.”

“It saved our land and gave us a beautiful setting,” said St. Pierre. "It’s a good plan.”

[End of article]

Comment By Jean Koelzer, 10-05-06

Our thanks to Place Matters 06 and New West for incorporating this much researched and beautifully presented project for Rocky Boy reservation. The School of Architecture is very excited and proud of this work by Ferd Johns, Andrea Orr and all students who contributed to this award winning effort.

- [Growth-Management Politics,
by Daniel Kemmis](#)
- [A \\$5 Million Growth Solution,
by William Travis](#)

underwritten by the **Orton Foundation**

Comment By Marco E. Garcia, 3-01-07

Hello, I am the new Environmental Justice Intern at Walking Shield Inc., and I am interested in any follow-up related to the Rocky Boy housing issue.

This article was printed from www.newwest.net at the following URL: http://www.newwest.net/main/article/rocky_boy_planning/

© 2007 NewWest, All Rights Reserved

Use of this site is subject to New West's [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).