



# 2019 ENERGIZE! CONFERENCE EVALUATION REPORT

Commissioned by the  
**SDSU Extension**  
Conducted by the  
**Black Hills Knowledge Network**

# 2019 Energize! Conference Evaluation Report

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SDSU Extension



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## Background

From April 30th to May 1st 2019, the SDSU Extension Community Vitality team hosted the second annual ENERGIZE! Exploring Innovating Rural Communities Conference. This year's conference was held in Lemmon, South Dakota. SDSU Extension intended the conference to help individuals, businesses, organizations and communities improve themselves by:

- Encouraging the development of new social networks,
- Helping communities recognize and develop their assets,
- Increasing local decision making, and
- Encouraging diversity of involvement; recognizing that everybody matters.

The conference began with registration and the opportunity for attendees to explore resource provider booths. The opening keynote was followed by a series of sessions. Each conference session was held in a different local business location, rather than in a conference center or hotel. Conference participants were able to attend one of four simultaneous sessions. Each session focused on different topics within the conference's four primary topic areas:

- Money: Funding community projects
- People: Attracting and retaining residents
- Business: Supporting community businesses
- Young Adults: Engaging the next generation.

Sessions on Wednesday concluded with social hosted by the Lemmon Placemakers which consisted of an activity session where attendees learned local arts, crafts, and cooking techniques, followed by dinner and musical entertainment. Sessions resumed the following day.

SDSU Extension hired the Black Hills Knowledge Network (BHKN) to conduct an evaluation of their program activities including this conference. BHKN worked with SDSU Extension staff to modify the conference feedback survey implemented at the 2018 Energize Conference and produce a findings report.

## Methodology

In order to measure conference impact, SDSU Extension staff and BHKN elected to conduct a survey of attendees. This survey was distributed in conference folders as well as electronically. 39 of 111 Energize! Conference attendees completed the survey for a response rate of 35%. The results of this survey are organized as an identified set of strengths and areas for improvement. The Appendix at the end of this report contains additional information and data regarding the survey responses.

## Strengths

The 2019 Energize! Conference received much more positive feedback than negative. BHKCN identified a number of key strengths of the conference and its organizers. They are as follows.

### Expansive Attendee Reach

The 2019 Energize! Conference attracted attendees from diverse geographies and industries.

Attendees from 50 cities in 6 states came to Lemmon for the conference. Attendees traveled, on average, 400 miles round trip to attend the conference. The majority of participants were from South Dakota, though others came from North Dakota, Minnesota, and even as far as Kansas and Michigan. One participant traveled nearly 1,700 miles round trip to attend the conference. Many of the out-of-town attendees elected to stay in Lemmon during the conference and had a sizable economic impact on the area. For more information see the economic impacts section on page 6.

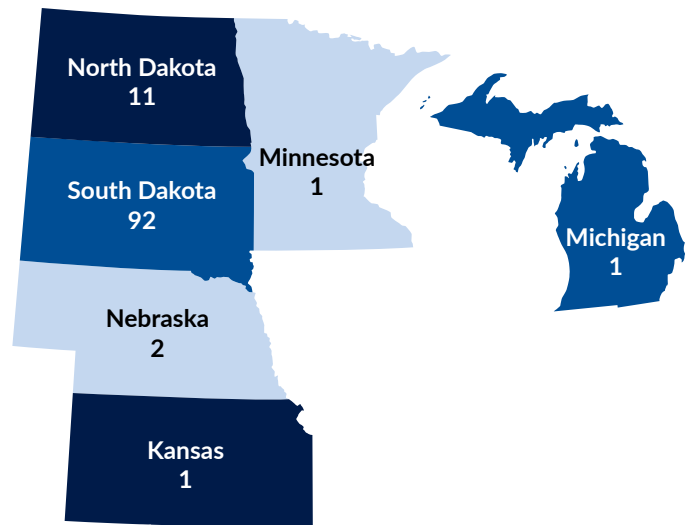


Figure 1: Attendee Locations

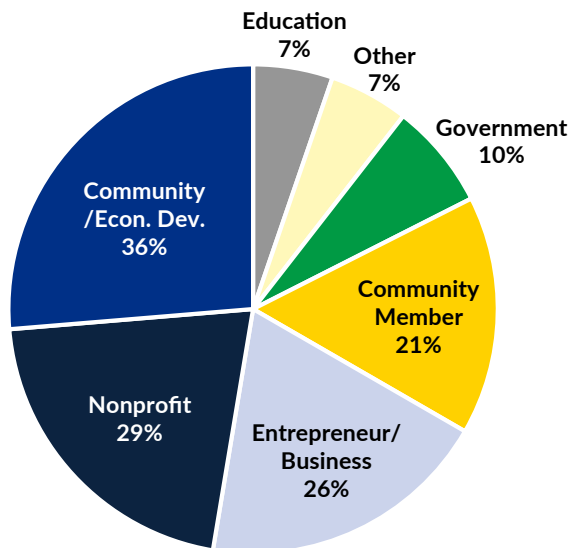


Figure 2: Survey Respondents by Industry of Employment

Attendees also represented a variety of industries. Such diversity in experience and background helped improve the conference and exposed attendees to new ideas and modes of thinking. The Economic Development field provided the largest number of attendees, representing 36% of survey respondents. Nonprofits (29%), Entrepreneurs/Business Owners (26%) and at-large community members (21%) were other well represented fields. The remaining survey respondents had backgrounds in: government, education, and healthcare.

Table 1: Highest Rated Conference Sessions

| Category     | Session Title   | Extremely Useful | Total responses |
|--------------|---|------------------|-----------------|
| Money        | Spread the Tunes to Raise Community Funds               | 100%             | 3               |
| Money        | New Health Care Options for A Rural Area                | 88%              | 8               |
| People       | Tips on TIF's-Using Tax Increment Financing for Housing | 88%              | 8               |
| Young Adults | Engaging Youth Reps on Local Boards                     | 86%              | 14              |
| Money        | Evolution of The Herreid Community Foundation           | 86%              | 7               |
| Young Adults | Small Town Embraces Young Leadership                    | 83%              | 6               |
| Business     | Start Where You Are                                     | 83%              | 12              |

### Sessions Inspired Attendees with Tangible Examples and Implementation Advice

Participants showed an appreciation for sessions that provided tangible examples of successful rural development strategies or events. Participants emphasized that these sessions provided details on how to implement similar strategies in their communities. Sessions with the highest approval ratings were those that focused on fundraising, housing, and youth engagement strategies. The following are individual sessions had at least 80% of attendees that found the session extremely useful. It is important to note that attendance varied for each session. More detailed data on session responses and attendance can be found in the Appendix.

The majority of survey respondents strongly agreed that the conference equipped them with implementable strategies they could take back to their communities. 67% strongly agreed that the conference inspired new and creative ways for community economic growth. 58% of respondents strongly agreed that the conference increased their knowledge of community development tools and resources. 56% strongly agreed that the conference increased their knowledge of business tools and resources.

SDSU Extension was not only interested in if conference sessions were useful, but also how attendees intended to implement their lessons learned. Figure 3 shows what types of action attendees intended to implement as a result of the conference. Attendees were, by far, most inspired to implement youth engagement strategies. 12 respondents shared plans to meaningfully involve youth in their communities' decision-making processes. Many specifically mentioned plans to incorporate youth on local community and economic development boards. Housing strategies, particularly the use of TIFs, were also frequently mentioned as potential actions. For further information on how attendees intended to incorporate conference learnings into their work, see the Appendix.



Figure 3: Areas of Conference-Inspired Action

## Networking Opportunities Lead to Meaningful Relationships

Respondents consistently emphasized their appreciation for the networking and relationship building opportunities provided by the conference. When asked what the most useful information they gained from the conference, nearly 40% of respondents mentioned networking in their comments. This was the most prevalent theme observed in the comments. Furthermore, 84% of survey respondents strongly agreed that the conference gave them opportunities to build relationships with others outside of their organizations.

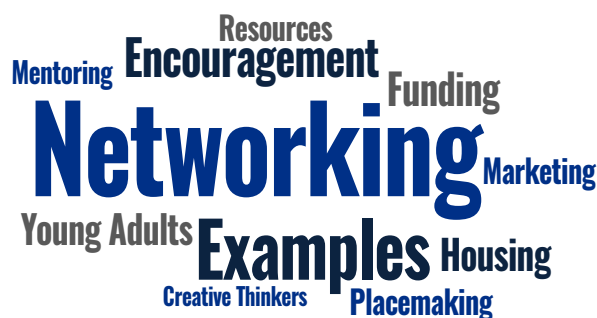


Figure 4: Most Useful Conference Information

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*“I think the most useful information was connecting with all the individuals from around the state and... and seeing what’s worked for them in their towns.”*

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The conference format itself was key in facilitating networking opportunities. 76% of respondents ranked both social events and networking breaks as extremely valuable to their conference experience. Many respondents specifically mentioned their appreciation for the placemaking activities held on the first evening.

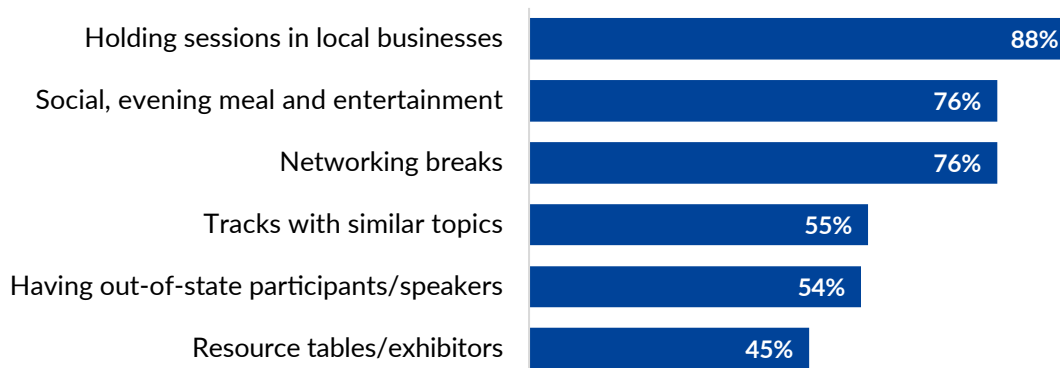


Figure 5: Conference Aspects Rated “Extremely Valuable” by Survey Respondents

## Dynamic Conference Format Garnered Loyal Attendees

Attendees voiced their enthusiasm for the dynamic conference format, both during the conference and in the survey. Attendees were particularly energized by the use of local businesses as session locations rather than conference rooms in a hotel. In fact, 88% of survey respondents shared that the unique session locations were a very valuable part of the conference, the highest approval rating of any conference aspects. Placemaking activities following sessions on the first day were also popular among survey respondents.



One attendee summarized their appreciation for the conference as follows:

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*This is my favorite conference to attend because of its “casual” and fun atmosphere. Going from business to business instead of sitting in a conference room for 2 days makes it more fun and I feel like people actually get to meet more people by not knowing everyone in every session.*

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The conference format clearly earned SDSU Extension a loyal group of attendees, many of whom are likely to attend future iterations of Energize. 58% of respondents shared that they were very likely to attend next year’s conference, with an additional 35% voicing that they were somewhat likely. Survey comments suggested that those who were only somewhat likely often were limited by funding or how far next year’s location would be from their home base. 75% of respondents were also very likely to recommend this conference to their peers, with an additional 20% sharing they were somewhat likely to do so.

The conference was seen as so successful by one attendee that it inspired a system change in Michigan.

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*We are creating a Connecting Tourism Communities conference for the first time in Michigan (MSUE). I was really charged up from the De Smet workshop, and have moved our staff into a more adaptive model that is a hybrid of sorts between SDSU and MSUE.*

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### Conference Responsible for Sizable Local Economic Impact

In addition to highlighting local business and community achievements, this conference brought an estimated \$25,802 to the local Lemmon economy during the two-day event.

SDSU Extension alone spent \$5,527.40 in Lemmon on catering and “chamber bucks” which gave each attendee 10 dollars to spend at a local business. 39 survey respondents also shared their spending data for the event. Attendees spent an average of \$136 on lodging, \$36 on food, and \$57 on shopping in town, totaling \$5,273.32 for survey respondents.

Based on the survey responses, we estimate out-of-town attendees and SDSU Extension staff spent a total of \$25,802 during the conference: \$12,913 on lodging, \$6,461 on food, and \$6,428 on shopping. Based on these figures, BHKN estimated the total economic impact on the Lemmon economy using IMPLAN economic multipliers. BHKN estimates the total economic impact of the conference was 1.392 times the direct spending of conference attendees, resulting in a total economic impact of \$35,907.

Table 1: Energize! 2019 Economic Impact

| Category | Average (\$) | Respondent Total (\$) | SDSU Extension (\$) | Total Spending (\$) | Multiplier | Total Impact (\$) |
|----------|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Lodging  | 136          | 2,581                 | 280                 | 12,913              | 1.386      | 17,893            |
| Food     | 36           | 1,200                 | 3,079               | 6,461               | 1.342      | 8,673             |
| Shopping | 57           | 1,492                 | 1,090               | 6,428               | 1.453      | 9,341             |
| Total    | 229          | 5,273                 | 4,449               | 25,802              | 1.392      | 35,907            |

## Reaffirmed Positive Attitudes of the Rural Future

Survey responses confirmed that the conference was successful in its goal to “energize” rural communities. Many shared that the conference, its participants, and sessions inspired them to think about the positive possibilities of rural communities.

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*I learned that there are people who are interested in bettering rural communities! We often allow small communities to spiral into a state of entropy and stagnancy. It was great to see a group of people excited about community improvement and vitality.*

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The conference was also successful in shifting personal perceptions away from negative rural stereotypes.

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*I have always liked my small community but there is a stereotype that hangs over small-town life. I plan on implementing a state of mind that small towns aren't sleepy and boring!*

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## Areas for Improvement

Though the conference excelled in many areas, two areas for improvement arose: diversity and local community awareness.

### Diversity

Though the conference successfully garnered a diverse range of attendees in terms of industry and geography, there was a lack of racial diversity. Of survey respondents, all but one were Non-Hispanic Whites. One survey respondent shared the following:

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*South Dakota is full of native nations that were not represented at this conference.*

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Groups also called attention to a lack of youth and young adult attendees. Though the survey show that these groups were represented, these age groups were significantly smaller than the older age groups.



Those aged 55-64 were the largest proportion of respondents (26%), followed by those 45 to 54 (21%) and those under 25 (19%). Overall, the conference did skew towards older attendees, 40% were over the age of 55, but did have more than 4 representatives from each age group.

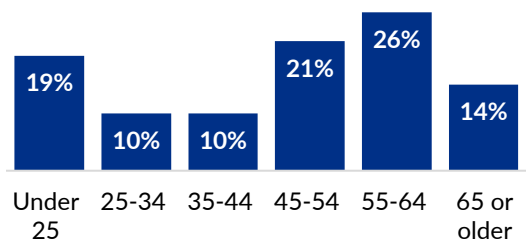


Figure 6: Survey Respondent Ages

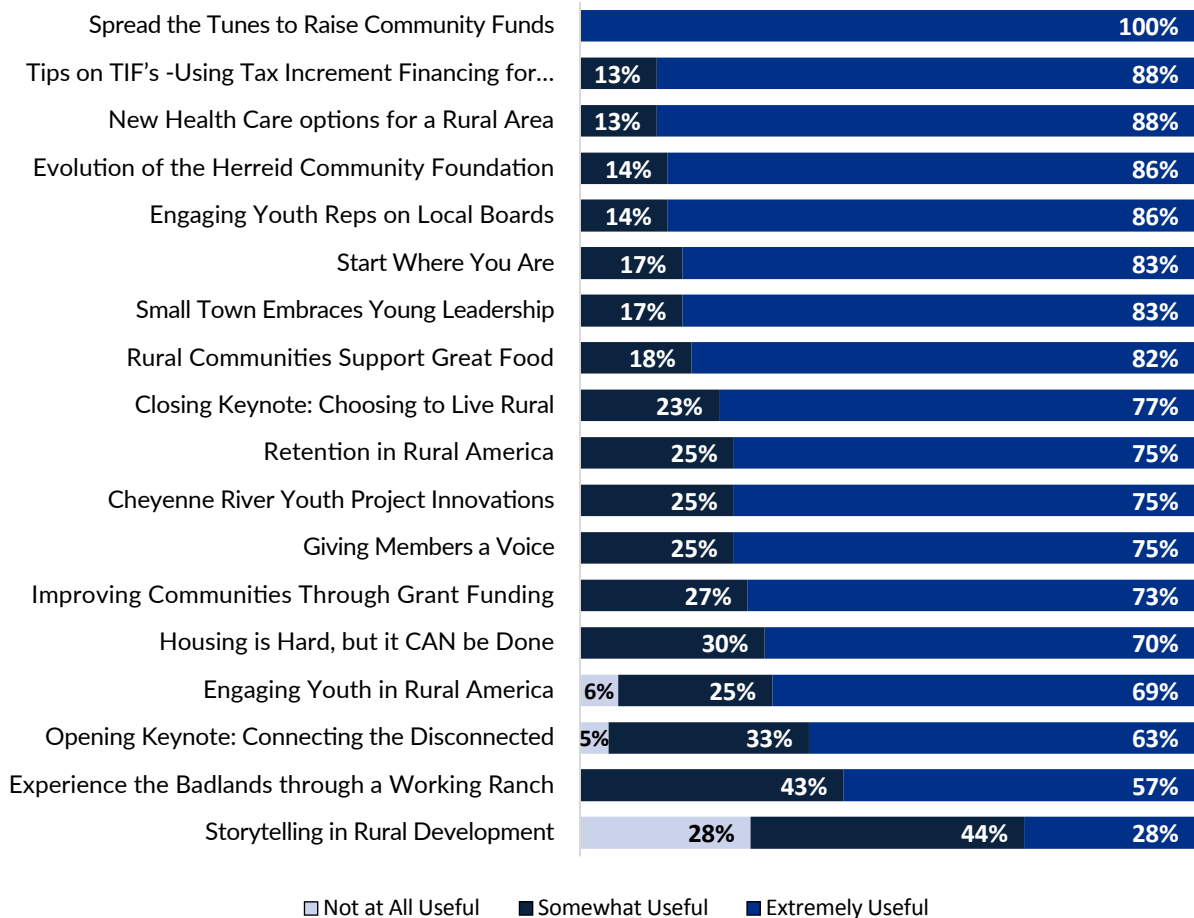
### Local Community Awareness

A number of survey respondents shared concerns that the local community was not as aware of conference as they could have been. Some respondents felt there was more work to be done to meaningfully involve the local business community. Others shared that social events should be opened to the community at large to foster further awareness of the conference and its intent.

## Appendix

The following appendix includes the raw survey data for selected questions. Bullet points differentiate individual open-ended responses.

Question 2: Please rate the usefulness of the sessions you attended. (44 responses)



Question 2: Please rate the usefulness of the sessions you attended

| Session   | Not at All Useful | Somewhat Useful | Extremely Useful | Total responses |
|---|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Spread the Tunes to Raise Community Funds               | 0                 | 0               | 3                | 3               |
| New Health Care options for a Rural Area                | 0                 | 1               | 7                | 8               |
| Tips on TIF's-Using Tax increment Financing for Housing | 0                 | 1               | 7                | 8               |
| Engaging Youth Reps on Local Boards                     | 0                 | 2               | 12               | 14              |
| Evolution of the Herreid Community Foundation           | 0                 | 1               | 6                | 7               |
| Small Town Embraces Young Leadership                    | 0                 | 1               | 5                | 6               |
| Start Where you Are                                     | 0                 | 2               | 10               | 12              |
| Rural Communities Support Great Food                    | 0                 | 2               | 9                | 11              |
| Closing Keynote: Choosing to Live Rural                 | 0                 | 7               | 24               | 31              |
| Cheyenne River Youth Project Innovations                | 0                 | 1               | 3                | 4               |

| Session   | Not at All Useful | Somewhat Useful | Extremely Useful | Total responses |
|---|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Giving Members a Voice                          | 0                 | 5               | 15               | 20              |
| Retention in Rural America                      | 0                 | 3               | 9                | 12              |
| Improving Communities Through Grant Funding     | 0                 | 3               | 8                | 11              |
| Housing is Hard, but it CAN be Done             | 0                 | 3               | 7                | 10              |
| Engaging Youth in Rural America                 | 1                 | 4               | 11               | 16              |
| Opening Keynote: Connecting the Disconnected    | 2                 | 14              | 27               | 43              |
| Experience the Badlands through a Working Ranch | 0                 | 3               | 4                | 7               |
| Storytelling in Rural Development               | 5                 | 8               | 5                | 18              |

Question 7: What was the most useful information you gained from the conference? (37 responses)

- When developing programming find creative thinkers to work with. Find ways to align your ideas or reshape them to work w/ other groups/people or to fundraise
- being encouraged
- I learned that there are people who are interested in bettering rural communities! We often allow small communities to spiral into a state of entropy and stagnancy. It was great to see a group of people excited about community improvement and vitality.
- Motivation to get more involved in my community
- Living rural is exciting to more people than i thought :)
- Rural communities are making progress
- I think the most useful info was connecting with all the individuals from around the state and learning and connecting with them and seeing what's worked for them in their towns.
- The ideas of things happening in other communities.
- Just how vibrant SD small communities are!
- How many efforts are underway
- Hearing what other towns have done-ideas. learning about various resources available
- Keynote Speaker was extremely sharp. Each presenter gave useful ideas.
- Community Foundation Info
- The TIF session!
- How housing projects are happening in rural communities and that young people are making a great life in our rural communities. These stories aren't making the headlines and they should be!
- TIF info
- Meeting the Lemmon Housing Authority person and her talk as well as connecting with the seasoned ED people.
- ideas on promoting local business
- Learned how to express my town's ideas and help other towns get the youth representation that is deserved on local boards.
- mentoring tip from Brent Comstock. "How can I help you?"
- Networking- who can help our community with the issues of funding, etc.
- Others are interested in developing small towns and willing to help others
- Networking with others from SD. Sessions were good, but not as good as last year's workshop. Learning from others on how to help rural communities.
- Networking
- The networking.
- The networking was the best. I heard that the Chislic was quite a story. I have people fired up to attend next year's conference!!

- Networking opportunities
- The information activities around placemaking
- Ideas like Placemakers, and personal stories of why folks return to rural SD. Networking with others and visiting with booth vendors about what is available in South Dakota.
- How much placemaking creates community,
- Resources
- How to engage the youth in our community
- Engaging youth, comstock, chislic guy
- How to engage and encourage youth

Question 8: What ideas are do you plan to implement based on what you have learned at the conference?  
(33 Responses)

- Community enhancement projects
- Cheering on housing in my town
- Visiting with references that had booths on their turf
- Inviting more youth to be involved on boards in town
- Trying to engage youth, possibly start in home business
- Use ideas for our housing issues
- Finding ways to involve youth on the boards I work with, create mentorships and involve youth as well as engage them.
- TIF, placemaking
- Get the information from graduates and keep in touch with them
- Feel better prepared to engaged effectively with fellow board members!
- I have several notes that I plan on trying to implement in my community plus several new people that I've learned from that I plan to keep in contact with.
- Engage more youth with civic and community boards. Try and focus on more youth development/engagement strategies with the older grey hair alpha male silverbacks who have been in local government for 30 years.
- Use more of the grant connections, be better at reaching out to seasoned ED people for advice and help.
- Engaging more people in dialog on development issues
- We plan to get more people involved.
- Establishing some round table discussions with placeholders to identify what our communities needs are and then developing a plan of action to address them.
- Trying to do a better job of looking for local talent first.
- Youth on the local economic development board. Host a housing conversation in my community. Talk about entrepreneurship as an option to return home.
- Farmers market, farm to table collaboration with our local growers, Art Council and hopefully events and co-op as the goal
- Engaging youth in board activities.
- Interested in a maker space in both hot Springs and Edgemont.
- Go to other towns across South Dakota and speak about youth involvement.
- I have always liked my small community but there is a stereotype that hangs over small-town life. I plan on implementing a state of mind that small towns aren't sleepy and boring! Placemakers has done an amazing thing for Lemmon and I hope that it continues to grow and there are more opportunities for the arts in rural communities.
- There are many things to use and implement
- Housing w/TIF

- I don't know
- plan to share with my community
- Giving the youth a louder voice
- Youth on EDC board
- H.S. youth board members, co-marketing ideas
- Placemakers
- Ideas on how to start a business
- Give a key to our town to graduating seniors. Change my outlook on affecting culture.

Question 9: Please indicate your response to the following statements about the Energize Conference.

| Statement  | Strongly Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Somewhat Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| The conference increased my knowledge of business development tools & resources.                 | 2%                | 2%                | 40%            | 56%            | 43    |
| The conference increased my knowledge of community development tools & resources.                | 2%                | 0%                | 40%            | 58%            | 43    |
| The conference inspired new and creative ways my community can foster economic growth            | 5%                | 0%                | 28%            | 67%            | 43    |
| The conference gave me opportunities to build relationships with others outside my organization. | 5%                | 0%                | 11%            | 84%            | 44    |
| I will attend this conference in the future  | 5%                | 2%                | 35%            | 58%            | 43    |
| I will recommend this conference to others   | 5%                | 0%                | 20%            | 75%            | 44    |

Q10. How valuable were the following items to your conference experience?

| Item                                      | Not at all valuable | Somewhat valuable | Extremely valuable | NA/Did Not Attend | Total |
|---|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Resource tables/exhibitors                | 0%                  | 50%               | 45%                | 5%                | 42    |
| Having out-of-state participants/speakers | 0%                  | 44%               | 54%                | 2%                | 41    |
| Tracks with similar topics                | 0%                  | 38%               | 55%                | 7%                | 42    |
| Networking breaks                         | 0%                  | 24%               | 76%                | 0%                | 41    |
| Social, evening meal and entertainment    | 0%                  | 20%               | 76%                | 5%                | 41    |
| Holding sessions in local businesses      | 0%                  | 10%               | 88%                | 2%                | 42    |

Question 11: Is there anything that would improve a future conference? (26 responses)

- Keep hosting in Lemmon, love it there!
- Great conference, good job
- No
- N/A
- Can't think of anything at this time.
- Can't think of anything.
- Conference was excellent, nothing to change
- It was perfect
- Thank you for considering my suggestions :)
- Loved the place maker activities. keep them.
- being able to visit exhibitors on Wednesday
- Are potential attendees encouraged to establish topics/break outs?
- Have a topic about diversity
- I am growing tired of hearing how we need to be inclusive to youth and millenials (sp). Work is still required! Knock off this 'understand us' crap. Go back to good old fashioned basics such as — instead of 'telling a story' for Chislec fest tell us how many volunteers you needed, what you needed for marketing, vendors, — the checklist to do an event and make it work. Like the old days (10 years ago!) Have examples and handouts or links so we can utilize.
- A tour of a local home grown business success story or a community development success story. Have a session on how Agri-tourism works with rural communities to increase traffic to the rural areas. Maybe a panel on people who have started non traditional type business and how they market them. i.e. Air B & B's, hunting lodges, raising specialty products such as goats, alpaca's, buffalo, crickets for protein (Montana has a cricket business), border collie training business. Things that people have added to supplement their income that are off the wall but lucrative.
- More robust set of tools and skills that participants can walk away with. Host a follow up video (ZOOM) call with interested participants in 6 months to see how folks are doing, and if there are additional items or issues to work on.
- Two of the speakers I attended where not great speakers and were not very organized or helpful. Making sure you have speakers that are interesting and can get the message across is helpful.
- Less than 4 presenters at one time. limited numbers of participants in a few.
- Heard a lot about fundraising ideas, projects, and housing but didn't hear much about incentivizing new businesses and helping news businesses get started/set up in rural areas
- Prefer tabled seating-better for note taking
- Yes, the community that is chosen should be involved. Especially when businesses are asked about donations and holding sessions.
- Please involve the host community more during future conferences! More community members who have a say on the planning committee because they are the ones who have the knowledge of what will work and connections!!! Communication is key with the host town!!! Double and triple check that everyone is on the same page!!! Also, Not everyone in Lemmon was aware of the conference until they asked why there were so many people in town. Something as simple as opening up the after party to the public would help to bring the community together and help people to be proud that they are part of the host town!
- Hold the after party in a more friendly environment- the conference building is great for workshops and meals but maybe take advantage of local bars with space to create a warmer environment that people will stick around for. By the way, I liked the band!
- Dakota Resources sponsoring Placemakers to do make and takes was great, but, it wasn't in the schedule and people were confused. If you ever do something similar again please include it in the



schedule and require sign up during check-in.

- The keynote speaker made some good points, but I feel like there are sure to be influential young business people in our own state! Also, it was difficult to understand what Bcom was exactly. Part of what I project this conference to be about is building community... why not find a speaker from the community of SD : )
- Local keynote?
- More bios on the speakers
- I think that reaching out to more youth such as people in their 20's would help get this conference to boom.
- Find an incentive that will bring more youth to the conference! There is so much to learn from a conference like this! This year there were only 4, 18 and under I hope that number will grow in the future!
- Have more youth involved
- Diversity. South Dakota is full of native nations that were not represented at this conference.

Question 13: What changes did you implement as a result of the De Smet Conference? (13 or 30% of survey respondents did attend the De Smet Conference).

- It helped motivate me to stay involved in my community
- Picked up on some of the housing ideas, because more aware of resources/agencies to work with
- I brought walking shoes this year because I wasn't sure what to expect the first year!
- We are creating a Connecting Tourism Communities conference for the first time in Michigan (MSUE). I was really charged up from the De Smet workshop, and have moved our staff into a more adaptive model that is a hybrid of sorts between SDSU and MSUE.
- Don't remember
- Sharing ideas.
- 1. Bought Red Ants Pants 2. Took a group on a learning tour of De Smet Event Center 3. Encouraged people to apply for SDCF CIG 4. Learned more about AirB&B
- No
- More people were at the table during the planning. In De Smet only Rita as at the table.
- I noticed that people were more interested in the sessions and there were more people, which is always great!
- Many connections
- How my Board operates

Question 20: Do you have any further input regarding the Energize Conference? (21 responses)

- Thank you. Sad it's over. Not ready to leave
- Great Job!
- Very informational
- Thank you for putting this together!
- This is my favorite conference to attend because of its "casual" and fun atmosphere. Going from business to business instead of sitting in a conference room for 2 days makes it more fun and I feel like people actually get to meet more people by not knowing everyone in every session.
- Great conference! Looking forward to what you folks are doing next year in East River country... and am planning on attending again. Well done!
- I was interested in this conference the minute I heard about it. I thought there would be more on social media marketing etc. and how Lemmon has managed to keep on going with the challenges facing rural communities. But I liked it — although I thought the younger speakers I heard have no clue on what is required to run businesses or events. Why can't we give direction to today's 20 somethings? Don't bother to do a conference on it — just my opinion.
- Great job again.
- Well run and organized. Lots of positivity. The authenticity of the breaks and the food served was amazing. You can tell that Lemmon wanted to host us. I hope that you can continue this energy. Just the descriptions you provided for the breakouts was energy filled. It made it difficult to choose which one to attend. Keep it authentic and organic and I will attend again.
- It was a well-run, well attended conference that is empowering local people to tell their success stories and inspire others while making lasting connections. Thank you.
- No
- It was great I do think that the Beeler was a bit big because it didn't feel intimate. I don't know how to fix that though.
- Nope
- Thank you so much for putting this on every year! Please continue this great program because it will go far!
- No great!
- I think it is a great concept- I learned a lot! It is only two years old and I look forward to seeing it grow!
- Fantastic!
- Thank you for hosting!
- Keep up the excellent work. You are the rockstars. Love the Data Nerd :)
- I was unable to attend the sessions because I was helping prepare food
- Very well done, I would enjoy more engagement with conference attendees, maybe small group breakouts of attendees. Could start earlier 1st day