MU Extension in Broadwater County is a partnership between Broadwater County, Montana State University, and the United States Department of Agriculture. This partnership provides educational outreach in the areas of Agriculture/Natural Resources, 4-H Youth Development, Community Development, and Family and Consumer Sciences.

Broadwater County is a fast-growing county with a population of about 6,237. The county encompasses 796,000 acres of agricultural land, small acreage subdivisions, rural communities, and range or forested land. With about 45% of the county in public land, the area is a popular choice for recreation. Primary industries include agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and services. Townsend is the county seat and home to the MSU Extension office.

**Big Changes for the Office**

The year 2020 brought big changes to MSU Extension in Broadwater County. Just a month before the fair, the office moved to a new location from the basement of the Courthouse to the Opportunities Building, a building formerly owned by Opportunity Bank and purchased by the county with the hopes of establishing a permanent office in the building.

In 2019, county commissioners combined the positions of Extension Administrative Assistant and Fair Manager to create a permanent full-time position. Josie Reynolds was the first person to fill this position and held it until August 2020. In October 2020, the office welcomed new Administrative Assistant and Fair Manager Jessica Erickson. Erickson has roots in the area, has been involved as a 4-H leader and parent, and is a Broadwater County Master Gardener. She hit the ground running during 4-H enrollment season and preparing for the 2021 fair.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic required the office to make changes to everyday business and programming. The Extension Agent and office staff worked from home as needed, held virtual meetings and adapted programs. For example, the Master Gardener class moved from an in-person class to virtual meetings during the third week of the eight-week program. 4-H activities were adapted, and the 2020 fair was cancelled except for approved 4-H activities.

Even with these big changes, MSU Extension in Broadwater County continued to meet the needs of clientele and offer high quality educational programs while keeping the health and safety of clientele a priority.
4-H Program Remains Strong During a Pandemic

Broadwater County 4-H had another strong year with 144 club members. The program is supported by 52 certified volunteers who led clubs, organized project work, served on committees, and coordinated events and activities. On average, volunteers spent 7 hours per month with 4-H. This commitment equates to a value of $111,078 of time given by 4-H volunteers to support county youth.

Due to the pandemic, the office, clubs and leaders developed new ways to reach youth when face-to-face meetings were not possible. Club meetings and project workshops were done using virtual technology such as Zoom and Webex. Additionally, the office started the “4-H Activity of the Day” program to provide youth with an activity to do while at home during “shelter-in-place” and create another opportunity for youth to learn new skills and knowledge.

Through the program, a daily activity was provided with bonus activities on the weekend. Topics varied from science, engineering, visual arts, problem solving and history. Some activities focused on 4-H projects so that members could use them in their 4-H project books as a substitute for missed workshops. A total of 39 4-H youth completed 316 activities during the spring of 2020.

Another major change was the cancellation of the Broadwater County Fair & Rodeo. However, the 4-H program received special permission to continue certain fair activities with adjustments in place to ensure participants remained safe and healthy.

Reimagining Rural in Townsend

Like much of Montana, Broadwater County is experiencing changes and population shifts. Housing developments and subdivisions are increasing the county population while business dynamics are shifting, including the closure of a major employer, RY Timber, during 2020. With changing populations, it can be difficult to balance the strong desire to maintain local tradition with the compelling need to make change to improve the community and create a welcoming place for newcomers.

Townsend joined over 20 communities across the state for the Reimagining Rural Community Gatherings. This program consisted of three sessions focused on understanding changing demographics and creating vibrant communities now and into the future. Each session included a virtual speaker followed by local discussion on how to incorporate the ideas into the local community.

Throughout the three sessions, 20 people participated locally by listening to the speakers and having community discussion. These individuals represented a variety of local
4-H Member Andrew Beatty displays his work, by Jennifer Beatty.
service groups, organizations and local government. Together they generated ideas to improve and strengthen the community.

As a result of participating in all three sessions, Townsend was eligible for grant funding through the Montana Community Foundation. A group of participants from the program applied for and received a $2,000 grant for a beautification project in Townsend. This was one of the ideas discussed during the program and was inspired by a mural contest organized by Tina Homann, owner of The Lodge and participant in Reimagining Rural.