

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

NORTH FORK HEART & SOUL: Paonia, Hotchkiss, Crawford, and outlying Colorado Mesas

The North Fork of the Gunnison River Valley is located in Western Colorado in Delta County. Bordered by the West Elk Mountains and the Grand Mesa is a beautiful landscape of irrigated farms and orchards, ranches, riparian and mountain wildlife areas, and semi-arid desert. The physical setting of the Valley – tucked between the mountains to the east, the Grand Mesa to the North, and the canyons and high desert of the southwest and west portions of the county, make this a distinct sliver of paradise and one with its own identity.

POPULATION:
9,000

CHALLENGE:
Engaging missing voices and bridging divides.

FOCUS: Developing a shared future vision

KEY TOOLS:
Resident, arts, and youth engagement; radio and film; community events and activities; and community focus groups.

Agriculture and animal husbandry have been a primary way of earning a living in the Valley since the 1880's and are enmeshed in the fabric of the community's identity. Cattle ranchers, cowboys, and sheep men still care for their herds, which now include buffalo and elk along with the traditional cattle and sheep. Along with diversification in livestock ranching, there has been a strong trend in organic crop and fruit farming. The North Fork Valley is home to burgeoning wine and organic fruit and vegetable markets and growers are finding that small-scale farming can be profitable with the right mix of creativity and niche marketing. Coal mining is also a historic part of the Valley's history and, until recently, the area's economic vitality. The coal mines have also been a core part of the community's identity.

North Fork Valley “by the numbers”:

- 317 meetings & events held
- 7 local community partners
- 18 Advisory Team Members
- 184 personal and group interviews completed
- 100 Pass the Mic interviews completed
- 45 News articles produced

Local conditions:

Recognizing the need to engage the larger public in addressing local trends and challenges, a citizen group named “Vision 2020” began public conversations about what the economy could look like in the year 2020, focusing on how to develop existing strengths and how to diversify the economy. The Vision 2020 group applied for the Community Heart & Soul grant in hopes of finding a solution to address the valley's greatest challenge: bringing together a politically and ideologically diverse community to create common ground, language and a shared vision for the future.

Volunteer and Community Response:

Collaborations included supporting the development of the:

- Hotchkiss Downtown Improvement Project
- Updated Paonia master plan
- North Fork Valley Creative Coalition and arts district
- “Pass the Mic” youth radio training program
- Friends of Paradise Theatre and leasing of facilities to keep the theatre open by the Paonia Chamber
- Community Summit and Joint Chamber Symposium, “We take care of our own” and a partnership with the Western Colorado Community Foundation to give 3 \$10,000 mini- grants to local projects.

The project cooperated on several local storytelling and art projects that highlighted community members’ personal stories and connection to sense of place:

- Rita Clagett’s 100 years Photo Project – “Neighbors, Strangers, Friends” featuring interviews and photographs of the valley’s senior citizens.
- Woven Heart Spots Installation by visiting artist Lane Taplin, a multi-media project weaving stories about sense of place into handmade and dyed fabric art.
- Paonia Fashion Show – Live Your Dreams (theme inspired by the Heart & Soul Project);
- Community built art wall/Valleyscape behind Elsewhere Art Studio.
- The North Fork Valley Health and Wellness Directory.
- Jordan Schiavone’s film “What Matters Most: Exploring the Values of the North Fork Valley”.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

These local projects are incorporating “what matters most” into their work:

- Creative Coalition Leadership Training is incorporating values-based decision-making modules into non-profit leadership development.
- The North Fork Alternative Plan used the documented value of “Rural and Natural Environment” in their submission of North Fork Land Management Guidelines to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management regarding appropriate land use planning.
- Citizens and Town Trustees are asking how development plans are in alignment with the shared beliefs at town meetings and in newspaper letters to the editors.

