

East Helena, Montana Community Review

Phase 1 Report



The Montana Community Review Program is a collaboration of federal, state, tribal, and local governments, along with the private sector and nonprofits. Montana Community Reviews are made possible with support from Montana Business Assistance Connection, Montana Economic Developers Association, Western Rural Development Center, and the Western Community Assessment Network.

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SPONSORING AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

- Montana Business Assistance Connection
- Montana Economic Development Corporation
- University of Idaho Extension
- Western Rural Development Center

Finally, the Visiting Team thanks the organizations, businesses, and individuals below for their contributions of support, time, and information to this project.

Valley Bank
Galaxy Roasting
Missouri River Brewing Company
Montana Business Assistance Connection
MSU Extension Lewis & Clark County
East Helena Public Schools



HOME TEAM TOPIC ORGANIZERS FOR EAST HELENA COMMUNITY REVIEW: PHASE 1

- All East Helena Residents - all home team
- K-12 Educators - Shaun Murgel
- High school students - Shaun Murgel
- Business owners - Callie Ascheim
- Seniors and retirees - Andrea Eckerson
- Social service organizations and nonprofits - Stephanie Chambers
- East Helena City/County/Municipal Employees - Wes Feist
- Home Team - Visiting Team

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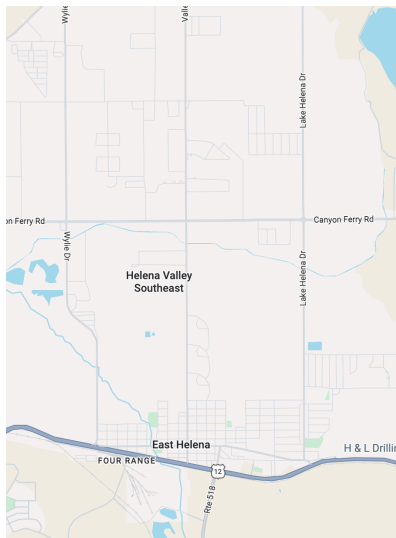
INTRODUCTION

It was a privilege for the East Helena Visiting Team to spend time in your beautiful community. Thank you for your hospitality, your time, and for sharing with the team the vision you have for your community.

Before diving into the report, thanks are due to the support of the Montana Economic Developers Association (MEDA), Montana Business Assistance Connection (MBAC), the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN), Community Solutions Consulting, and the Western Rural Development Center (WRDC). It is a partnership between MEDA, MBAC, WeCAN, and WRDC that makes the Montana Community Review program available across the state.

The Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN) website can be found by visiting www.westerncan.org and serves as a resource to communities, as does the Western Rural Development Center (WRDC), which is partnering to offer WeCAN programs more broadly across Western states and territories. Find more information about WRDC at <https://wrdc.uidaho.edu/>.

Thank you again for sharing your hope and vision for East Helena with the East Helena Community Review Team. Working together, much will be accomplished!



MONTANA PROCESS OVERVIEW

The Montana Community Review Process consists of three phases and begins with an application. The application helps the sponsoring agency, the Montana Economic Development Association (MEDA), better understand the community and assess its readiness for a team visit. If the community falls under a Certified Regional Development Corporation (CRDC), the CRDC must agree to support the Community Review. With this support in place, the MEDA Board authorizes the process and MEDA launches Phase 1.

Phase 1 serves as the discovery phase and includes a community survey, development of a community profile, and a visit from the Visiting Team. Phase 2 focuses on learning and exploration, with deeper analysis of the priorities and challenges identified in Phase 1. Phase 3 emphasizes implementation and evaluation, culminating in recognition and celebration of the community's successes.

EAST HELENA COMMUNITY REVIEW: PREPARATION FOR PHASE 1

Approximately six months prior to the East Helena Community Review, Montana Economic Development Association allocated funding to support a community review. Montana Business Assistance Connection (MBAC) indicated to MEDA that the community of East Helena was interested in an assessment process. The East Helena City Council approved a collaborative effort with MBAC to apply for the MEDA funding. MBAC and MEDA connected with their Community Review partners at the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN) which is housed at University of Idaho Extension and the Western Rural Development Center and contracted Marci Miller of Community Solutions Consulting as the WeCAN Community Facilitator. MBAC, MEDA, WeCAN, and the Visiting Team assisted with a mailed survey and advertising for the Community Review. More than 475 people responded to the survey. In addition, MBAC helped form the Home Team to assist with on-the-ground participation for the people of East Helena and planned the agenda and logistics for the Visiting Team Visit.



PHASE 1: Visiting Team in East Helena

East Helena Community Review Agenda | March 9-11, 2026

Listening Sessions took place throughout the city, including at Galaxy Roasting, East Helena High School, East Helena City Hall, East Helena Library, and Missouri River Brewing Company.

Day 1	March 9th	Location
3:30 - 4:00 pm	Visiting Team Arrives	EH High School
4:00 - 5:00 pm	Driving Tour	
5:15 - 6:15 pm	Home Team Dinner	MRBC
6:30 - 7:45 pm	Home Team LS	MRBC/Valley Bank

Day 2	March 10th	Location
8:30 - 9:45 am	Business Owners LS	Galaxy Coffee
10:00 - 11:15 am	Seniors/Retirees LS	EH Library
11:30 - 12:15 pm	EH High School LS	EHHS (order pizza)
12:30 - 1:00 pm	Visiting Team Lunch	
1:00 - 2:15 pm	City/County/Municipal/Planning LS	City Hall Council Chambers
2:30 - 3:45 pm	Social Service/Nonprofit Orgs LS	MRBC- War Room
4:00 - 5:15 pm	Break	
5:30 - 6:45 pm	All East Helena Residents LS	MRBC - East Wing
7:00 - 8:00 pm	Visiting Team debrief	MRBC- War Room

Day 3	March 11th	Location
7:30 - 8:15 am	HS Teachers Listening Session	East Helena HS Library
8:30 - 9:45 am	All team breakfast - Debrief	Galaxy
10:00 - 12:00 pm	Visiting Team compile info	MRBC opens at 10am
12:15 - 1:15	Visiting Team lunch	MRBC
1:30 - 3:30 pm	Town Hall prep presentation	MRBC
3:30 - 5:00 pm	Break	
5:00 - 5:30 pm	Prep Town Hall room	East Helena City Hall
5:30 - 7:00 pm	Town Hall	East Helena City Hall

Tour of East Helena

To orient the Visiting Team, Shaun Murgel of East Helena High School, Andrea Eckerson of East Helena Library, and Mike Callahan of East Helena Kiwanis conducted a tour of the city and surrounding area of interest, including:



- Subdivisions in the school district, including Fox Hollow and Eastgate II
- Former rodeo grounds
- Prickly Pear Nature Park
- Main Street
- Kennedy Park

As part of the tour for the Visiting Team, the group traveled past the former American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO) site and slag pile, which consists of lead-contaminated soil and remains a central element of the community's

history as a designated Superfund site. The tour also included the proposed new library site located at Kennedy Park, next to the community pool. Participants passed the former rodeo site and heard about plans for the new housing development in that particular area, as well as the relocation of the rodeo to new grounds where it could continue to be a resource and well-loved community event.

East Helena sits in a broad, mountain-rimmed valley in west-central Montana, located between the Elkhorn Mountains to the south and the Big Belt Mountains to the northeast. Prickly Pear Creek meanders through town before joining the Missouri River not far downstream. The valley itself is classic northern Rocky Mountain terrain: wide-open and windswept, with sagebrush flats giving way to ponderosa pine on the lower slopes.

For most of the 20th century, East Helena was defined almost entirely by one thing: the ASARCO lead smelter, which operated from 1888 until 2001 and was both the town's economic backbone and its most complicated legacy. The smelter left behind a Superfund cleanup site. This is one of the more significant environmental remediation efforts in Montana, as lead contamination in the soil became a serious public health concern that took decades and enormous effort to address. East Helena is ready for a new chapter to shape their image and culture as a safe, supportive, close-knit community, which happens to be adjacent to a major city, and the capital of Montana, Helena. The former name of the community, Prickly Pear, was referenced multiple times as a potential element that might help reshape that identity.

The effort of reclaiming land is one of the many efforts of the Montana Environmental Trust Group (METG). It has been nationally recognized for the scale and reclamation of such a large project, including the prestigious Phoenix Award for Brownfields Redevelopment. In 2011, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) hosted a design charette for residents of East Helena to help determine the vision, goals, and priorities of the project. One outcome of that process was the redevelopment of Prickly Pear Creek on the south side of the current slag pile and the establishment of Prickly Pear Park. This project contributes to the community's expanding trail network. However, connectivity remains a challenge, as Highway 12 divides East Helena proper from the ASARCO site and the newly developed park area.



East Helena has a growing business community, including Missouri River Brewing Company, Galaxy Roasters, Creative Stitches, and several other small businesses. East Helena is also the home to the state's largest Town Pump convenience store for travelers and heavy truck traffic traveling Highway 12 east from Helena. There is a desire for additional dining options, aside from the two listed above, a bakery, and a need for a breakfast restaurant (especially on the weekend) were mentioned. Main Street East Helena is a unique challenge for businesses and municipal planners who would like to see updates. The Main Street is the former highway and is still under the purview of the Montana Department of Transportation. The city is constrained in sidewalk projects, street tree planting, garbage cans, and wayfinding signs due to this arrangement.

The tour included driving past a couple of the subdivisions that are part of the East Helena School District, but the subdivisions are part of the county and not included in the city boundaries. Challenges associated with this arrangement were discussed, including water and



sewer concerns, taxation, and residents not knowing if they are city residents or not. Local emergency services work well together and provide support as needed. There are several more subdivisions planned for the East Helena area, including a large development south of Highway 12, near the old rodeo grounds. This project is a large collaborative effort with Habitat for Humanity to provide many different types of housing, including single-family, duplexes, and cottage homes. Some of these homes will be for sale for a cash price, along with the

cornerstone of Habitat for Humanity, the sweat-equity homes for qualified families.

East Helena has a very well-regarded school district. It is growing quickly, but the new high school is meeting the current needs. One of the elementary schools that is newer does need to expand its classroom space, as the pace of growth in East Helena is the fastest in Montana. East Helena is the only school district in the state with a double-decker bus, which transports both sports and academic teams, along with student boosters, in a single bus.

PHASE I EAST HELENA COMMUNITY REVIEW LISTENING SESSIONS

OVERVIEW OF LISTENING SESSIONS:

Phase 1 of the Community Review process is centered on gathering authentic feedback and insights directly from the community. Community listening sessions are open-ended, facilitated, focus group–style discussions conducted with key stakeholder groups representing a diverse cross-section of the community. These stakeholder groups are identified by both the local home team and the visiting team to ensure a broad range of perspectives are included.

The purpose of this process is to ask open-ended questions, listen carefully to the responses, reflect, and record what we hear. This approach allows the review team to accurately communicate community perspectives, concerns, and priorities in the community’s own voice.

During the in-person visit, the team met with approximately 110 residents and conducted eight listening sessions throughout the community. In each session, participants were asked the same three questions:

- **What don’t you want to see happen in East Helena in the next five years?**
- **What do you want to see happen in East Helena in the next five years?**
- **Who, what, and where are the assets that can benefit East Helena?**

The questions and their order are intentionally designed to encourage a wide variety of responses. The process begins by identifying concerns and challenges, allowing participants to share what they feel is not working or what they hope to avoid in the future. This helps ensure that concerns are acknowledged early in the conversation before shifting the discussion toward community assets, opportunities, and vision for the future.

The listening sessions included the following stakeholder groups: East Helena residents, senior citizens and retirees, high school students, educators (EHHS staff), business owners, social service and nonprofit organizations, local city and county government representatives, municipal staff and emergency services, and the local home team. The following sections provide a summary of the responses received from these groups for each of the three primary questions.

SUMMARY OF LISTENING SESSION RESPONSES:

What Don't You Want To See Happen In East Helena In The Next Five Years?

While each stakeholder group provided unique perspectives, several consistent themes emerged across all listening sessions in response to the question of what residents DO NOT want to see. These themes reflect shared concerns about how growth is occurring in East Helena and its potential long-term impacts on the community. The most frequently cited concerns include:

- **Loss of small-town character and community identity**
- **Growth occurring without adequate infrastructure or service planning**
- **Rising costs and financial burden on existing residents**
- **Expansion of undesirable industries and large corporate development**
- **Crime and public safety capacity and service gaps**

LOSS OF SMALL TOWN CHARACTER AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY:

The preservation of East Helena's small-town character, community identity, and sense of pride was one of the most prominent themes across all stakeholder groups. Residents consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining the qualities that define the community, including its close-knit feel, friendly atmosphere, and strong sense of place.

With ongoing population growth, subdivision expansion, and new development, many residents expressed concern that these characteristics are at risk. Specific concerns included a perceived loss of connection among residents, increasing feelings of overcrowding, and the gradual erosion of the community's distinct identity. Several participants noted that continued expansion toward Helena could blur the boundaries between the two communities, potentially resulting in East Helena becoming a bedroom community rather than maintaining its own economic and cultural identity. Overall, the general sentiment from residents is that they know that growth and change is inevitable, but do not want it to come at the expense of community character and that future development not only reflects, but also reinforces East Helena's identity.



GROWTH WITHOUT ADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE SERVICE PLANNING:

Concerns regarding the pace of growth relative to infrastructure and service capacity were consistently raised across all stakeholder groups. Many residents and local officials expressed that development is occurring more rapidly than the community's infrastructure systems can support.

Key concerns included water availability and usage, sewer capacity, road infrastructure, and the timely extension of services to new developments. Participants also highlighted concerns related to zoning, coordinated development, and the need for long-term planning to manage projected growth. Additional priorities included improving safe walking and biking pathways, addressing traffic congestion and related safety risks, preventing overcrowding in schools, and ensuring public works and municipal staff have the capacity and resources needed to keep pace with development. There was also a recurring concern regarding coordination between jurisdictions, including East Helena, Helena, and Lewis and Clark County. Participants noted the importance of strong communication and collaborative planning to ensure that growth is aligned across the broader region.

RISING COSTS AND FINANCIAL BURDENS ON RESIDENTS:

Rising costs associated with growth emerged as a significant concern, particularly regarding the financial burden placed on existing residents. Many participants expressed concern that the costs of infrastructure expansion and associated service delivery would be passed on to residents through increased property taxes, utility rates, and service fees.

Many residents noted they are already feeling the effects of rising costs, particularly through higher housing expenses, property taxes, and utility bills. Many also voiced significant concern for seniors, fixed-income households, and low-income residents who may be disproportionately affected by these increases. Some participants expressed concern that continued development of higher-cost housing could further drive up property values and housing prices, contributing to displacement and making it more difficult for long-time residents to remain in the community. Participants repeatedly emphasized that growth should not come at the expense of affordability for existing residents.

UNDESIRABLE INDUSTRIES AND CORPORATE DEVELOPMENT:

Another concern closely tied to maintaining community identity and character was the type of businesses and industries already operating in East Helena, as well as those likely to expand or locate there over the next five years. Many residents said they did not want to see additional casinos, bars, dispensaries, large corporate retailers, large-scale manufacturing facilities, or duplicative developments such as storage units and car washes. Concerns related to these types of businesses included increased traffic and congestion, potential public safety impacts, and a general lack of alignment with the community's identity and long-term vision.

At the same time, many residents emphasized that they are not opposed to business and industry growth. Rather, they expressed a clear preference for development that supports local entrepreneurship, enhances quality of life, and reflects community values.

CRIME AND PUBLIC SAFETY:

Concerns related to crime and public safety were also consistently noted, particularly in the context of rapid population growth and increased service demands. Residents, along with local officials and public safety personnel, expressed concern about the capacity of law enforcement, fire, and emergency services to meet current and future needs and the need for expanded collaboration.

Key issues included staffing and resource constraints, response times, and overall service coverage within the city. Participants noted that without corresponding investment in public safety infrastructure and personnel, continued growth could place significant strain on existing systems. Many also expressed concern about perceived increases in crime and poverty, and the potential impacts on community safety and overall quality of life. There was consistent emphasis on the need for public safety planning and investment to keep pace with residential and commercial growth to ensure the community remains safe.



East Helena Community Concerns — What Residents Do Not Want WordCloud

Word-art visualization synthesizing common themes identified through East Helena community listening sessions. Word size reflects the relative emphasis and frequency of shared concerns related to growth, infrastructure, and community identity. Community Review Team, 2026. Created with Copilot.

What Do You Want To See Happen In East Helena In The Next Five Years?

As with the stakeholder group responses to the first question, residents shared a wide range of perspectives. Despite the variety of responses, several primary themes consistently emerged across all groups, focusing largely on sustainable growth, business and economic development, health and safety priorities, and efforts to improve overall quality of life and livability within the community. The most common topics included the following:

- **Attainable Housing**
- **Small Business and Employment Opportunities**
- **Senior and Social Services**
- **Community Space/Third Space Development**
- **Collaboration and Community Involvement**
- **Connectivity, Accessibility, and Walkability**

HOUSING (LIVABLE AND AFFORDABLE)

Many residents expressed a desire for housing that is diverse, affordable, and accessible to a range of demographics, including young professionals, seniors, and low-income residents. There was strong emphasis on ensuring that current and future subdivisions and housing developments are thoughtfully planned, well-supported by infrastructure, and designed to promote connectivity throughout the community.

Residents identified several priorities they would like to see addressed in the next five years, including the development of safe pedestrian pathways across highways, pedestrian bridges, and improved connections between neighborhoods, amenities, and trails. Participants also emphasized the importance of including neighborhoods outside city limits in long-term planning efforts and ensuring that infrastructure planning is proactive and coordinated between the city and county governments.

Additional priorities included maintaining high-quality housing while preserving affordability, creating clear guidelines for sidewalk improvements and residential development, and encouraging greater community pride through property upkeep, neighborhood cleanup efforts, and revitalization of mobile home parks. Residents also expressed support for pursuing grant funding and other financial resources to help advance residential development and infrastructure expansion.

SMALL BUSINESS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES:

Residents expressed a strong desire to expand and diversify the local economy while maintaining a strong focus on small and locally owned businesses. Many participants noted the need for more restaurants, including quick-service options for students with limited lunch breaks, family-friendly dining options, and restaurants open on Sundays. There was also interest in attracting additional retail and service businesses such as hardware stores, bakeries, laundromats, and other everyday services that support community livability.



Residents emphasized the importance of revitalizing and clearly branding East Helena’s Main Street, identifying key economic drivers, and creating incentives to attract and retain businesses in targeted industries. They also highlighted the need to support both new and existing businesses in identifying appropriate locations to start, expand, or build. Encouraging mixed-use development that integrates commercial, residential, and retail uses was identified as an important strategy to support long-term economic vitality and community growth.

Workforce development was also identified as major priority across all listening sessions, including expanding local job opportunities across industries, creating employment opportunities for younger demographics/students, and developing career pathways, internships, mentorship programs, and upskilling opportunities to help retain local talent and reduce brain drain. Residents also expressed interest in creating a centralized place where job, internship, and volunteer opportunities to be posted and shared, as well as increasing activities and opportunities for youth outside of school. The overall sentiment expressed by residents was a desire for intentional economic development and planning that strengthens small businesses, creates diverse job opportunities and career pathways, improves livability, and positions East Helena as a place where people want to live, work, visit, and invest.

SENIOR AND SOCIAL SERVICES:

As in many communities with aging populations, residents expressed a desire for stronger support systems for seniors. This was a consistent theme raised across nearly every listening session and generally fell into three primary categories: improved access to services, strategies to promote connection and reduce isolation, and the development of safe walkways and pathways.

Residents identified several priorities they would like to see addressed over the next five years, including the development of a new senior center and increased outreach to connect seniors with community resources. They emphasized the need for safer and more accessible pathways, including ADA-compliant walkways, curb cuts, and routes suitable for individuals with mobility limitations. Additional priorities included expanded programming at existing facilities, as well as more comprehensive services for aging populations, such as long-term care options, affordable housing, and supportive services.

Residents also highlighted the importance of reliable senior transportation systems throughout East Helena and into Helena, efforts to reduce social isolation, improved access to services, and

the creation of community spaces designed specifically for seniors. Ensuring safe and convenient travel throughout the community was identified as a key priority.

RECREATION/COMMUNITY CENTER/TEEN SPACE

Residents expressed a strong desire for expanded community and “third spaces” that foster connection, recreation, and engagement for all age groups. This included multi-use facilities such as a community center, senior center, and youth centers that provide a variety of programs, safe gathering spaces, and accessible opportunities for all members of the community. Many residents also highlighted the need for informal and flexible spaces for younger populations, including amenities like a skate park, ice skating rink, bowling alley, and roller rink.

There was significant interest in expanding or building a new pool that could be used year-round and support swim tournaments. Similar interest was expressed for parks and sports fields, with a focus on making these spaces destinations for recreational events and tournaments. Residents also emphasized expanding trails and parks to make them more fully usable for gathering and recreation. Student stakeholders specifically noted a desire for evening options for studying and meetings. Additionally, residents suggested supporting the addition of more diverse businesses on Main Street and throughout town, including bookstores, coffee shops, and collective workspaces that could double as meeting and working spaces. Outdoor third spaces were highlighted as a priority, with residents emphasizing the importance of beautification efforts such as adding trees, murals, streetlights, and other enhancements to strengthen community character. Overall, residents envision both indoor and outdoor spaces that are welcoming, accessible, and designed to foster social connection, youth engagement, recreation, and cultural enrichment.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Residents expressed strong appreciation for the events, festivals, and community activities currently offered in East Helena, while also emphasizing a desire to expand these opportunities. Many highlighted the need for more activation and programming on Main Street, additional year-round family-friendly events, expanded trail systems, and community food initiatives such as a farmers market or food co-op. Residents also noted interest in incentives to attract more food trucks and the creation of a central food truck court.

In addition, participants emphasized the need for improved and more centralized communication systems to promote events and raise awareness of community happenings beyond social media. There was also strong interest in increasing locally hosted business and industry events, as well as strengthening collaboration with local nonprofits to support shared goals, initiatives, and broader community engagement.

CONNECTIVITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND WALKABILITY

A primary concern that emerged repeatedly, especially as East Helena experiences rapid growth, is the need for improved connectivity, accessibility, and walkability throughout the town, including trails, subdivisions, and key destinations. Residents emphasized the importance of addressing these needs over the next five years, including more paved roads, sidewalk repairs, ADA-accessible sidewalks, and safe multi-modal pathways for pedestrians, cyclists, and hikers. The general sentiment was that transportation planning should align with in-town expansion and focus on connecting community assets, such as trails, Main Street, and surrounding neighborhoods, to promote community cohesion, reduce traffic congestion, and provide additional transportation options to neighboring cities, including Helena and Townsend. Neighborhoods outside city limits were also highlighted as important to include in urban planning, zoning, and annexation efforts to ensure equitable access and prevent the isolation of certain areas.

Residents also stressed the importance of updating roadways and enhancing safety, particularly on high-traffic routes such as Highway 12, Valley Drive, Montana Drive, and areas near East Helena High School. Key concerns included potholes, roads in poor condition, lack of turn lanes, insufficient stoplights, inadequate lighting, and unsafe sidewalks. Many residents called for increased collaboration among the Montana Department of Transportation, city and county government, and local law enforcement to support traffic monitoring, speed management, and overall roadway safety. Ultimately, residents emphasized two primary priorities: ensuring connectivity throughout the town that promotes safe and accessible travel, and proactively addressing roadway maintenance, safety and traffic concerns as East Helena continues to grow rapidly.



East Helena Community Priorities — What Residents Want.

Word-art visualization synthesizing common priorities identified through East Helena community listening sessions. Word size reflects the relative emphasis and frequency of shared priorities related to infrastructure, livability, economic development, and community identity. Community Review Team, 2026. Created with Copilot.

Who, What, and Where Are the Assets That Can Benefit East Helena?

In each listening session, we asked residents to identify the greatest assets in the East Helena community, including people, organizations, places, natural resources, and any other features they see as meaningful benefits to the community. Amongst all of the listening sessions, there were common themes that can be categorized as follows:

- **Community Events**
- **Parks, Recreation, Trails, and Outdoor Spaces**
- **Local Government and Leadership**
- **History, Identity, Culture, and Community Pride**
- **EH School District and Staff**
- **Main Street and the EH Small Business Community**
- **Nonprofit and Civic Organizations**
- **Law Enforcement and Emergency Response**

COMMUNITY EVENTS

When asked about community assets, nearly every stakeholder group expressed a strong appreciation for local events, not just for the events themselves, but for the way they bring people together and foster a sense of unity. Frequently mentioned were the annual East Helena fireworks show, one of the largest Fourth of July displays in the region, along with holiday traditions like the downtown Christmas Stroll and Christmas Convoy, the summer food truck festival, as well as various parades, strolls, and other events held throughout the year.

Many residents also highlighted the East Helena Rodeo and parade as a key asset. Beyond serving as a tourism draw and destination event, it remains a cherished summer tradition for local families and community members. Participants further emphasized their appreciation for local businesses, including Missouri River Brewing Company, Joe Mitchell State Farm, Valley Bank, and Galaxy Coffee Roasting, as well as nonprofits such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Prickly Pear Land Trust, and the Eagles. These organizations, along with other community partners, were recognized for their role in planning, supporting, and sustaining local events, and for their broader contributions to strengthening community connection and vibrancy.

PARKS, RECREATION, TRAILS & OUTDOOR SPACES

Due to East Helena’s location and its abundance of local trails and easy access to recreational amenities, parks, trails, and outdoor spaces were consistently identified as key community assets. Residents also highlighted the organizations that support the maintenance, improvement, and expansion of these resources. Prickly Pear Land Trust and the Montana Environmental Trust Group were both recognized for their impact in advancing recreational asset development. In addition to their development efforts, these organizations were noted as assets in their own right, providing educational opportunities and community activities such as guided nature hikes and volunteer days.

Specific trail assets frequently mentioned included Prickly Pear Park, located on the former ASARCO industrial Superfund site, which offers a variety of trail systems year-round, as well as The Grove, which sits adjacent to the park and expands the overall trail network. Students and educators shared that these trail systems are used not only for recreation, but also for school-related activities, with East Helena High School athletes regularly using them for year-round training. Residents also expressed appreciation for city-owned parks, including Main Street Park and John F. Kennedy Memorial Park. More broadly, residents emphasized that access to outdoor activities such as fishing, hiking, and waterways, including Prickly Pear Creek, is a significant asset for the East Helena community and contributes greatly to residents’ quality of life.



LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND LEADERSHIP

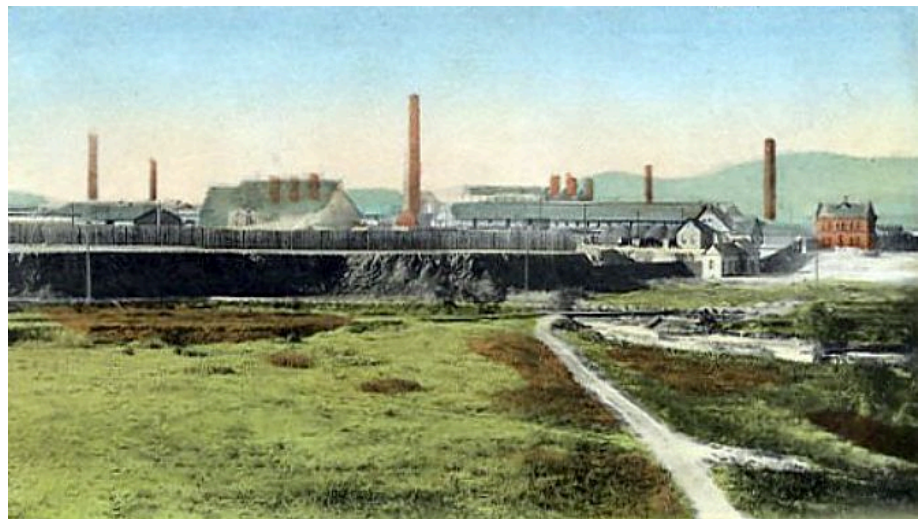


Another commonly identified asset throughout the listening sessions was East Helena’s local government and leadership. Residents frequently shared that the East Helena City Council is strong, motivated, and engaged, and that both City of East Helena and Lewis and Clark County staff are collaborative, responsive, and supportive. Many expressed appreciation for the council’s accessibility and its solution-oriented approach to addressing community needs.

Residents also voiced strong appreciation for local law enforcement, EMS, and fire services, with particular recognition given to the East Helena Volunteer Fire Department. As the primary fire response agency for the City of East Helena, the department consists of 16 volunteers who respond to both fire and medical emergencies, playing a critical role in community safety. Additionally, stakeholders highlighted the collaborative nature of local government as a key strength. Partnerships with agencies and departments in Helena were noted as especially valuable, with the East Helena Police Department working closely with the Helena Police Department, the sheriff's office, and other entities to ensure consistent service and coverage for residents.

HISTORY, IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY PRIDE

East Helena's history, including its industrial past and the completion of the ASARCO Superfund cleanup, continues to shape how residents view their community and its future. Many residents identified this rich history and strong sense of identity as a significant asset, noting the community's ongoing efforts to preserve and share its story.



Pictured above: Former ASARCO Smelter, credit helenahistory.org

The East Helena Historical Society was frequently cited as a key asset, along with the dedicated local volunteers who support historical preservation efforts. Beyond its history, stakeholders emphasized that East Helena's culture and strong community pride are also major assets, reflected throughout the community and there is significant generational buy-in for the success of the community. Some residents noted that one of East Helena's defining strengths is that it "is not Helena," expressing a shared sense of pride in the community's distinct identity. This uniqueness was seen as an opportunity to guide future growth and development in a way that remains authentic and aligned with local values and priorities.

In this same vein, many residents expressed that timing is also a significant asset at this moment. While development and growth are occurring rapidly in East Helena, there is a clear opportunity for the community to be proactive and collaborative in shaping that growth to align with local priorities and community desires. Residents also described the community as highly collaborative and solution-oriented, supported by a strong network of local champions and

nonprofit organizations. They emphasized a strong sense of place, pride in their community, and the value of maintaining East Helena’s small-town feel.

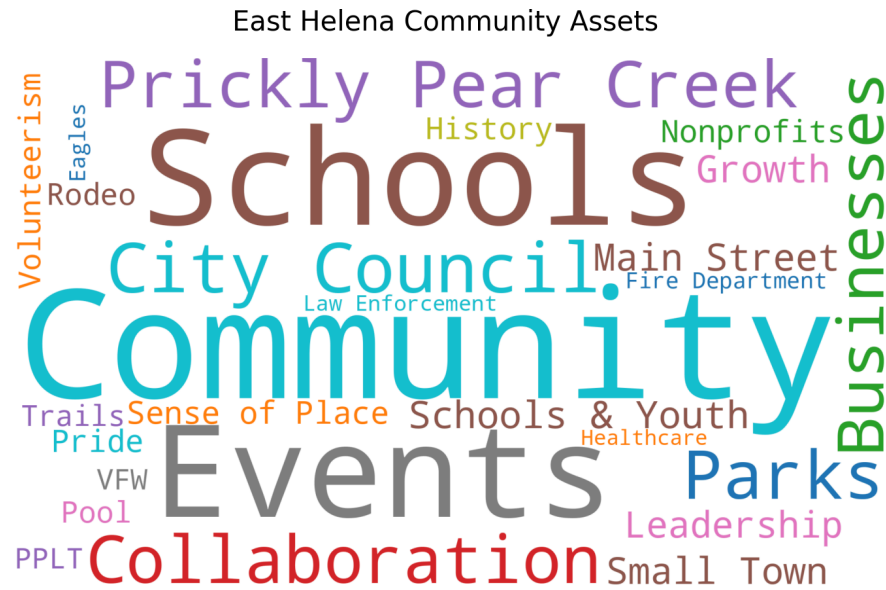
EAST HELENA SCHOOL DISTRICT AND STAFF

The East Helena School District was consistently identified as one of the most significant assets in the community. Residents noted that district staff, including teachers and coaches, are highly engaged, supportive, and strong community partners. The district was also recognized for its collaborative approach and for providing a wide range of opportunities for students, including activities and sports such as shooting sports, baseball, basketball, rodeo club, flag football, career and technical education programs, summer sports camps, Future Farmers of America (FFA), 4H, and high school culinary classes. In addition to student programming, residents highlighted the district’s role in offering adult education opportunities and classes. Many also emphasized that the high school itself, which opened in 2020 after nearly a decade of community planning and effort, is a significant asset and point of pride for East Helena.

MAIN STREET AND THE SMALL BUSINESS COMMUNITY

East Helena’s Main Street and small business community were frequently identified as key assets during the listening sessions. Residents expressed strong appreciation for the businesses and services located along Main Street, including the East Helena Public Library, Galaxy Coffee Roasting, Smith’s Place, and Creative Stitches. Additional businesses throughout the community were also recognized as important assets, such as Heritage Foods Grocery Store, Missouri River Brewing Company, J4 Automotive, local childcare and daycare providers, Valley Bank, and many others.

Residents noted that many of these businesses serve an important role beyond their primary function by acting as “third spaces” or informal community gathering places, and are also highly collaborative and give back to the community in many ways. There was also a strong sense that Main Street is well-positioned for future development and activation, with opportunities to expand amenities, enhance community spaces, and build on existing momentum. Stakeholders emphasized that the community’s collaborative energy and commitment make it well-suited to harness ongoing growth in a way that reflects local priorities. In addition, residents highlighted local media outlets as valuable community assets for sharing information and supporting informed engagement, including the East Helena Monitor, MT 43 News, and Prickly Pear Junction.



East Helena Community Assets Word Cloud.

Visualization based on assets identified through East Helena community listening sessions and synthesized by the Community Review Team, 2026. Created with Copilot.

PHASE I TOWN HALL

The Visiting Team spent time going through the listening session information, pulling out the themes heard throughout the visit and eight listening sessions. The team discussed the themes and placed the information into ten topic areas. The Visiting Team and the City of East Helena hosted an open Town Hall meeting, giving a brief presentation of the process of a community review, the community satisfaction survey results, and the results of the listening sessions. The team asked the 20 community members in attendance to vote on their top three topic areas that they would most like to see move into Phase II. The community selected from the following topic areas:

- Small business & employment: career pathways and retention, Main street development
- Connectivity of places: ADA sidewalks, Main street, trails and neighborhoods, schools
- Recreation and community spaces
- Social services: healthcare, food share, aging services, etc.
- Transportation: public transit, road & safety infrastructure, specialized transportation
- Community history & identity
- Communication: events, methods of communication, city/government two-way intentional communication flow
- Community engagement and volunteerism: collaborative planning

The top three vote getters from this informal polling will move forward with the support of the Visiting Team and professionals in the topic areas who have resources that can support actions that will be developed during Phase II.

EAST HELENA COMMUNITY SATISFACTION SURVEY RESULTS

A “Community Satisfaction Survey” was conducted in East Helena and included all households located in the city boundary, plus several subdivisions that are in the East Helena School District, including Fox Hollow, East Gate II, and La Casa Grande. A community survey is conducted before the Visiting Team visits the community to conduct listening sessions with multiple groups, discuss survey and listening session results, and plan for bringing action teams together to implement projects prioritized by the community. The survey was conducted by the University of Idaho Extension and the HELPS Lab at Montana State University and is included in the appendix of this report.

Survey results serve the community in multiple ways with several purposes. Results can be used as justification for community grant proposals and demonstrate support for new policies or the status quo. Citizen groups and municipalities can also use this data as a guide for planning and identifying future initiatives. In addition, Community Review delivery organizations and partnering Universities use this data to identify common interests and concerns across multiple communities, which in turn helps these organizations develop programs and resources to better assist rural communities like East Helena. To identify commonalities and differences across communities, surveys need to be relatively standardized. Therefore, some questions in a standardized survey may be more or less relevant to particular communities.

Demographics (characteristics of those who responded to the survey)

East Helena respondents are similar to other communities that have completed the survey in that they tend to be female, older, and have lived in the area for more than ten years.

- 52% of respondents are ages 37-56, Avg age 52
- 97% of surveys were returned electronically.
- 60% of respondents are female; 32% male.
- 83% of respondents are white
- Response rate is 18% (2700 deliverable surveys, with 489 surveys completed)

Respondents by income

RESPONSE OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Under \$25,000	10	2.43%
\$25,000-\$49,999	51	12.41%
\$50,000-\$74,999	78	18.98%
\$75,000-\$100,000	101	24.57%
Above \$100,000	171	41.61%
TOTAL	411	

Respondents by length of time in the community

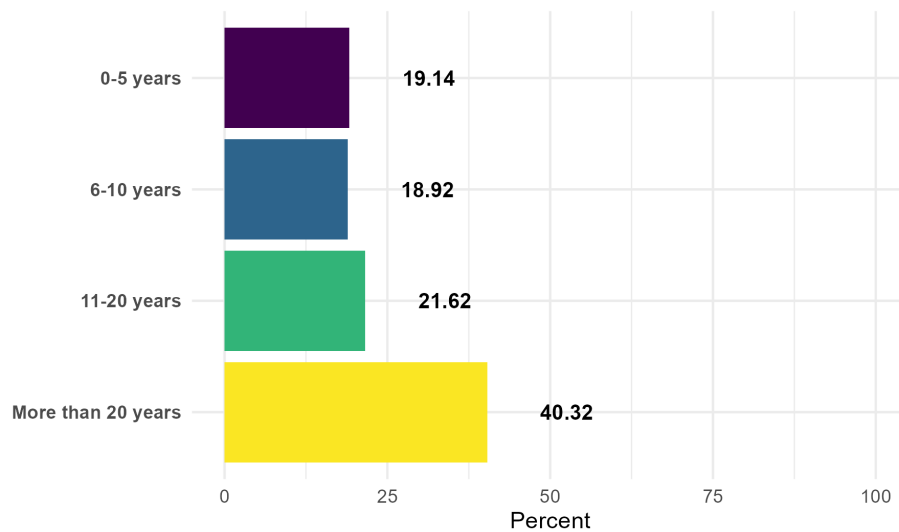


Figure 44: Marginal percentages plot for 'q17' variable

The first survey question is a list of community attributes that were ranked by respondents on a five-point scale – from Very Satisfied to Very Dissatisfied, plus an option to mark “I don’t know.”

As was explained in the introduction, information respondents were provided, this survey has been standardized for rural communities ranging in size up to 10,000 people. It is important to retain the standard questions to allow for results to be compiled and compared across communities over time. This also ensures that outsiders are not presuming what is and isn’t important to the residents of a community or subdivision.

Q1. Listed below are public services and community amenities within East Helena. Thinking about availability, cost, quality, and any other considerations important to you, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the following aspects of your community? Please circle a number from 1 (highly dissatisfied) to 5 (highly satisfied), or “don’t know.” If you believe an item is not applicable to your community, please feel free to skip it. (see next page for results graphic)

East Helena Community Review Report Phase 1

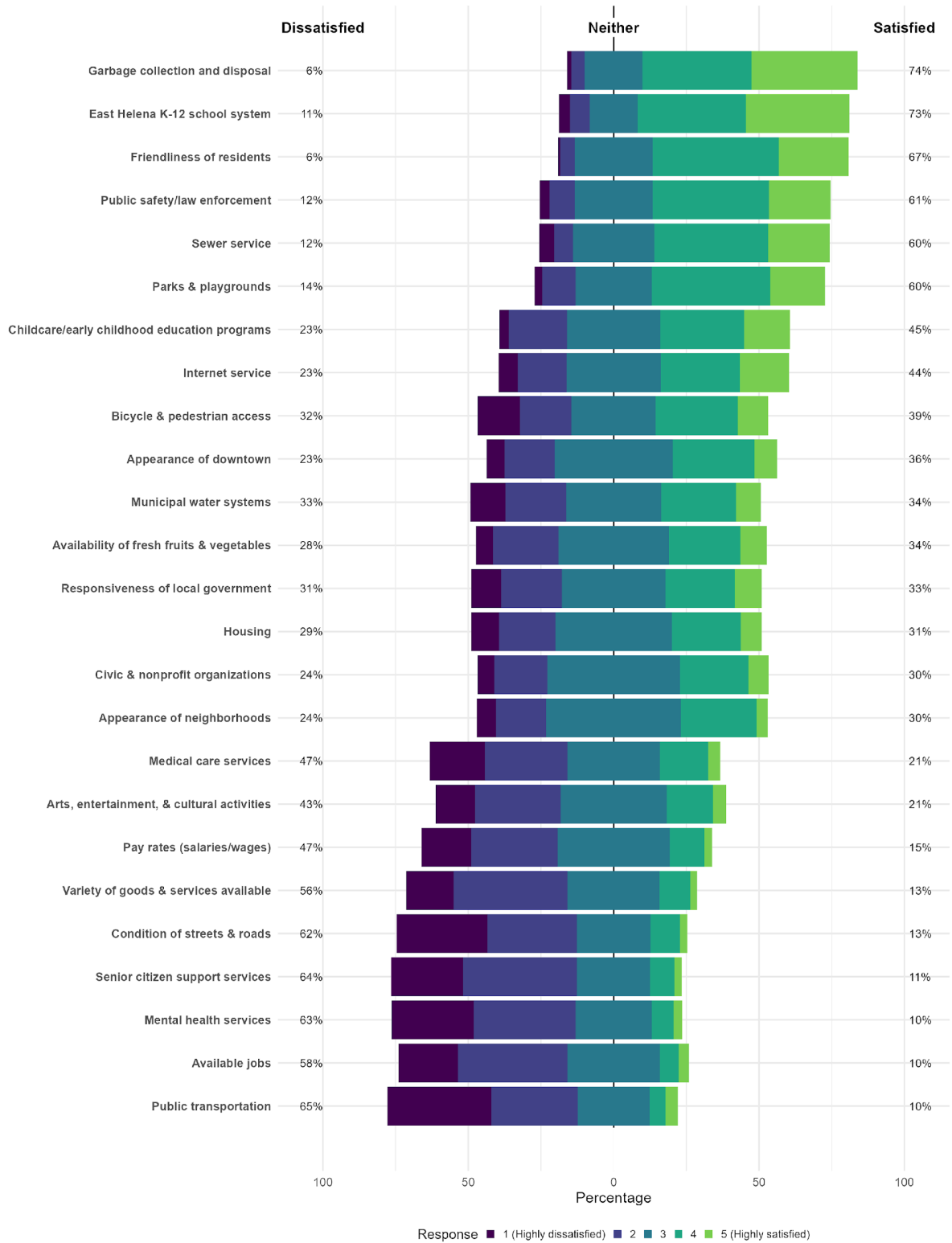


Figure 26: Likert plot for for 'Satisfaction with aspects of community' variables

149 replied to Question 2 – “Would you like to comment or explain why you rated your satisfaction with any of these public services and community amenities in the way you did?”

1. Roads & Infrastructure (Most Mentioned)

60–70% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Roads are terrible,” “potholes everywhere,” “just patching, not fixing”
- Specific problem areas mentioned repeatedly (Montana Ave, Valley Drive, Lewis Street)
- Concerns about:
 - Safety (kids almost getting hit)
 - Vehicle damage
 - Lack of long-term planning

2. Water, Sewer & Utilities

40–50% of responses

Common feedback:

- Water supply concerns (especially with growth)
- “Not enough water for new housing”
- High sewer costs (“highest in the state”)
- Concerns about:
 - Contamination
 - Sustainability
 - Residents paying for growth

3. Lack of Restaurants, Retail & Services

40–50% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Need more restaurants”
- Limited grocery options / expensive food
- Want:
 - Fast food
 - Sit-down dining
 - Hardware store
 - More local businesses

123 replied to Question 3- “Please explain your level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with housing options for people in your community”.

1. Housing Affordability Crisis (Overwhelming #1 Theme)

75–85% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Housing is too expensive”
- “Rent is out of control”
- “Young people can’t afford to live here”
- “Getting priced out of town”

2. Water Supply & Growth Concerns

50–60% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Not enough water for current residents—let alone new housing”
- Wells going dry
- Concerns about:
 - Snowpack decline
 - Water rights mismanagement
 - Overbuilding without resources

3. Opposition to Rapid Growth & Subdivisions

50–60% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Stop building”
- “Too many subdivisions”
- “We don’t want to become Helena/Bozeman”

118 replied to Question 5 and 6 “In general, how effective do you think the residents of your community are at working together to solve challenges?” and “Please briefly explain why you answered the previous question in the way you did.”

RESPONSE OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Very effective	55	12.14%
Somewhat effective	333	73.51%
Not at all effective	65	14.35%
TOTAL	453	

Community Engagement & Collaboration

55–65% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Community shows up when needed”
- “Neighbors help neighbors”
- “People come together in times of crisis”

Communication, Transparency & Awareness

45–55% of responses

Common feedback:

- “We don’t hear about anything”
- “Not enough communication”
- “People don’t know how to get involved”

Leadership, Trust & Community Divide

40–50% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Leadership isn’t listening”
- “Too political”
- “Same people make decisions”

94 responded with comments to question 7- “Have you been involved in a neighborhood or community project in the last 12 months? For example, youth development, community beautification, fundraiser, etc. , and please tell us the type(s) of projects you have been involved in.”

RESPONSE OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Yes	134	29.00%
No	328	71.00%
TOTAL	462	

Strong Volunteerism & Community Involvement

70–80% of responses

Strong Resident Sentiment:

- “Fundraisers”
- “Volunteering”
- “Helping schools and community organizations”

Schools as the Hub of Community Engagement

50–60% of responses

Strong Resident Sentiment:

- “School fundraisers”
- “Youth sports and activities”
- “Helping students and families”

Community Events, Beautification & Local Pride

45–55% of responses

Strong Resident Sentiment:

- “Christmas Stroll”
- “Community clean-up”
- “Parks and trails”

168 commented on question 8- “I would be involved in more community projects if...”

Lack of Awareness & Communication

75–85% of responses

Common feedback:

- “I knew about them.”
- “We ever hear about projects.”
- “I didn’t hear about it after the fact.”

Time, Work & Life Constraints

60–70% of responses

Common feedback:

- “I had the time.”
- “Work schedule allowed it.”
- “I didn’t already have too many responsibilities.”

Need for Better Organization, Access & Inclusivity

45–55% of responses

Common feedback:

- “I knew where to start.”
- “There was a clear way to get involved.”
- “Meetings worked for working people.”

31 Responded to question 9-“Do any of the following factors challenge your ability to support East Helena’s locally owned businesses?”

SELECTED CHOICE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Prices	127	25.97%
Hours of operation	151	30.88%
Parking	52	10.63%
Availability of products, services, or both	285	58.28%
Nothing/no challenges	89	18.20%
Other challenge(s)–please specify:	38	7.77%

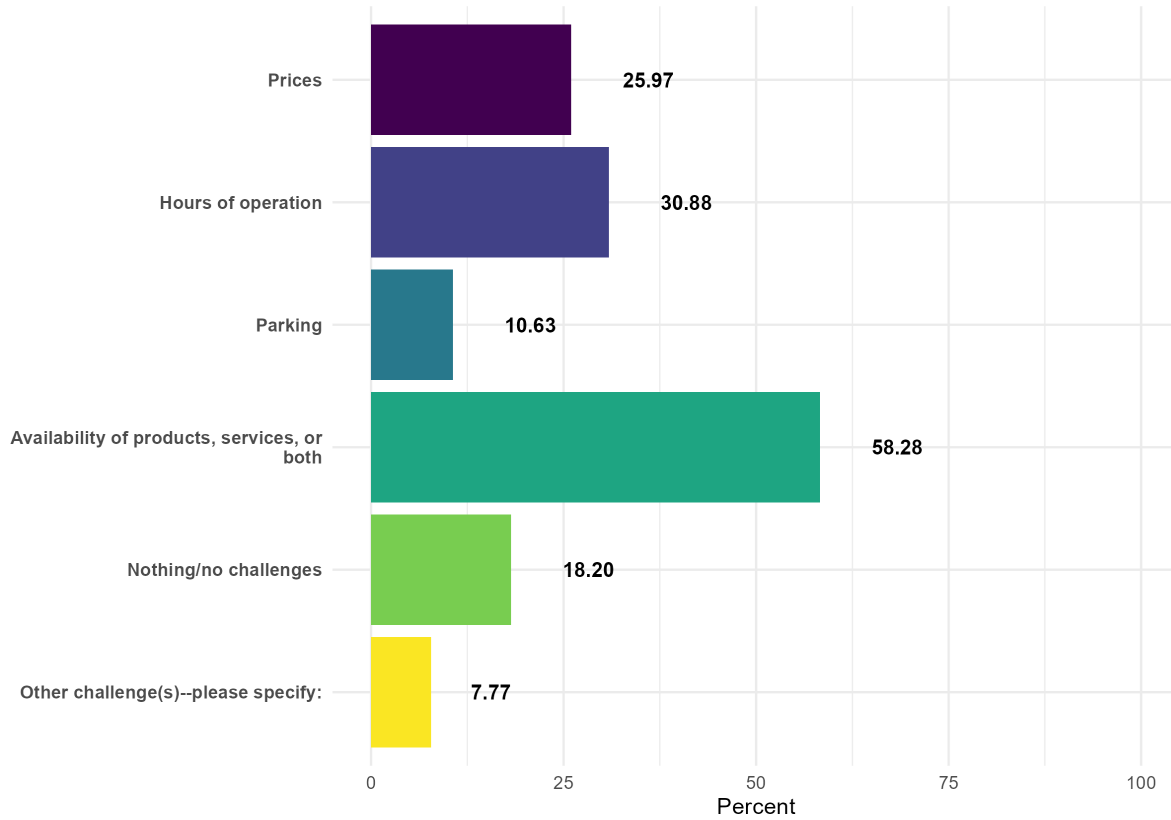


Figure 35: Marginal percentages plot for 'Support local' variable

Lack of Business Variety & Options

75–85% of responses

Common feedback:

- “There are very few businesses.”
- “Need more variety.”
- “What businesses?”

Limited Dining & Entertainment Options

60–70% of responses

Common feedback:

- “Only 2 restaurants”
- “Need more dining options.”
- “Too many bars and casinos”

Leakage to Helena & Limited Local Spending Opportunities

50–60% of responses

Common feedback:

- “We go to Helena for everything.”
- “There’s just not much here to support”

183 responded to question 10-“What businesses/ services would you like to see in East Helena?”

Demand for Restaurants & Food Options

80–90% of responses

Strong Resident Sentiment:

- “More restaurants”
- “Food options”
- “Family dining”

Most Requested:

- Sit-down restaurants (not bars or casinos)
- Breakfast diners/cafés
- Family-friendly dining
- Some fast food (especially for convenience)

Need for Everyday Retail & Essential Services

60–70% of responses

Strong Resident Sentiment:

- “Hardware store”
- “Pharmacy”
- “Better grocery store”

Most Requested Businesses:

- Hardware/auto parts stores
- Pharmacy / medical clinic / urgent care
- Larger or more affordable grocery store
- Laundry mat, car wash, childcare

Family, Youth & Community Activity Spaces

50–60% of responses

Strong Resident Sentiment:

- “Something for kids to do”
- “Places to hang out”
- “Family-friendly activities”

Most Requested:

- Rec center/gym/YMCA-style facility
- Teen center/arcade/safe hangout space
- Movie theater/bowling alley
- Indoor recreation (especially winter activities)

440 responses to question 11-“ To what extent would you support or oppose the city implementing zoning to regulate land use?”

RESPONSE OPTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Strongly oppose	34	7.73%
Oppose	31	7.05%
Neutral	165	37.50%
Support	138	31.36%
Strongly support	72	16.36%
TOTAL	440	

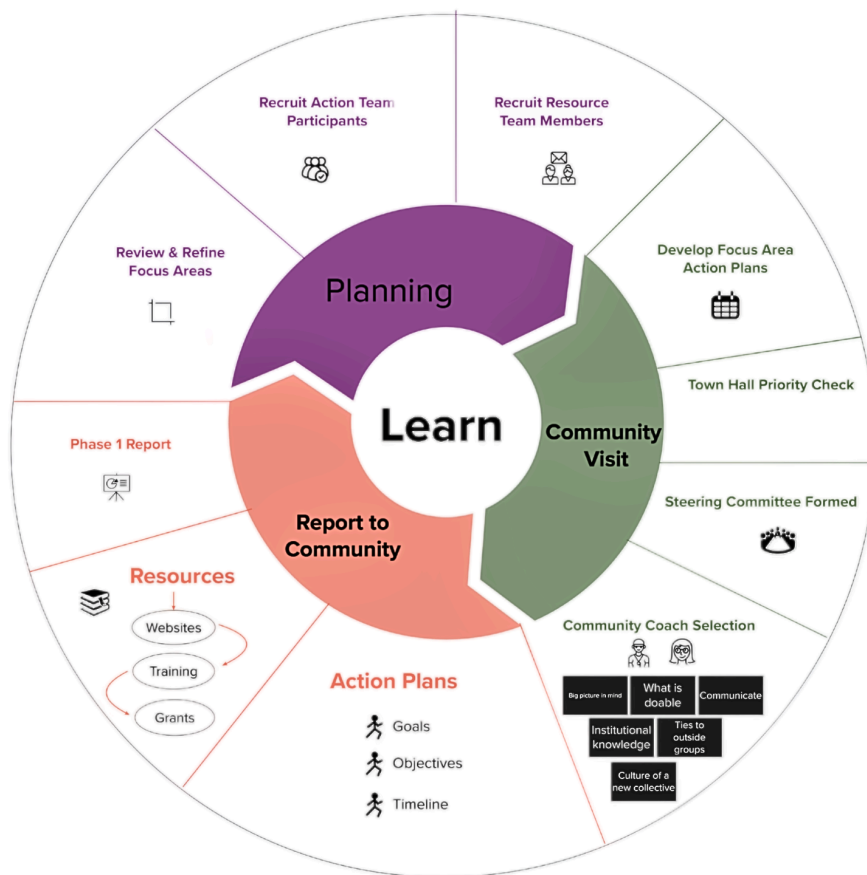
PHASE II: WHAT'S NEXT

Now that Phase I is complete, we are ready to move into Phase II: **Learn**. Here is what you can expect from your community review team:

July 21-22, 2026 - Phase II: Learn

Location To Be Determined

- Working Groups will meet to create action plans and strategies
- Assisted by Phase II East Helena Visiting Team resources
- Formation of Steering Committee
- Identify a community coach



Tentative areas to focus on based on Phase I results:

- Small business & employment: career pathways and retention, Main street development
- Social services: healthcare, food share, aging services, etc.
- Recreation and community spaces

Phase III: Launch

- Community Coach support

East Helena Community Review Report Phase 1

- Mini-grant administered by MBAC
- Follow-up and Ripple Effects Mapping (projected to be done in 2027 -2028)

Phase III begins as soon as the Phase II visit concludes. A report that includes all completed or in process action plans and helpful resources provided by Phase II Visiting Team members that are targeted to the action plans will be produced and provided to the community. Please look for more information from your Home Team in the coming weeks and months. Community members are encouraged to watch for more information from the Home Team in the coming weeks and months. Those who completed a Sign Me Up Card will receive a call or email requesting participation in Phase II. If you would like more information about Phase II, please contact anyone from the listed home team on page 4 of this report.

Appendix A

Community Development Resources

BUSINESS MENTORSHIP

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCE/ CONTACT	CONTACT INFORMATION
Montana Business Assistance Connection (MBAC)	Eric Seidensticker	eseidensticker@mbac.biz
Helena Chamber of Commerce	Callie Aschim	caschim@helenachamber.com
Small Business Development Center (SBDC)	Carlos Joaquin	cjoaquin@mbac.biz
State Chamber of Commerce	Todd O’Hair	Todd@MontanaChamber.com
Department of Agriculture and Livestock	Mike Honeycutt	Livboard@mt.gov
BlackStone Launchpad	Brian Arthur	info@msulaunchpad.org
Montana Cooperative Development Center (MCDC)	Tracy McIntyre	Tracy@mcdc.coop
Accelerate Montana’s Rural Innovation Initiative (AMRII)	Karl Unterschuetz	karl.unterschuetz@mso.umt.edu
Prospera Montana Women’s Business Center	Lindsey Benov	Lbenov@prosperamt.org
Goldman Sachs 10k Small Business Montana Program	Amie Thompson	amie.thompson@gfcmso.edu
Montana Manufacturing Extension Center (MMEC)	Brian Sullivan	brian.sullivan8@montana.edu
Western Montana SCORE Chapter	Jim Vemich	James.vemich@scorevolunteer.org

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Organization	Resource/Contact	Contact Information
Montana Main Street	Micky Zurcher	Micky.Zurcher@mt.gov
Southwest Montana	Sarah Bannon	info@southwestmt.com
Tourism Advisory Council	Alicia Harvey	Alicia.harvey@montana.edu
Montana Ambassadors	Spencer Buck	spencer@montanaambassadors.com
Montana Department of Commerce	Lisa Troyer	LTroyer@mt.gov
Made in Montana Program	Jessica John	jess.john@mt.gov
Food and Ag Development Network	Eric Seidensticker (Helena-area FADC Center)	eseidensticker@mbac.biz
Montana Trade Show Assistance	Angelyn DeYoung	adeyoung@mt.gov
Montana Business Assistance Connection (MBAC)	Eric Seidensticker	eseidensticker@mbac.biz
Helena Chamber of Commerce	Callie Aschim	caschim@helenachamber.com
Visit Helena	Andrea Opitz	AOpitz@Helenamt.com

CITY/COUNTY RESOURCES

Organization	Resource/Contact	Contact Information
League of Cities	Kelly Lynch	Kelly.lynch@mtleague.net
State Chamber of Commerce	Todd O' Hair	Todd@Montanachamber.com
Montana University System	Jane Wolery (MSU Extension)	jane.wolery@montana.edu
Local Government Center (MSU)	Dan Clark	Daniel.clark@montana.edu
Montana Association of Counties	Jason Rittal (MACO)	jrittal@mtcounties.org

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Organization	Resource/Contact	Contact Information
Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC)	Justin Rigby	jrigby@bigskyeda.org
State Workforce Innovation Board (SWIB)	Tammie Hickey	tammie.hickey@mt.gov
Skillbridge	Leid Ibsen	Leif@vetoppsmt.com
Accelerate Montana	Karl Unterschuetz	karl.unterschuetz@mso.umt.edu
Veterans ASCEND Collective	Robyn Grable	Robyn@veteransascend.com

FUNDING/CAPITAL STACK RESOURCES

Organization	Resource/Contact	Contact Information
Montana Department of Commerce (MDOC)	Mackenzie Espeland	Mackenzie.Espeland@mt.gov
Montana Main Street	Micky Zurcher	Micky.Zurcher@mt.gov
Montana Facility Finance Authority	Adam Gill	AdapGill@mt.gov
Montana Board of Investment	Doug Hill	boi.loans@mt.gov
Preserve Montana	Jenny Buddenborg	jenny@preservemontana.org
USDA Rural Development	Tash Wisemiller	Tash.Wisemiller@usda.gov
Montana Business Assistance Connection (MBAC)	Eric Seidensticker	eseidensticker@mbac.biz
Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)	Rosie Goldich	Rose.Goldich@mt.gov
MDOC Loan and Grant Programs	Olivia Kettenring	olivia.kettenring@mt.gov
Montana Historic Preservation Grant	Jordan Conley	jordan.conley@mt.gov
Opportunities in Rural Economies (ORE) Program	Josh Bennett	josh.bennett@mt.gov

Appendix B

East Helena Community Survey

Q1. Listed below are public services and community amenities within East Helena. Thinking about availability, cost, quality, and any other considerations important to you, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the following aspects of your community? Please circle a number from 1 (highly dissatisfied) to 5 (highly satisfied), or “don’t know.” If you believe an item is not applicable to your community, please feel free to skip it.

		Highly dissatisfied			Highly satisfied		Don't know
a.	East Helena K-12 school system	1	2	3	4	5	DK
b.	Childcare/early childhood education programs	1	2	3	4	5	DK
c.	Housing	1	2	3	4	5	DK
d.	Parks & playgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	DK
e.	Bicycle & pedestrian access	1	2	3	4	5	DK
f.	Condition of streets & roads	1	2	3	4	5	DK
g.	Public transportation	1	2	3	4	5	DK
h.	Internet service	1	2	3	4	5	DK
i.	Appearance of downtown	1	2	3	4	5	DK
j.	Appearance of neighborhoods	1	2	3	4	5	DK
k.	Public safety/law enforcement	1	2	3	4	5	DK
l.	Medical care services	1	2	3	4	5	DK
m.	Mental health services	1	2	3	4	5	DK
n.	Senior citizen support services	1	2	3	4	5	DK
o.	Available jobs	1	2	3	4	5	DK
p.	Pay rates (salaries/wages)	1	2	3	4	5	DK
q.	Municipal water systems	1	2	3	4	5	DK
r.	Variety of goods & services available	1	2	3	4	5	DK
s.	Responsiveness of local government	1	2	3	4	5	DK
t.	Civic & nonprofit organizations	1	2	3	4	5	DK
u.	Arts, entertainment, & cultural activities	1	2	3	4	5	DK
v.	Friendliness of residents	1	2	3	4	5	DK

East Helena Community Review Report Phase 1

w	Availability of fresh fruits and vegetables	1	2	3	4	5	DK
x.	Garbage Collection and disposal	1	2	3	4	5	DK
y.	Sewer Service	1	2	3	4	5	DK

Q2. Would you like to comment or explain why you rated your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any of these public services and community amenities in the way you did? If so, please provide your comments/explanation here:

Q3. Please explain your level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with housing options for people in your community:

Q4. Would you like to comment on your level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any other public services or community amenities that are not listed above? If so, please explain here:

Q5. In general, how effective do you think the residents of your community are at working together to solve challenges?

- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not at all effective

Q6. Please briefly explain why you answered the previous question (Q5) in the way you did:

Q7. Have you been involved in a neighborhood or community project in the last 12 months? *For example, youth development, community beautification, fund raiser, etc.*

- Yes → If yes, please tell us the type(s) of projects you have been involved in:
- No

Q8. Please complete this sentence: "I would be involved in more community projects if..."

Q9. Do any of the following factors challenge your ability to support East Helena's locally owned businesses?

Please select all that apply.

- Prices
- Hours of operation
- Parking
- Availability of products, services, or both
- Nothing/no challenges
- Other challenge(s)—please specify: _____

Q10. What type of business(es) would you like to see in East Helena?

Q11. To what extent would you support or oppose the city implementing zoning to regulate land use?

- Strongly support
- Support
- Neutral
- Oppose
- Strongly oppose

Q12. What is your sex?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to answer

East Helena Community Review Report Phase 1

Q13. What is your race?

Please select all that apply.

- African American/Black
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- White

Q14. What is your ethnicity?

- Hispanic
- Non-Hispanic

Q15. In what year were you born?

_____ birth year

Q16. What is your annual household income?

- Under \$25,000
- \$25,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$74,999
- \$75,000-\$99,999
- \$100,000+

Q17. How many years have you lived in East Helena or the immediate area?

- 0-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 21-30 years
- 31+ years

Appendix C

COMMUNITY PROFILE - AARP LIVABILITY INDEX

Link to the full report website [here](#)

East Helena, Montana

Population: 1,855



The overall Livability Index™ score for **East Helena, Montana** is **51**.

This is in the **top half** of **communities** in the U.S.







 **Housing**
Affordability and Access



Indicators: Metrics	2015 Value	Change	2025 Value & Measure	Tertile	2025 Median US City
Zero-step entrances			* 56.1% of units have zero-step entrances		56.1%
Availability of multi-family housing	21.3% of units are multi-family		19.4% of units are multi-family		8.7%
Housing costs	\$845 per month		\$1,165 per month		\$943
Housing cost burden	14.6% of income spent on housing		15.5% of income spent on housing		13.4%
Availability of subsidized housing			37.0 subsidized housing units per 10,000 people		0.0

Key:  Getting Better  No Change  Getting Worse  Imputed Data

Performance:  Top Third of Communities  Middle Third  Bottom Third

Indicators: Policies	Is there a policy here?
State and local laws that make housing accessible for people of all abilities	 No Policy
State and local funds that support the development and preservation of affordable housing	 No Policy
State laws guaranteeing notice and/or first right of purchase to residents of manufactured housing communities prior to sale	 No Policy
State policies and programs that protect homeowners from losing their homes to foreclosure	 No Policy
State laws that facilitate the creation of local accessory dwelling units.	 State Policy
Communities that have taken comprehensive steps to prepare for the aging of the U.S. population	 No Policy

Neighborhood
Proximity and Security



Indicators: Metrics	2015 Value	Change	2025 Value & Measure	Tertile	2025 Median US City
Access to grocery stores and farmers' markets			0.3 stores and markets		0.0
Access to parks			1.1 parks		0.0
Access to libraries	0.0 libraries		0.0 libraries		0.0
Access to jobs by transit			0 jobs		0
Access to jobs by auto			6,934 jobs		5,339
Diversity of destinations	0.23 (Index from 0 to 1) 2,231 jobs and people per sq. mi.		0.33 (Index from 0 to 1) 1,250 jobs and people per sq. mi.		0.42
Activity density					205
Crime rate	248.0 crimes per 10,000 people		301.0 crimes per 10,000 people		195.3
Vacancy rate	4.1% of units are vacant		3.6% of units are vacant		11.1%

Key: Getting Better No Change Getting Worse Imputed Data

Performance: Top Third of Communities Middle Third Bottom Third

Indicators: Policies	Is there a policy here?
State and local programs that support transit-oriented development	No Policy
Communities that have taken comprehensive steps to prepare for the aging of the U.S. population	No Policy



Transportation

Safety and Convenience



Indicators: Metrics	2015 Value	Change	2025 Value & Measure	Tertile	2025 Median US City
Frequency of local transit service			* 0.0 buses and trains per hour	☐☐☐	0.0
ADA-accessible stations and vehicles			* 85.4% of stations and vehicles are accessible	☐☐☐	85.4%
Walkability index			8.09 (Index from 1 to 20)	☐☐☐	6.17
Congestion			* 0.0 hours per person per year	☐☐☐	0.0
Household transportation costs			\$16,738 per year	☐☐☐	\$17,507
Speed limits			38.5 miles per hour	☐☐☐	36.7
Crash rate			8.6 fatal crashes per 100,000 people per year	☐☐☐	11.4

Key: Getting Better No Change Getting Worse Imputed Data

Performance: Top Third of Communities Middle Third Bottom Third

Indicators: Policies	Is there a policy here?
State and local Complete Streets policies	No Policy
State human services transportation coordination councils	No Policy
State policies that remove barriers to volunteer driver programs	No Policy
Communities that have taken comprehensive steps to prepare for the aging of the U.S. population	No Policy

 **Health**

Prevention, Access and Quality



Indicators: Metrics	2015 Value	Change	2025 Value & Measure	Tertile	2025 Median US City
Smoking prevalence			15.6% of adults smoke regularly		16.6%
Obesity prevalence			33.2% of adults are obese		37.1%
Access to exercise opportunities			73.6% of people have access		72.4%
Healthcare professional shortage areas	0.0 (Index from 0 to 25)		0.0 (Index from 0 to 25)		12.0
Preventable hospitalization rate			17.4 preventable hospitalizations per 1,000 patients		27.0
Patient satisfaction	63.0% of patients are satisfied		74.5% of patients are satisfied		69.0%

Key: Getting Better No Change Getting Worse Imputed Data

Performance: Top Third of Communities Middle Third Bottom Third

Indicators: Policies	Is there a policy here?
State and local laws that prohibit smoking in workplaces, restaurants, and bars	State Policy
Communities that have taken comprehensive steps to prepare for the aging of the U.S. population	No Policy

Environment
Clean Air and Water



Indicators: Metrics	2015 Value	Change	2025 Value & Measure	Tertile	2025 Median US City
Drinking water quality			59.30% of people are exposed to violations	☐☐☐	0.45%
Regional air quality			9.7 unhealthy air quality days per year	☐☐☐	4.9
Near-roadway pollution			0.00% of people are exposed to near-roadway pollution	☐☐☐	0.00%
Local industrial pollution			0.04 (RSEI Score)	☐☐☐	0.00

Key: Getting Better No Change Getting Worse Imputed Data

Performance: Top Third of Communities Middle Third Bottom Third

Indicators: Policies	Is there a policy here?
State date-based policies prohibiting disconnection of utility service	State Policy
FEMA-approved local multi-hazard mitigation plans	No Policy
State policies that support energy-efficient buildings, facilities, and appliances	No Policy
Communities that have taken comprehensive steps to prepare for the aging of the U.S. population	No Policy

 **Engagement**

Civic and Social
Involvement



Indicators: Metrics	2015 Value	Change	2025 Value & Measure	Tertile	2025 Median US City
Broadband cost and speed			80.2% of residents have high-speed, competitively priced service		89.5%
Opportunity for civic involvement			52.8 organizations per 10,000 people		34.0
Voting rate			74.1% of people voted		63.0%
Social involvement index			1.16 (Index from 0 to 2.5)		1.01
Cultural, arts, and entertainment institutions			14.1 institutions per 10,000 people		4.7

Key:  Getting Better  No Change  Getting Worse  Imputed Data

Performance:  Top Third of Communities  Middle Third  Bottom Third

Indicators: Policies **Is there a policy here?**

Absence of state policies that prevent or discourage communities from operating public broadband networks	 No Policy
State laws allowing the following: all-mail and/or no-excuse absentee voting; adequate early voting; same-day voter registration; ballot "curing" procedures for absentee voters; automatic voter registration; and promoting voting access for people with disabilities.	 State Policy
Existence of a local human rights commission	 No Policy
Total score of 75 or greater from the Human Rights Campaign Municipal Equality Index	 No Policy
Communities that have taken comprehensive steps to prepare for the aging of the U.S. population	 No Policy

Opportunity

Inclusion and Possibilities



Indicators: Metrics	2015 Value	Change	2025 Value & Measure	Tertile	2025 Median US City
Income inequality	0.39 (Gini Index from 0 to 1)	↓	0.44 (Gini Index from 0 to 1)	■□□	0.45
Jobs per worker			0.81 jobs per worker	□■□	0.73
High school graduation rate			83.0% of students graduating within four years	□□□	89.3%
Age diversity	0.89 (Index from 0 to 1)	↓	0.82 (Index from 0 to 1)	■□□	0.84

Key: ↑ Getting Better = No Change ↓ Getting Worse * Imputed Data

Performance: ■□□ Top Third of Communities □■□ Middle Third □□□ Bottom Third

Indicators: Policies	Is there a policy here?
Local government AAA general obligation bond rating	✗ No Policy
State and local minimum wage is higher than the federal minimum wage and is adjusted for increases in the cost of living	✓ State Policy
State policies that expand upon the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to provide additional leave benefits to workers	✓ State Policy
Communities that have taken comprehensive steps to prepare for the aging of the U.S. population	✗ No Policy

Demographics

[View all Demographic Characteristics](#) ✓

Total Population:

1,855

Race/ethnicity

Black/African-American: 0%
Asian American: 2%
Hispanic/Latino: 8%
White: 92%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 2%
Hawaiian: 0%
Two or more races: 4%
Some other race: 0%

Age

Age 50+: 32%
Age 65+: 13%

Other

% of the population with a disability: 19%
% of the population with income below poverty: 18%

Employment

[View all Employment Characteristics](#) ✓

Average annual hiring rate for new workers:

17.3%

Average annual hiring rate for new workers (by age group)

Ages 25-34:	35-44:	45-54:	55-64:	65+:
19.4%	14.2%	11.5%	9.8%	14.4%

Average monthly earnings

Overall: \$4,563

Ages 25-34:	35-44:	45-54:	55-64:	65+:
\$4,109	\$5,171	\$5,783	\$5,214	\$3,361

Appendix D

Town Hall Presentation Summary



Growing East Helena: Your Thoughts, Your Community

TOWN HALL MEETING, PHASE 1 EAST HELENA COMMUNITY REVIEW MARCH 9-11, 2026

East Helena Community Review TOWN HALL MEETING

What we will be doing this evening:

- ☐ How did we get here?
- ☐ Introductions
- ☐ MEDA Community Review Process
- ☐ Brief Survey Summary
- ☐ Listening Sessions – what we heard
- ☐ Prioritizing your thoughts and ideas – take the poll!
- ☐ Working groups - Sign Me Up
- ☐ Next Steps

Let's go!



How did we get here?

Recognizing previous work and work moving forward.

- 2011 Design Charette
 - Land Use Planning
- Home Team Introductions
- Visiting Team Introductions
- Thank You Sponsors

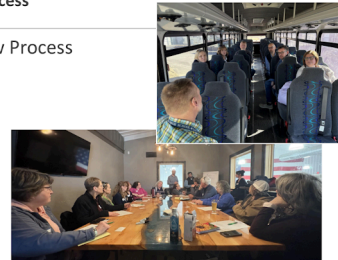


What is a Community Review?

Brief explanation of our process

MEDA Community Review Process

- Phase 1: Listen
- Phase 2: Learn
- Phase 3: Launch



Demographics

52% of respondent ages are 37-56
60% of respondents are female

Surveys Mailed: 2,700

Surveys Completed: 489

Response Rate: 18% with the inclusion of development additions Red Fox Meadows, Eastgate II, La Casa Grande



Community Satisfaction

More Satisfied than Dissatisfied:

1. Garbage collection & disposal
2. East Helena K-12 Schools
3. Friendliness of Residents
4. Public Safety/Law Enforcement
5. Sewer Service
6. Parks & Playgrounds
7. Childcare/early childhood education

More Dissatisfied than Satisfied:

1. Public Transportation
2. Available Jobs
3. Mental Health Services
4. Senior Citizen support services
5. Condition of streets & roads
6. Variety of goods & services available
7. Pay rates (salaries & wages)

"I see some things like the new high school and I'm encouraged by that action. I see other things like the general condition of the roads in the neighborhoods, and I'm disheartened."

"Leadheads come together. It may take a second and a bottle of whiskey, but leadheads find a way."

In general, how effective do you think the residents of your community are at working together to solve challenges?

12.14% Very Effective
73.5% Somewhat Effective
14.35% Not at All Effective



Community Involvement (N=462)

Have you been involved in a neighborhood or community project in the last 12 months? For example, youth development, community beautification, fundraiser, etc.

71% Have NOT been involved

29% HAVE been involved

"They were advertised more to people who do not have kids in the school district and [we could participate only] if planning and participation of the projects fall outside of normal working hours (7:30am-5pm)."

I would be involved in more community projects if...

"I thought it would make a difference."

"I didn't have to work two jobs."

"I was younger."

"I had more time."

"If they were better advertised, not on social media or after the fact."

"If I was asked."



"I love our public parks and trails and use them daily. Thank you for investing in green spaces. It helps with physical and mental health."



"Our City Government is invested in what they do and willing to collaborate."



LISTENING SESSION SUMMARY

Questions were:



1. What **don't** you want to see happen in East Helena over the next 5 years?
2. What **do** you want to see happen in East Helena over the next 5 years?
3. What, who, and where are **assets that benefit East Helena.**

Listening Sessions - We heard from

- Senior citizens/retirees
- High school students
- Educators (EHHS Staff)
- Business owners
- Social services/ nonprofits
- City/county/municipal/EMS
- All East Helena residents
- Home team

Overall: 109 Participants, 58 Sign Me Up Cards

Don't Want Summary

- Casinos, corporate giants, large manufacturing facilities, dispensaries
- Growth without infrastructure or service planning
- Loss of small town character & community identity
- Rising costs burdening residents
- Crime and public safety gaps

Do Want Summary

- Housing (Livable and Affordable):**
- Increase housing options that are affordable and diverse, while ensuring development is efficient, well-supported by infrastructure
- Small Business and Employment Opportunities :**
- Attract sustainable growth and new investment while preserving East Helena's small-town character and distinct identity from Helena
- Senior and Social Services:**
- Improve access to comprehensive health care (Primary, behavioral health, dental)
 - Senior Center/Transportation
- Recreation/Community Center/Teen Center:**
- Coordinate plan to expand recreation and youth services—parks, pools, youth programs, and community events
- Harmony, Collaboration & Community Involvement**
- Improve information flow through social channels, city website, newsletters (Prickly Pear Junction), and local media (EH Monitor).
- Connectivity, Accessibility, and Walkability:**
- Safe and accessible pathways in town (ADA sidewalks, crosswalks, etc.)
 - Safety concerns with roadways, speed limits, traffic lights
 - Connectivity between recreational assets, neighborhoods, and main street

Assets Summary

- Community Events: Festivals & Parades
- Parks, Recreation, Trails, and Outdoor Spaces
- Local Government and Leadership
- History, Identity, Culture, and Community Pride
- EH School District and Staff
- Main Street and Small Business Community
- Nonprofit and Civic Organizations
- Law Enforcement and Emergency Response

THAT WAS A LOT OF LISTENING! Next: Summarizing what was heard and prioritizing

In no particular order, here is a list of main topics and issues the Visiting East Helena Team heard emphasized:

- No uncontrolled growth but interest in thoughtful development and opportunity
- Preserving history and community identity
- Need for local government communication and accessibility
- Keep it local: small business development, additional food and shopping establishments
- Interest in more multi-use space for community/youth/seniors
- Connectivity of neighborhoods and trails with safe pathways
- Protected green spaces and increased maintenance

Focus Areas

- Small business & employment: career pathways and retention, Main street development
- Connectivity of places: ADA sidewalks, Main street, trails and neighborhoods, schools
- Recreation and community spaces
- Social services: healthcare, food share, aging services, etc.
- Transportation: public transit, road & safety infrastructure, specialized transportation
- Community history & identity
- Communication: events, methods of communication, city/government two-way intentional communication flow
- Community engagement and volunteerism: collaborative planning



Now is your chance to vote for the priority focus areas that will move into the next phase.

You will be given 3 sticky dots (vote), place your vote on your top priority areas.

If you are also willing to serve in a working group, please add your name and contact to that flip chart. (Or make sure we have your "Sign me up" card.)

Come back here when you are done voting and see and discuss results and next steps.

East Helena Community Review Report Phase 1

You did it!

Your Phase 1 East Helena Visiting Team will write up a report including:

- East Helena survey results
- Listening Session notes
- Visiting Team summary
- Next steps
- Town Hall meeting results
- Formation of working groups



Next Steps:

- **Summer 2026 Phase 2: Learn**
 - Working Groups will meet to create action plans and strategies
 - Assisted by Phase 2 East Helena Visiting Team resources
 - Formation of Steering Committee
 - Identify a community coach
- **Phase 3: Launch**
 - Community Coach
 - Follow up and Ripple Effects Mapping

Thank YOU!

....along with extra thanks to our East Helena Home Team!

