

## Cooperative Development Provides ‘Last Chance’ for Rural Montana Café

October 18, 2010 - By J.P. Pendleton, Public Affairs Specialist, USDA Rural Development, Montana



Last Chance Café manager Peggy Tobin shows off a homemade apple pie baked by a volunteer co-op member

It is an iconic fixture of rural America – the local diner. Not just a restaurant, but a social hub for a community, and when the local café in Sunburst, Montana closed in 2007 it seemed one more nail in the coffin of a small town facing decline.

Just over one hundred miles north of Great Falls, Montana along Interstate 15, and only nine miles south of the Canadian border you’ll find Sunburst, population 400. Much had changed and disappeared from Sunburst since the closing of the Texaco refinery in the sixties and now the loss of the café left the community with no family-friendly place to eat. Sure the local bar had bar food, and there were chicken fingers and corn dogs at the

deli counter of the grocery store, but a place to sit down for a cup of coffee, conversation, and a good meal was gone – possibly for good.

By 2009, local resident Peggy Tobin and some fellow community members started to explore options to bring their hometown café to life once more. They initially dismissed the idea of a cooperative, thinking it only applied to phones and electricity – but upon speaking with Brian Gion, Executive Director of the Montana Cooperative Development Center in Great Falls, plans began for the formation of a community cooperative to operate the Last Chance Café.

Funded through the Rural Cooperative Development Grant program from USDA Rural Development, Montana Cooperative Development Center has assisted 123 entities and guided the formation of 37 cooperatives since its inception in 1999. The reopening of the café as a cooperative has provided more than just jobs for the local residents. “It wouldn’t work without our volunteers,” said Peggy Tobin. “We have men and women coming in to bake pies and breads for the restaurant, or just to clean dishes and tidy up the place. It’s become a great opportunity for folks to get out and be active, and help support local businesses here in Sunburst.”

Providing the equivalent of three full-time jobs, a project this size might seem inconsequential in the larger economic picture, but for Sunburst it’s a focal point for the community. New development is on the horizon through a wind power project, and a newly-opened U.S. Border Patrol station has brought more life into the town. With a year of operation under their belt, Tobin and her partners are proud of what they’ve accomplished at the Last Chance Café. “We have people driving all the way here from Great Falls just for our clam chowder [every other Friday] and our homemade pies. It seems we’re getting a bit of a name for ourselves, and we’re thrilled to have the customers.”

As we recognize National Cooperative Month, it is appropriate to applaud the hard work of the Montana Cooperative Development Center, and the determination of the Last Chance Café cooperative in Sunburst, Montana. If you’re ever north of Great Falls, Montana and looking for a place to eat - I can personally vouch for the pie.