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THE MONTANA GAP

Libby, Montana, tries to shake its 'Superfund stigma'

Rebranding could help the town distance itself from past asbestos pollution.

John Blodgett/The Western News | NEWS | Jan. 18, 2018

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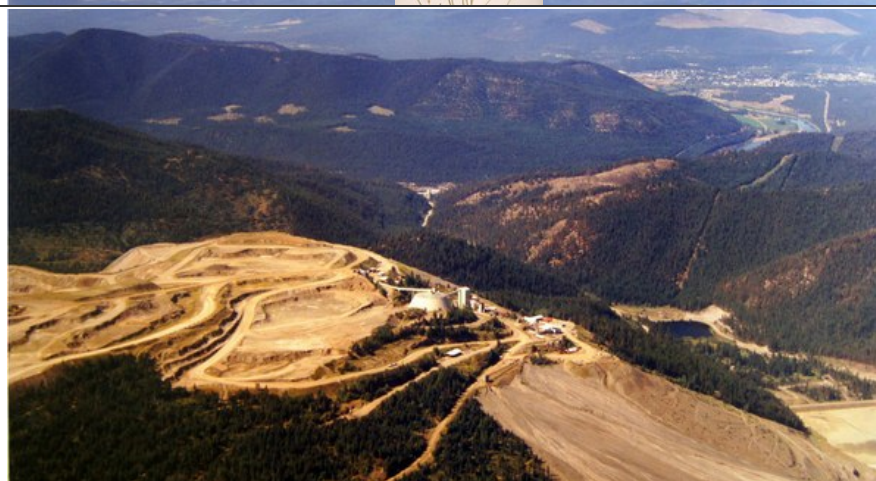
Mark Peck, of Libby, the county seat, drove roughly 300 miles to Missoula to meet with University of Montana business school faculty and staff from PartnersCreative, a local marketing agency. Peck had been referred there by Bill Johnston, director of the school's Alumni Association and, like Peck, a Libby native. (The two knew one another from when they were Little League teammates in the late 1960s.)

Peck left Libby in 1978 for a career in the U.S. Air Force. When he returned in 2010, he almost didn't recognize the place.

Once the site of a booming timber economy with as many as five mills operating at one time, Libby lost its last one in 2002. Market shifts and the "timber wars" of the 1990s that significantly reduced logging on the National Forest lands that comprise much of Lincoln County took their toll. On top of that, Libby was suffering from being an asbestos Superfund site under the Environmental Protection Agency and from the 1990 closure of the mine that caused the environmental and public health emergency, yet employed hundreds of people at a time for decades. (Libby has another Superfund site, due to groundwater contamination, that has drawn far less public attention.) "The identity of Libby carries a negative connotation with it," Peck said in November. "It breaks my heart but it's a fact. The majority of the population when they hear Libby, Montana, thinks asbestos."

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The vermiculite mine outside of Libby, Montana, operated for more than 70 years.

Center for Asbestos Related Disease

They also might think “depressed economy.” Lincoln County’s unemployment rate in November 2017, not seasonally adjusted, was 8 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That’s the second highest of Montana’s 56 counties and about twice the state’s rate.

Peck knew there was more to Libby, a story lost amidst the environmental and economic headlines. Despite its setbacks, the area could boast of a small-town pace, accessible wilderness and deeply rooted residents who take pride in their community’s heritage.

Peck's desire to help his community move beyond the Superfund stigma and reestablish its economic and social wellbeing caused him to search for solutions led him to that meeting at the University of Montana.



Sitting in AuntT's Coffee Corner in downtown Libby in December, Peck recalled that confab in Missoula. "I was just kind of stumbling through explaining, 'I don't how to do this, I just know we need some kind of a P.R. campaign to right the ship.'"

Sean Benton of PartnersCreative was first to respond.

"He said every small community in the western United States is trying to do, at some level, what you're trying to do," Peck recalled. "However, (he also said) what every other small community in the western United States lacks, and what you have, is a story."

That story, Benton told Peck, could be of a "phoenix (rising) out of the asbestos" — if residents could agree on where they saw Libby five, 10, 20 years down the road.

A rebranding effort came out of that meeting, a public-private partnership in which PartnersCreative would engage with UM students and faculty to help residents of Libby, nearby Troy and the rest of southern Lincoln County "refresh and reestablish their identities – honoring their heritage but firmly pointing the communities toward the future," according to the project proposal.

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A riverbank cleanup in Libby, Montana, in August 2011.

Environmental Protection Agency

After briefing local economic and community development organizations and agencies on the proposal, Peck presented it to the Lincoln County Commission on Nov. 4, 2015. He told his fellow commissioners, Greg Larson and Mike Cole, that “this is the first step in a long time where Lincoln County is taking control of its own destiny.”

All three approved proceeding with the roughly \$100,000 project.

Within a few weeks, a team of marketers, professors and students traveled to the area. For two days, they surveyed 156 residents of Libby and Troy in a combination of in-depth and on-the-street interviews and focus-group discussions.

The next step, Benton told The Western News at the time, was to analyze the survivors' data to identify the commonly held feelings and beliefs residents held about their

communities. “We need to pull the good parts to the surface,” he said. “It will help to overcome the negative issues and economic problems.”

Those good parts would inform the rebranding campaign the marketing team sought to create. What was crucial, Benton said at the time, was that “this (rebranding effort) comes from the people” and not from a team of marketers — no matter how skilled — with no connection to the area.

Benton also pointed out that rebranding the Libby area to the outside world would have an impact on the locals as well. “A project like this can help instill pride in a community,” he said. “It helps people see what they have in a place like this.”

The agency finished its analysis within four months and from it began to craft what marketers call “brand standards and guidelines,” a document containing logos, messaging and other items — including instructions — in support of a stigma-busting storytelling campaign.

In the midst of the campaign’s development, Peck and PartnersCreative held a public meeting March 9, 2016 at Dome Theater in downtown Libby to apprise people of the project’s status and its initial findings.

Addressing the more than 125 people that had gathered, Peck described it as the first step of a long-term movement to take control of the region's future.

Kevin Keohane, the project lead at PartnersCreative, outlined some of the key elements of the branding the agency was developing, which included highlighting the area's undiscovered opportunities and the independent nature of the region's residents.

The study had identified and described key audiences for branding efforts — including the “independent outdoor lover” and the “opportunity seeker” — as well as a positioning framework labelled “The right kind of remote” that encapsulated messaging themes such as “Pick your own path” and “Return on involvement.” The campaign's targets were entrepreneurs as well as visitors.

The following day, Peck told The Western News that the goal of the meeting, held in advance of a completed plan, was “to bring people together to start the dialogue.” Yet in the days and weeks that followed the community meeting the project outwardly lost momentum — something Peck takes responsibility for.

“I think I miscalculated,” he said in December. “I did not stay (involved) and engage (further) like I should have. One thing I've learned in this position (as commissioner) is it's really easy to switch tracks. Derailed is not the right word. Because there's things that come up that you don't see coming ... that you have to deal with.”

The project didn't come to a complete halt, however. Brand standards and guidelines were completed in September 2016. A month later to that, a committee of local business

people and city and county officials that had coalesced in support of the rebranding effort — eventually taking the name Kootenai River Valley — was made a subcommittee of the Libby Area Chamber of Commerce and tasked with updating the chamber's tired website, seen as a crucial first-step in the rebranding effort.

Peck said he had long thought the rebranding plan's logical home was the Libby Area Chamber of Commerce, explaining "I've never seen it as government's role to build an economy." The chamber was struggling at the time — Peck cited dwindling membership, a revolving board and other issues — but he had hoped Kootenai River Valley "would bring (it) strength."

Funded by the county and the Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development, Kootenai River Valley tapped PartnersCreative to develop the site in line with its rebranding plan. After about nine months of work, the new site launched July 28, 2017, and was "a huge step forward," Peck said.

In addition to conveying the Libby area's attributes, Nate Bender of PartnersCreative said the website is intended to offset "the inaccurate or misleading information" about the area, especially surrounding its Superfund site status, that exists elsewhere online. To do so, Keohane said they decided to "confront (the stigma) head on," Bender said. "We decided early on not to brush the EPA under the rug," he said. "We don't sugarcoat it."

One page of the website is therefore dedicated to an explanation of the cleanup efforts and includes links to outside resources to  **SUBSCRIBE | THE MAGAZINE | DONATE NOW |**

Peck said that over the course of the website's development the chamber had indeed transformed as he had hoped it would. He noted an influx of new and energized board members ready and wanting to help transform the community.



Kim Peck of Glacier Insurance in Libby stands next to a display of the revamped Libby Area Chamber of Commerce website. Peck was part of the committee that oversaw the revision, and as a chamber board member will help the community proceed with a rebranding campaign.

John Blodgett/The Western News

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The Chamber disbanded the Kootenai River Valley committee following the website's launch, according to Kim Peck, co-owner of the Chamber of Commerce and Insurance of Libby and a former

committee member who now sits on the Chamber board — yet it plans to proceed with the rebranding effort. Peck said the board will discuss next steps at its February retreat. “This won’t be ‘wholly owned’ by the chamber because the idea of the branding is for all groups to buy in and utilize this,” she said.

Noting that “now it’s time to blow the dust off the implementation” of the rebranding effort, Mark Peck added that the community didn’t have to follow it to the letter. “But I think it’s a great foundation to start driving where we need to be,” he said. “These (ideas) aren’t earth shattering. They’re (the) kind of tried and true things that successful communities have done in order to move themselves forward.”

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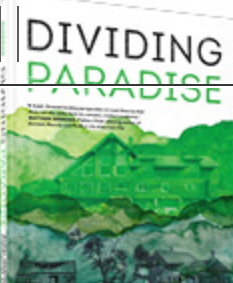


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