

Out west there is still a vision

Since Vision West ND became a consortium in the Fall of 2011, the oil and gas activity has been a rollercoaster.



JASON SPIESS
For Bakken Breakout
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From record oil prices and rig counts to low energy activity has many wondering whether development and planning groups would sustain during the downturn. According to the group's spokesperson Deb Nelson, the mood is much better now in 2016 than it was last year.

"Even though we have had that downplay in the oil production, there is a much better mood," Nelson said. "Our priorities are still very similar what they were at the beginning."

According to Nelson, the oil and gas producing counties still need transportation, housing, child care and emergency services. These were issues that were prevalent during the high oil prices and Nelson sees signs that indicate continued support.

"In a nutshell, we have become a very viable planning organization in the state. We actually look at our issues and believe it is more than just western North Dakota issues."

— Deb Nelson Vision West ND spokesperson

"Child care was an issue then and continues to be a huge issue now," Nelson said. "Particularly since we are seeing record birth in the three hub communities: Minot, Williston and Dickinson.

Those hospitals are still experiencing record births so we know there is a continued need for child care."

Nelson added pipeline issues have been showing up more and more in their data collecting, surveys and general due diligence. So much a new committee has been developed solely to analyze pipelines in communities and disseminate the information to appropriate parties.

"Pipelines were more of a secondary issue when we developed the plan," Nelson said. "But that issue is quickly rising to the top. We are seeing more and more need for pipelines to transport oil and water."

Another ride on the rollercoaster came from the group itself. According to Nelson, the Vision West consortium considered shutting down after the oil prices dropped and the mood and momentum was heading that way. In the end it turned into nothing short of a couple meetings and conversations.

"By all means the project should have been over because there was no further HUD funding available for continuation," Nelson said. "But the representatives of the consortium said 'no we are not done, we are going to continue as a consortium and continue working with these small towns and counties and try to implement some of the recommendations that came out of the original plan.'"

After the decision was made to move ahead, additional funding was gathered from the state and NDOAGPC.

"As a result of the additional funding, those consortium members have been able to continue and grow as well as develop committees," Nelson said. "In a nutshell, we have become a very viable planning organization in the state. We actually look at our issues and believe it is more than just western North Dakota issues."

Nelson believes many of the western issues are statewide issues and they can become an educational assistant for the state.

"Actually we are continuing to grow and are probably stronger than ever be-



Submitted photo

Vision West ND chairman Daryl Dukart leads a discussion with other members.

fore," Nelson said. "I do want to point out that during that planning process we had over 2,000 people in western North Dakota participate in some fashion."

Nelson said participation varied from planning meeting to town hall participation to workshops gathering information.

"This was a grassroots effort," Nelson said.

Early on the goal was to get the regional plan done. Now that it is done, the focus has shifted to the implementation of the plan.

"Now I think members are much more excited than they were back in then,"

Nelson said. "Even though we have had a slowdown in the oil price and play, this is an opportunity for us to look at what can we do as a consortium to help those counties continue to be viable, continue to grow and become economically diversified so that people want to stay here."

Vision West is unique in that it has grown since the Bakken slowdown and oil price drop. Nelson said one of the big reasons for the growth is Vision West opened their membership doors to associate members.

"We've grown unbelievably because we opened up our consortium and organization to associate members," Nelson said. "So we now have about 30 associate members. There's state agencies, federal agencies, engineering companies, oil related companies that are interested in working with us at Vision West."

Nelson added the county's role representatives range from tax directors to communications coordinators to county commissioners to school board members. Overall they are people in leadership roles appointed by their elected leaders.

"We are excited where this project is going," Nelson said.

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Jason Spiess is an award-winning journalist, talk show host, publisher, author and executive producer. Spiess is a North Dakota native and NDSU graduate. He currently creates multimedia content for newspapers, magazines, and online news services. He is also the host of Building the Bakken, MonDak OilField Review and Coffee & Capitalism Radio. Spiess also is author of the book Building the Bakken. For more information or to contact Spiess, email jason@buildingthebakken.com.