

Community renewal council still serving
By John Hall

The Blue Mountain Community Renewal Council celebrates 19 years of service to Calaveras County communities this year.

Since 2000, the organization has served as the non-profit umbrella providing 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status for a diverse array of community projects that could not obtain non-profit designation in time for project start-up, or faced financial constraints. BMCRC also provides liability insurance for project volunteers and events, and helps with obtaining grant funds and other resources.

In recent years, BMCRC has seen itself often overlooked by groups that are seeking the very services that the organization provides.

“We don't do enough promotional work,” said Susan McMorris, BMCRC’s current chairperson. “People don't know we exist.”

Projects which began under BMCRC’s umbrella in the past include Community Revive and Re-Leaf, Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions (CHIPS), and Friends of Rail Road Flat School, which continues to thrive under the arrangement. Current projects include Gold Rush Writers Conference, Friends of Schaad’s Lake, and Wilseyville Library and Community Museum (WLCM). A recently-approved project will see the ceremonial re-opening of the Rail Road Flat Ballpark at 2 p.m. on Saturday, April 6. The Ballpark Project has obtained a 10-year lease of the property, and a number of volunteers to maintain and manage it. It will also be home to the newly formed Gold Country Miners under-12 traveling baseball team. The ballpark has been closed for at least 20 years.

Chartered as a non-profit under United States Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) in July 2000, Blue Mountain Community Renewal Council was the culmination of a process that began in February, 1999. Sponsored by Foothill Conservancy and the Sierra Nevada Alliance, a series of meetings created a community vision for the northeast region of Calaveras County. More than 200 residents of West Point, Wilseyville, Glencoe, and Rail Road Flat took part in the process. Participants reached consensus in November, 1999, to start a number of community renewal projects, including a long-term organization, the Mokelumne Alliance for Community Renewal, to support on-going projects. Other projects included Community Learning Centers in West Point and Rail Road Flat, Community Revive and Re-Leaf in West Point, and a Community Switchboard.

A grant from Foothill Conservancy got the project started, according to Judy Engels Spadoni, BMCRC’s first chairperson. “Not only did that money pay for the training we received from the [Rocky Mountain Institute] in sustainable community development, but also allowed us to leverage other money for projects. The Community Learning Center received funds from Calaveras Unified School District, which we were able to leverage into the California State Healthy Start Grant which brought in \$400,000 to the communities of RRF and West Point. We leveraged the heck out of small seed money.”

The Community Learning Centers provided instruction nights twice a month. Preceded by a dinner, the events included training in computer skills, cooking and nutrition, arts and crafts, and a young children’s program. In Rail Road Flat, the Learning Center evolved into Friends of Rail Road Flat School, which currently provides meals and enrichment programs for both children and adults.

Community Revive and Re-Leaf planted a lawn and perennial flowers near the Odd Fellows Hall on West Point’s Main Street, and organized a community garden on donated property in the downtown area. Later, the project moved its resources under the auspices of Blue Mountain Coalition for Youth and Families.

Not all of the projects developed as originally proposed. The Community Switchboard, later renamed the Community Network, failed to meet its original goal of providing resources information to and for the Blue Mountain community via a computer network. It did, however, produce a “Business and Community Services Directory” in 2001. In addition to a printed version, the directory was also available on the BMCRC website. In 2002, an updated second edition was completed. Today, the BMCRC website is the primary presence of the Community Network.

In May, 2000, the West Point Park and Recreation Association was considering dissolution after years of divisive opposition to various proposals for a community park. In a move to transfer the Park Association's non-profit status to the new organization, four directors of the Mokelumne Alliance for Community Renewal were elected to the park board. In June, the park association's Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws were revised to accommodate the broader objectives set by the community meetings, and submitted to California's Secretary of State. The park association was officially reorganized in July as Blue Mountain Community Renewal Council. Inc.

"My feelings when we first put the pieces together were a sense of real pride in getting our Articles of Incorporation in place and working through all the minutia of deciding how we were going to operate," Spadoni said recently. "We covered a lot of ground, and had in mind that we were going to be here for the community in the long run. We wanted to make it enduring."

Spadoni was elected to chair the new organization.

"My approach to being the original chairperson was to be a facilitator," she said. "In order to do that, I had to keep an eye on a lot of moving parts. We were so enthusiastic while we were creating our organization that we were growing projects at the same time as we were learning to manage a new non-profit corporation.

"All those things were happening at the same time. I think we all learned a lot so fast, because we cared so much about our communities. Every one of us took on roles that expanded our sense of what we could individually contribute. We supported each other and became much more capable as we went along. Every one of us stretched and grew."

Since its founding, BMCRC has sponsored workshops in strategic planning, organizational development and creating effective volunteer organizations. Its various projects have sponsored clean-ups in West Point and Rail Road Flat, updated lighting to the West Point Community Center, sponsored harvest festivals at Humbug Creek Farm in Glencoe, helped with improvements at the youth center in West Point, and provided many other community services.

"Most of the people who have an interest are bringing us proposals that fit within our mission statement," McMorris said.

Getting a project approved is "usually pretty easy," she added. "They fill out a basic overview of their project design, who is involved, scope of the project. The Board discusses it, gets commitments, and votes on the project. It's pretty straight forward."

The BMCRC Board of Directors is open to any proposal that meets the organization's vision, which can be seen on its website at <https://www.bmcrc.org>. Volunteers are always welcome to assist projects or the Board of Directors.