

THE MONTANA CONSENSUS COUNCIL

CREATING SOLUTIONS TO PUBLIC CONFLICTS

HISTORY

In 1992, a cross-section of Montanans—ranchers, conservationists, legislators, and federal officials—set out to find a better way to make natural resource decisions and to resolve controversial issues.

For decades, policy debates over natural resources, land use, and other public issues in Montana and the West had been marked by acrimony and gridlock. Too often, decisions on endangered species, growth management, or water rights had satisfied only the side with the most clout, leaving fundamental issues unresolved and key interests unmet. Debates recurred or dragged on in costly stalemates. The work of agriculture, industry, and conservationists alike was frequently stalled by weak "interim" management plans or court battles.

The ad hoc group envisioned a "center for excellence" designed to help people on all sides build mutually satisfying public policies. Governor Racicot agreed to host the effort, and, with start-up funding provided by the legislature, he issued an executive order creating the Montana Consensus Council in January 1994.

In the 2003 session, the Montana Legislature authorized the Council in statute as a state agency, attached to the Department of Administration. Today the Council consists of an eight-member board of directors (appointed by the governor and legislature), a small staff, and a handful of consultants. The Council is funded through a mix of fees for services and grants. Its programs build on existing statutory mandates for public participation, including the 1972 Montana constitution, which states that *"The public has the right to expect government agencies to afford such reasonable opportunity for citizen participation in the operation of the agencies prior to the final decision as may be provided by law."* Pursuant to this constitutional mandate, the legislature provided guidelines on public participation in governmental operations in MCA 2-3-101.

MISSION

The Montana Consensus Council promotes fair, effective, and efficient processes for building agreement on natural resources and other public policy issues important to Montanans.

The Council is nonpartisan; it is not an advocate for any particular interest or outcome.

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

The Montana Consensus Council is a resource for the legislative and executive branches of state government, tribal government, public officials, employees, citizens, and communities, to resolve complex public policy issues.

WORKPLACE MEDIATION

To improve the workplace climate, reduce escalation of conflict and pursuit of lawsuits between co-workers, the Council offers workplace mediation to state agencies and non-profit organizations.

Unresolved workplace conflict

- Impacts productivity
- Affects internal and external interactions
- Reduces morale and wellbeing

In a few cases endangers the safety of employees

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND CONSENSUS BUILDING

To help citizens and officials foster meaningful public participation, build agreement, and resolve complex public issues, the Council:

- Assesses specific situations and designs appropriate processes, such as:
- Public participation
- Policy dialogue
- Agreement building
- Dispute resolution
- Conflict Partnership
- Facilitates and mediates such processes as appropriate.
- Supports and promotes the use of other facilitators and mediators.
- Provides Conflict Partnership services through staff and certified Conflict Partnership Catalyst Facilitators

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

To improve people's ability to build agreement and resolve public disputes, the Council:

- Provides information and advice on different approaches to public involvement, consensus building, and dispute resolution.
- Offers presentations, short courses, and other educational programs.
- Prepares case studies, simulations, and other educational materials.
- Provides certification for Conflict Partnership Catalyst

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NATURAL RESOURCES LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

- 2004 -

Solutions, Successes and Opportunities For Tribal, State and Federal Partnerships

- This event was designed by tribal, state and federal representatives to celebrate intergovernmental successes and improve interactions in the future by identifying what contributed to the successes.
- This was the fourth Leadership Institute sponsored by the Montana Consensus Council and funding was provided through a Hewlett Foundation grant. The agenda was approved by The Montana Wyoming Tribal Leaders' Council.
- There were sixty-three participants including tribal leaders and staff from six Montana reservations; legislators; a county commissioner; water district, state and federal resource agency staff; non-profit and private consulting representatives, and journalists.

RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATION

To increase awareness and understanding of the role of collaboration and consensus building in public decision making, the Council:

- Produces practical guides and handbooks.
- Evaluates projects, processes, and programs.
- Publishes in professional journals

TYPES OF PROJECTS

The Montana Consensus Council has facilitated processes on a range of issues, including:

- Federal land management.
- Land-use and growth management.
- Tribal consultation
- Public health and human services.
- Fish and wildlife.
- Water management and policy.
- Environmental quality.
- Workplace mediation

Our systematic approach to public dialogue can be tailored to supplement many types of decision-making processes. We have helped citizens and officials:

- Shape legislation.
- Develop administrative rules.
- Prepare and coordinate public participation plans.
- Develop resource management plans.
- Draft city and county policies.
- Design educational forums.
- Develops strategies to integrate collaborative problem solving into public decision-making.
- Examines alternative approaches to shape effective public policy and build sustainable communities

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Phyllis Denton, U.S. Forest Service (retired)
Anne Hedges, Montana Environmental Information Center
Monica Lindeen, Representative (D)
Leroy Not Afraid, Crow Nation
Jon Sesso, Butte Planning Department
Peggy Trenk, Montana Association of Realtors
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AFFILIATIONS

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