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Group Facilitation
Big Sky Resort Tax Area District

Group Facilitation & Team Building

Big Sky Resort Tax Area District

In summer of 2023, 12 Big Sky community leaders met to revisit a fraught topic: whether Big Sky might consider incorporating as a municipality.

On the first morning, the tension was palpable. Not everyone saw eye-to-eye on incorporation, nor did the major stakeholders many were associated with. Yet there was also cautious hope that the discussion would be productive.

On the flanks of one of the largest ski resorts in North America, Big Sky is home to 3,300 full-time and 3,000 seasonal residents, and sees upward of 5,000 visitors on a busy day. Over the last 25 years, development in this remote, decentralized community had boomed. And while several groups had tried to move incorporation forward, none succeeded. It remained divisive.

Sarah Blechta — chair of the Resort Tax board that hired Emily and convened this group — spoke the morning's first words.

"Think of this as Step .5," she said. "We're making a plan to explore incorporation — what it could look like, what problems it might or might not solve, and what our options are. We're setting a framework for the future."

"Very rarely are you in a place where you have all the different opinions, and you all get to share them. Usually, one person is overpowering the whole thing. The way Emily facilitated discussions allowed me to hear and take in everyone's views."

— Sarah Blechta, Big Sky Resort Area District Board Chair

Beginning like this was no accident. Having coached Sarah beforehand, Emily Wolfe, the facilitator, was helping this group lead themselves.

Now Emily spoke:

"Thank you for being here. It's no small thing. The purpose of these sessions is to build trust, traction and momentum. My role is to manage the process and help you move forward. You're here to contribute your knowledge and ability to think."

Emily paused.

"You're also here as someone who cares about this place deeply," she said. "Stop and look around."

Heads turned as participants made brief eye contact with one another.

"Everyone here is as human as you. Here's your number one job today: Be a human first."

This work is hard for established teams. With stakeholders spanning a multibillion-dollar developer, an affordable housing trust, a food bank, and a grassroots citizens initiative, the gulf of perspectives yawned wide.

The topic of incorporation was so hot, the group couldn't touch it on day one. Instead, Emily shepherded them through exercises that encouraged giving respect, sharing viewpoints, and visualizing challenges and opportunities. Working together in this nonlinear way, they began to trust one another.

They all knew that past efforts to consider incorporation had cost the community, both fiscally and socially. The stakes were high stakes.

"Emily ensured that all stakeholders were equals, and no one person led us in any particular direction."

— Tallie Lancey, participant and local resident



With the community straddling two counties and represented by commissioners who live up to two hours away, there were many unknowns about incorporation, especially because the last Montana town to incorporate was Colstrip, in 1998. After decades of debate, it was hard to disentangle fact from fiction.

In session two, the group set out to reframe how they were thinking about incorporation, tackling their challenge head-on.

But could they really work together and agree on a plan?

"On day one, you set goals for finding common ground and collaborating," Emily said as they began. "You said things like, 'This conversation is respectful, which isn't always the case,' and, 'This group is open to the possibilities.'"

“After [Emily’s workshops], I trust everyone in this group. We now know that parties are not nearly as opposing as we thought they were.”

— David O’Connor, workshop participant, Big Sky Housing Trust Executive Director



She looked around, gauging the energy.

“Today, there’s a lot of tension,” she said. “This is the crux, and the only way out is through.”

They got to work, leaning into the process. Responding to Emily’s prompts, their ideas formed on the wall in a multicolored array of sticky notes. Soon, they gathered around those ideas and, with coaching from Emily, began forming their own prompts. The tension continued rising, but they stuck to the guidelines for respect they’d established on day one.

Thirty minutes before the workshop’s end, the weight lifted. They’d chosen three shared reframes and were brainstorming possible solutions. Darting to post new ideas, these problem-solvers were finally in their element.

But with the workshop almost over, they still hadn’t drafted a plan. One participant spoke up: “There’s too much to do! We need to meet again.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

A month later, with Emily guiding, the group developed a plan to conduct a rigorous, unconstrained incorporation study. They would leverage resort tax leadership and funding, and engage the community as part of the process.

“It was amazing when we did the final exercise to develop messaging about our work,” said a participant. “Instead of answering Emily’s question one at a time, we first had to talk to each other. It really signifies that we’re committed to working together.”

While the group members still did not always agree, they had become a team. According to Resort Tax Executive Director Danny Bierschwale, the group was able to make decisions together as a result of their work with Emily.

Completed in 2025, the study now serves as the foundation for Big Sky’s ongoing conversation about its future governance. 