



Comprehensive Community Development

CASE STUDY

Building Stronger Communities Through Resident Ownership

NEIGHBORWORKS MONTANA

CCD PRINCIPLES HIGHLIGHTED:



INTENTIONAL
APPROACH



COMMUNITY
DRIVEN



LAYERED
STRATEGIES



GUIDING
VISION & PLAN



STRATEGIC
PARTNERSHIPS



COORDINATED
LEADERSHIP



LAYERED
INVESTMENT

KEY INSIGHTS

- NeighborWorks Montana leverages a resident ownership model to help rural residents prevent eviction and build a stronger sense of community.
- Establishing 21 Resident Owned Communities (ROCs) with 818 homes has led to big gains in financial stability and improved quality of life for ROC members.
- The member incentive and community grants programs have successfully boosted community participation and board member engagement across a wide rural service area.

A New Homeownership Model

In the United States, 2.7 million homeowners live in manufactured home communities, which offer an important source of unsubsidized affordable housing. Yet most mobile home communities are commercially owned, leaving homeowners vulnerable to displacement as communities are sold and subject to lot rent increases that cause financial strain to residents.

Through the Resident Owned-Community (ROC) model, NeighborWorks Montana (NWMT) assists manufactured home residents in taking ownership of their communities, providing stability for homeowners while fostering engaged communities across the state.

The Importance of Resident-Owned Communities

In a resident-owned community, instead of paying lot rent to the park owner, residents form a corporation to purchase their community and establish a cooperatively run resident corporation

that owns the land. Lot rent is paid to the resident corporation, and each household shares land ownership with their neighbors.

As part of the ROC USA Network, NWMT guides residents through the community purchase process by assessing purchase viability, forming the resident corporation and securing financing. NWMT continues to support the residents after the purchase, providing technical assistance and training in governance, financial management, and community engagement to help residents manage their community effectively.

Members of ROCs are not personally liable for the community's loans, providing financial security while ensuring that funds are used for community improvements and maintenance. Residents control their monthly lot rent, ensuring it remains affordable, and they enjoy lifetime security against unfair eviction. This cooperative model has fostered an increased sense of stability and mutual support, creating active, resilient communities.

ROC IMPACT

Since 2010, NWMT has established 21 ROCs with 818 homes in Montana, creating tangible impacts in the lives of the community members. Over half of ROC members report a better quality of life since joining, citing increased financial stability, community cohesion, and peace of mind.

Yet while the ROCs have seen a marked increase in active members, COVID-19 presented significant challenges to community engagement. Member and board meetings transitioned to virtual formats, but many residents faced difficulties with technology and internet access. Many communities experienced a significant drop in participation and community boards were reduced from five active members down to often just two or three.



"We hear all the time, 'I didn't know my neighbors, and now I do.' With that resident leadership and engagement, that community connectivity happens and it's really valued."

—KAIA PETERSON
NWMT Executive Director

Creative strategies were necessary to re-engage residents and re-establish governance structures as the ROC model relies on active members. "The driver for the entire program is having that buy-in and drive to continue to make your community a place where everyone wants to live," said NWMT Cooperative Housing Director Danielle Maiden. "We provide guidance and coach the residents, but it is their community and without their engagement, everything starts to fall apart."

Community engagement decreases fuel a decline in volunteerism, with fewer residents performing essential maintenance tasks such as mowing community areas or picking up trash. This decline necessitates hiring more maintenance vendors, leading to increased costs and potential rent hikes. Additionally, the overall condition and aesthetics of the community begin to degrade, diminishing community pride, morale and connection.

Boosting Engagement: The Member Incentive Program

To mitigate these issues, NWMT implemented a member incentive program to boost engagement. NWMT provided participating ROCs \$500 to encourage participation in member meetings by rewarding participants with entry into a drawing for a free month of lot rent. Residents received a raffle ticket each time they attended a meeting or volunteered in the community. These tickets were collected throughout the year, and winners were drawn at the annual member meeting.

This program proved effective in increasing resident participation in community meetings and volunteer activities. The program also significantly boosted engagement at the board level, creating a notable increase in board member participation. Trish Faust, President at the Green Acres ROC, noted, "The free month of lot rent has always been a great incentive and it has stood the test of time. These to date have been the most effective way to promote community engagement."

Enhancing Community Spaces: The Community Grants Program

To further engage residents, in 2022, NWMT provided \$1500 grants to enhance community pride and connectivity. Twelve communities used grants to improve their communal spaces. Projects included creating barbecue areas, enhancing community centers, developing community gardens, and beautifying entrances with flowers.

At Green Acres, the community hired an artist to paint a mural on their community center building, installed flower boxes and updated the landscaping around the community sign. This project beautified the area and helped re-energize and re-engage the community around maintenance and improvements. Faust noted that the mural was such a success that several neighbors commissioned murals on their personal sheds.

Building on Success: The Future

The impact of community engagement within the ROCs goes far beyond the beautification that murals and flower boxes provide. Building on the ROCs' stability, investing in community engagement helps empower residents personally in ways that build connection, which is essential to creating and maintaining resilient communities.

"We hear all the time, 'I didn't know my neighbors, and now I do,'" said NWMT Executive Director Kaia Peterson. "With resident leadership and engagement, community connectivity happens and is really valued."

Looking ahead, infrastructure has become central to NWMT's efforts. Many of the ROCs previously had investor owners who neglected infrastructure updates, leading to degraded



systems. NWMT has secured over \$12 million in investments across eight projects for infrastructure improvements, such as enhancing water quality and functioning, and is seeking additional funding.

Peterson sums up the importance of NWMT's work in assisting the ROCs and facilitating the community engagement that supports them. "It is about housing, but it's about a lot more than housing. It's about leadership. It's about community connectivity. It's about healthy environments. It's about connection to other organizations and resources and the way those communities are functioning within their broader community."



LEARN MORE

- **Read more** about NeighborWorks Montana and their work with ROCs.
- **Learn about** the national ROC USA® Network and program.
- **View a map** of the 21 Montana Resident Owned Communities.