

Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

POLSON, MONTANA

The City of Polson occupies a breathtakingly beautiful spot along the southern tip of Flathead Lake, at the base of the Mission Mountain Range on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The largest freshwater body in the West, Flathead Lake draws thousands of tourists every summer.

POPULATION:
5,018

CHALLENGE:
Economic
development,
community
vibrancy

FOCUS: Civic and
community
engagement in all
parts of Polson

KEY TOOL:
Using
neighborhood
gatherings to find
out what matters
most to residents

Economic disparities are a reality for year-round residents, where the household income is about \$20K lower than the national median. Believing that they could change this statistic, residents, business owners, tribal leaders, and city officials came together through Envision Polson! to try to move the needle toward a more successful and economically viable Polson. With Envision Polson! and community members ready to “get in front of development” and a desire to build a culture of collaboration, proactive actions and planning based on what matters most to citizens, the Polson Heart & Soul project began.

Polson “by the numbers”:

- 21 neighborhood meetings
- Two community surveys conducted
- Six Heart & Soul statements reflecting what matters most to residents
- Six committees and community groups formed within Envision Polson to continue work on the efforts of collaboration and inclusion such as Health and Well-being, Youth and Schools, Leadership, Collaboration and Communication, Year-Round Recreation, Vibrant Downtown, and Beautification

Local conditions:

Economic concerns and a desire to work on solutions led to Polson’s interest in Community Heart & Soul. Polson retained the essential charm and benefits of a rural Western town, but it had not enjoyed the same growth or resort status as that of neighboring communities. Many believed Polson is a community rich in opportunity and in the strength of its people, but it has not thrived economically since the homestead and timber shipping days of the early to mid-1900s. Residents of Polson were said to lead good lives, but not necessarily easy ones.

Volunteer and Community Response:

Polson Heart & Soul project gathered stories from hundreds of residents in 21 neighborhoods and gathering places. They held story-gathering sessions with community leaders, teens and youth and listened to neighborhoods with different concerns and views of the future.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

Over the course of two years, the project solicited community input to the questions

- “What do you love about Polson?”
- “Why did you come to/stay in Polson?”
- “What would you miss about Polson if it were no longer here or changed?”
- “What are your hopes for Polson’s future?”

Community members ultimately identified and agreed upon eight community Heart & Soul statements. The result was agreement on what matters most to Polson residents. They described things they like, things that the community is doing well, and the community assets. They also described issues, suggestions, concerns, or areas for improvement related to these comments. By summarizing the issues and concerns, Polson Heart & Soul provided a launching point for continued community discussion that will guide future action.

