

## A New Angle

### Episode 85

February 23, 2023

**Justin Angle:** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

**Justin Angle:** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today is our February edition of Incentives & Instincts, a recurring series in which I speak with economist and friend Bryce Ward about some of the broader issues facing our society. Bryce, how are you today?

**Bryce Ward:** I'm good, Justin, how are you?

**Justin Angle:** I am doing well. Today we're going to talk about changes in Montana's demographics and culture and their effects on the Montana economy and community cohesion. And to do that, we're joined by executive director of the Missoula Economic Partnership, Grant Kier. Grant, thanks for coming on the show.

**Grant Kier:** Thanks for having me, Justin.

**Justin Angle:** So, we have to subject you to the rite of passage that everybody gets. Where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

**Grant Kier:** So, I grew up in Boulder, Colorado, and for most of my younger years, I was raised by a single mom who was a registered nurse.

**Justin Angle:** Wonderful. So, Grant, you've been out speaking about this issue publicly for a while now. What's the problem you're seeing? How would you describe this sort of moment that Montana is experiencing?

**Grant Kier:** Well, it's obviously a very dynamic point in time for Montana. And I think the thing that we're seeing here that I think a lot of my peers across the state are seeing as well, is that shift in demographics and around leadership and how it is impacting some of the relationships we see in our community and the power that those relationships have to enable us to take on big problems that we see in our communities. So specifically, a few factors that we're seeing right now is we're seeing this big wave of baby boomers who are retiring. In many cases, those retirements are facilitated by an exit plan that includes selling a company off to a bigger company. Some of those companies aren't located in Montana, so suddenly we now have a business owned by a company that's less tethered to our own community and its interests. Some of those companies are replacing CEOs with new CEOs who are in the remote workforce operating remotely out of new places that are in our communities. So again, there's this sense of that person who runs the company less connected to our community and to the issues that

we face. And I think we're seeing it at lower levels of employment, even where we're seeing a lot of remote workers taking on jobs to fill employment needs of a lot of our businesses and communities. And those employees are less connected to each other within the workplace, but also less connected to our communities and our towns across Montana.

**Justin Angle:** So, Bryce, how would you describe these trends that Grant is outlining in terms of the economic data that you track regularly?

**Bryce Ward:** Okay. So, it's worth just putting a label on this because we call this social capital. The easy way to think about it is how we use relationships to solve problems. Both individually and collectively. It's a hard thing to measure because it's kind of this complicated thing. In lots of different ways and tries attempts to measure it. And the thing I want to do is, as I am apt to do, is the American Time Use Survey and the American Time Use Survey again, it's a survey. They ask people every day of the year randomly and they say, well, what did you do yesterday? And people in five-minute interview will say, I did this right? So, we can see like how often people say they were volunteering. Right. Or they were doing some form of kind of civic public service, and it's gone down. So, we have these data for 20 years, almost 20 years. And, you know, if you went back for a middle aged, middle-aged guys like us, you know, 20 some years ago, 29 days a year, effectively, we would have said we were engaged in volunteering. And in 2021, obviously pandemic affects that, but that was down to 17 and those declines are, everybody's seeing declines of some sort but is particularly strong amongst kind of middle-aged folks? So, I wouldn't say it, there is some other data to look at and really,

we don't really have great time trend data on volunteerism. You know, it's just that, you know, people are still volunteering in terms of, you know, okay, yeah, maybe that hasn't gone down in terms of, do I volunteer at all? It's about a third. But, you know, the Time Use Survey is great because it gets at intensity, right? Like, how frequently am I doing it? And it seems like, yeah, we've lost some of that participation. So, another question that is at least roughly comparable, they ask, do you exchange favors with your neighbors? Half of Americans do not over the course of an entire year, exchange favors with their neighbors, and the share that do so regularly is single digits. And then the last one, which has only been asked more recently, is, you know, just in general, not in volunteerism, but just have you gotten together with other people in your neighborhood or your community to do something positive for change? Only one in five Americans say they do that. And again, that fell during the pandemic. It was 20% in 2017, 2019, and 2021, it was down to 17. It's not clear. I don't again, we don't have the, I don't have the full context. You know, Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* suggests that yeah, if we went back even further. You know, we would see, you know, these big long-term trends. But the data that we have in the last decade is kind of messy. So, I can't tell you what's happening more recently, which is what I really wanted to do. But, you know, certainly it suggests that maybe it's not an obvious glaring alarm, but there's some concern here in the data that suggests that, yeah, things are changing, perhaps in ways that aren't going to help, but, you know, come together and effect positive change in our neighborhood or in our community.

**Justin Angle:** So, Grant, you know, it'll be interesting to hear your kind of descriptive experience in talking to business leaders, community leaders, etc. But it sounds like from the problem, as you describe it in the data Bryce outlines that there's several dimensions to it, but two important ones are, well, if fewer people are volunteering and they're volunteering for fewer days or hours, however you quantify that, that's an amount of public welfare labor that's just not occurring. A certain amount of work is not occurring. The other piece of it is what does it kind of do to people's connection to community and each other? I think that's more of a descriptive issue. But yeah, what are you observing out there and how do you kind of get your head around the significance of this problem?

**Grant Kier:** So, I think there's a couple of things that led me to sort of identify this as an issue worth talking about in our communities. The first was just over years of talking to civic groups, watching those civic groups get smaller and older over time, as I go in to talk to them and sort of wondering who it was that was going to take over a lot of the work that we saw our communities do over many generations.

**Justin Angle:** And can we just stipulate, what are some of those work functions, like what were these civic organizations doing?

**Grant Kier:** I mean a lot of that's just community volunteer work and sort of community cleanup projects, fighting poverty and helping deliver food to people who are in need.

**Justin Angle:** Sponsoring events and things at the school.

**Grant Kier:** These simple things like sponsoring events and contributing money to important community causes are other parts of that. But it is part of that roll up your sleeves labor that gets done. It's building houses for Habitat for Humanity. That kind of work that's happening in our community day in and day out that is sort of off the books, but instrumental to accomplishing a lot of our goals. The second factor is that my organization is fundamentally and it was even conceived in the process of responding to challenge. And so, part of the Missoula Economic Partnership's role is to sort of rally the troops in time of need. And one of the things I've observed over the last five years is that the people who are leading our community aren't always sure who to reach out to anymore, to rally the troops. And so, they might not know the CEO at that company that they knew for 30 years up until just a couple of years ago, or they might not know the leader of this other community institution the way they did ten years ago. And so, they don't have that person they can call at 10:00 at night when they just had an idea about a way to go out and solve a community problem. So, I guess for me, I see it as two big questions for us is do we have the relationships in our community at the leadership level to even start to identify what the collective problems are we should be bringing that energy to? And the second is, do we have the resources and the capacity to solve the problem if we can identify it collectively as a community?

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And some of these factors that roll up into these outcomes that we're discussing today are not necessarily bad. I mean, the rise of remote work has enabled a lot

more flexibility for families and geographic flexibility for folks that maybe have trouble finding housing in certain areas. It's opened Montana up as a place where companies can invest in new ways. So, we're not necessarily describing the outcome of some awful thing like these. These are some of the benefits of growth. Would you agree with that, Bryce?

**Bryce Ward:** There's tradeoffs. And the reality is it's fine to accept the benefits, but it's important to acknowledge the costs because in that acknowledgment it becomes the process of, oh, I actually just can't, we just can't be like, oh, this is great. We have to be paying attention to the relationships and the access to resources that we're going to need at some point to solve various problems. And there was a New York Times little quiz like a couple months ago and evaluate the quality of your social relationships. Right. And one of the questions in there was, you know, who can you call at two in the morning? And as I answered that question, I was like, oh, I got lots of people. And then I thought about it, and I was like, well, the first seven people on my list don't live in Missoula. It's one thing if I have a problem that doesn't matter where you are to solve, but it's a big problem. If I have a problem that I need to solve in two in the morning and I need somebody who can come and help me at two in the morning, we can bring resources from across the globe to help focus and solve our problems. That's all great. But every once in a while, in fact, more than every once in a while, often, both individually and collectively, we got to figure out what to do here in our neighborhoods and in our communities. And that requires relationships with the people who are here in our neighborhoods and in our communities. And if those are disappearing, then we have a problem.

**Justin Angle:** Grant, when you articulate this and engage with the public about this topic, does it resonate? Are people like nodding their heads and thinking, yeah, yeah, that kind of makes some sense because it is. And we're trying to define it and measure it right now, but it's a little ephemeral of a concept. It's sort of like you don't really know what's gone until it's gone.

**Grant Kier:** That's right. I think this whole idea of social capital is probably nebulous for many, but I can't stress strongly enough how much I'm convinced that it is an important part of who we are as a community and as a state. Yes, is the answer to your question. Part of what has given me the confidence to do this more than once is that the first time I gave this talk, I had a number of people, leaders in our community coming up to me and saying, wow, thank you. I hadn't put my finger on what it was, but this is something that's kind of been I've been noticing and has kind of been a question in my mind for a number of years now. And the second time I gave the talk, even stronger feedback to the point where I've actually had people in those talks reach out to me afterward and call and say, hey, I want to talk to you about how this is impacting me and my company. And you have kind of helped me realize I need to start making a plan for how I'm developing the next generation of leaders in my company or how I'm developing partnerships to allow my company to continue to be successful here in the future.

**Justin Angle:** And so, one of the threads we pull on often in this series and in this show in general is what is Montana? How do you describe this place, this community, the spirit? And it's not a static thing, but what we're broadly describing are some changes to that and a reconceptualize nation, and that's threatening to the people that feel like it's kind of something



that's moving in a different place than they want it to be or have been accustomed to. Is that resonate with your experience?

**Grant Kier:** Very much. And I think I see it as a threat in two ways. I think it's a threat to what many of us in Montana have valued about being here. And so, I think one thing that I have known many people to appreciate about being in Montana, this includes business owners and community members, is when they feel like they see an issue emerging that they need something done about. They know who to call and how to sort of catalyze a group of people to go out and solve the problem. So, if it's a business owner and they call me and they say, hey, this policy is really getting in the way of what I think the intended outcomes are supposed to be, we sit down with policymakers and talk about this issue and think about a different way to approach it. All of those policymakers are accessible to them.

**Justin Angle:** Mm hmm.

**Grant Kier:** And I think that's true at the grassroots level, all the way up to our senior business leaders. But there's a second way that I'm not sure everybody understands, which is what gives us a competitive advantage as a state. So, part of my job is to strategically identify and recruit companies that we want to be here. And one of the things that those companies are looking at when they come to Montana is the accessibility of business and decision makers. And so, when they see peer groups, they can enter into easily and really have people to talk to about how business is going for them, what industry needs are like, and how to make changes

around those or policymakers who are accessible and responsive to their needs. People feel really good that if they come here, they'll get an ear with somebody about how to make their business more successful over time.

**Justin Angle:** We'll be back to our conversation with Bryce Ward and Grant Kier after this short break.

**Justin Angle:** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Bryce Ward and Grant Kier about the state of social capital in Montana.

**Justin Angle:** So, Bryce, as you referenced a few moments ago, you've been on the Economic Outlook tour talking about the changes in demographics to the state. How are you kind of thinking about this social dynamic with the growth in cities, the changes in the makeup of those cities, the changes in the rural communities? How do you kind of square those two?

**Bryce Ward:** Well, the way I frame it or have been framing it in the address is, again, it's just all tradeoffs, right? So, you know, as people come here, as more people are different people want to spend more time here. Well, that creates challenges, you know, because there's more people and there's, we have to either change how we allocate stuff or create more stuff. And those changes then change things. And people are like, I don't like change. And you know, from a community perspective, if you let more people in, you get what I call the consequences of size. Okay. Well, there's more people. But if I don't, demand didn't go anywhere. Right. So, I get

the consequences of cost, right. And I start changing the social composition of the place because I effectively push out people who are low and middle income.

**Justin Angle:** It gets too expensive to afford a home or an apartment here.

**Bryce Ward:** And both of them people don't like. So, some people will leave. So, you know, when I conceptualize a community, right, there's two things. Resources and relationships. Both of them are vital to my success here and our success here. More resources, more people. That's good. More resources means I have more options. There's more stuff in the pantry. But resources by themselves without relationships that allow me to access those resources or to just enjoy the relationships because they're their own kind of resource are a problem. And so, you know, things that mess up relationships also mess up Montana. As you push people out, it's not random who's leaving, right? You know, we're making choices about who gets to be here or not. The concern which we see across the West. Any place that's dealing with these kind of growth pressures is. It's long-time people that are forced out and it's their families that get torn apart, the families then leave. You know, we lose kind of that history in the community and you're already actually seeing it. It's slow. But the share of Montana households with at least one member who's a native Montanan. It just keeps ticking down and, you know, there's value in having that historical memory and having that stuff get passed down. And that's where these growth pressures, the changing has set the number of people, the different people, the at the margins, they start to mess with that. And that's, you know, again, change is

inevitable, but we want to manage that change in ways that we're at least aware of the threats so that we can take steps to kind of mitigate those effects.

**Justin Angle:** What leverage do we have? We have policy and then we have culture and norms. And so, from your vantage point, Grant, how do you kind of think about policies to address this challenge? And then how do you kind of think about building norms with the folks that you interact with?

**Grant Kier:** Yeah, quite honestly, I feel like what's been a bit risky about us leading on this conversation is this is much less about policy and much more about norms and culture. And I think having listened to Bryce giving some of his talks over the years and him helping us really wrestle with what was happening in our community through Covid in terms of demographic changes and what was happening here, it did really impress upon me the importance of making decisions about, very conscious decisions about, the way we treat people coming into our communities. And I will say, and I'll preface all of that by saying, our number one priority for the Missoula Economic Partnership and our whole long-range plan is how do we make sure that the people who are here have sufficient opportunities to stay if they choose to? So, our number one priority is making sure we aren't displacing Montanans with the people coming in, but we know people are coming and we need people to come if we're going to be healthy and strong over time. So how do we think critically about how we use the relationships and the process of inviting people into our communities when they get here so that we are actually perpetuating that long term history of building strong relationships, of understanding one

another's challenges, and of working together in some way, formal or informal, to solve those problems.

**Justin Angle:** Do you see it happening in certain sectors, like I think of Montana as such a rich community of community banking, like so many of the banks here, of deep roots in the community, they have, you know, like First Security Bank, one of our sponsors has a volunteerism requirement for their employees. Like are there sectors where it's easier and sectors where it's maybe more difficult?

**Grant Kier:** I think in some of our bigger institutions like banks, some of our bigger companies, there is this sort of expressed either a mandate or permission to get out and volunteer. And that's wonderful. I think what's harder is those people who aren't part of an organization that's already really steeped in the culture of our communities, or connected to our communities in those ways, that remote worker, it's really hard for them to know where they're supposed to start to get out and engaged in our communities. And I think many of our nonprofits across the state and region are also facing the same question is how do we connect with these people who've come into our communities? And we know that they are probably looking for opportunities and ways to get involved. So, some of it is just individual people making choices about that new neighbor next door and inviting them across the street to learn about what's going on in their community and where they can engage. Some of it's more formal. We're certainly working on new engagement programs that focus more on events that don't just bring sort of the usual suspects together, but really try to expand the network of people that

we reach into to invite to actual events so that we're formally creating opportunities for people to build those relationships. You know, the truth is that I've started this sort of campaign of including this in my community conversations, because I think we need a lot of different minds to think about the ways that we approach this issue and we sort of capitalize on the opportunity and maximize it to our benefit as opposed to just being angry and disgruntled that there's too many people at the trailhead or that the rivers are crowded. Really thinking carefully about how do we bring this new audience that's here into our communities, and also how do we reach out across great distances to take people who might be in leadership, formal leadership positions, but don't yet understand what it means to be leading something that's based in Montana, even if they don't live here.

**Justin Angle:** So, we've talked about this issue in a variety of iterations over the course of this Incentives & Instinct series. Bryce, are there things that are happening in Montana that are happening more broadly across the United States? And what does that mean for the health of our society?

**Bryce Ward:** I don't think Montana's different. My guess is that we're going to notice it more. One of the issues that is that as you get bigger, we rely on more formal stuff than informal stuff. And this is true even within Montana, right? In Missoula, we have Grant Kier, we have the Missoula Economic Partnership. I'm guessing as you move down the hierarchy of towns in Montana, there is no Grant Kier. Right. The Grant Kier is some informal, local group of people that get together and do it. And that's, you know, that's what I grew up with, right? I watched

my dad do it. I watched my grandfather do it. You know, they were all just, they just did it. And so, as you get bigger and have more resources, you get more specialized. And that's okay. That said, there's still like we talked about earlier, there's still stuff that, we still need the informal, we still need the network. I can't just, Grant can't do everything. He just needs, you know, to be he still has to be able to tap into a network that exists. And the challenge that we face is that because so much of this had to be done through informal networks historically and because of other constraints in the economy or lack of other constraints in the economy, people just did this stuff. Yeah, like what else am I going to do? I'm going to go to the Rotary meeting and I'm going to go to the Elks Club meeting and I'm going to go to whatever it might be. And now I've got all the other stuff. I don't, I'm not doing that, me literally I'm not doing that. And according to the data most people like me are not doing that. We have to be more intentional. Right. And I've been preaching this literally for nine years. Networks do not build themselves. Social capital does not build itself. And as individuals, we will do some amount of investment in it. We will probably make mistakes because we don't really appreciate how important it is. But even as communities, we're going to make mistakes. And my long vision has been well look as we get more resources, it needs to become a job. There needs to be in a place the size of Missoula, several dozen people who are effectively building networks that essentially are the weak ties. That is the formal term for it.

**Justin Angle:** You could argue it's an infrastructure project.

**Bryce Ward:** It is exactly an infrastructure project. The social infrastructure is like, well, there's this group over here, there's this group over here, and I'm oh, and they keep pulling people together, facilitating those, Grant, already, that's part of his job effectively. We have people that do it. I'm just not sure we have enough. And because this is kind of a new position, I'm not sure we have like it's like you go get a degree in it. But that's what we need, we need to be training people and then figuring out who pays for it. And then it basically becomes, yeah, we're going to pull people in so that both as individuals and then collectively our communities have more social capital.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, these are sorts of the jobs that shifts in technology shifts and demographics create that we don't often talk about them being created. Grant, in our remaining time, let's make the pitch for somebody who's listening, who's thinking, you know what, that's that resonates. I want to go out and get involved. I want to just learn more about my community. I want to become engaged. What sort of suggestion, where do people start?

**Grant Kier:** I think we have a great network of nonprofits across the state. We have the Montana Nonprofit Association that can help people connect to nonprofits in our communities. You know, here in our community, I would encourage people to reach out to somebody like United Way, who can really help them understand what resources and opportunities are here that might fit their needs. Part of this is formally engaging in volunteerism. Part of this is just building stronger relationships in communities. And so, I can't stress strongly enough. I think Bryce talked a little bit about statistics of people just doing things with their neighbors, how



important it is when that person moves in across the street and that for sale sign finally goes down to just walk across the street and make sure that that person is starting to feel what it's like to be a part of Montana and help them get to know the community through you and through the neighborhood and through your neighbors. Because I think it does start as simple as that. And I think that's how my family got to know Montana by sitting down with the people we work with, and we live near and learning more about the community and the interests. And suddenly we're part of this incredibly vibrant network of people who are all identifying and working on cool problems in our communities all the time. And it's really inspiring and enriching. And I think that's what, frankly, many people are excited about when they leave other places and come to a place like Montana to be a part of a community like that.

**Justin Angle:** And there's so many easy onramps to that. I mean, I think about the day we moved into our house, two different neighbors came over and said, hey, you got to pay attention to bears living here and here's how. And we're like, okay, this is new information. And I got to meet, I get the ancillary benefits of meeting these people, having a connection with them. It could be bears, could be how you deal with wildfire. Could be any number of issues are easy onramps if you're facing new people in your community or you're new or a newcomer and want to learn more. Bryce, what would be your call to action on our in our remaining minutes.

**Bryce Ward:** It's one of two things: either go to things, show up and go regularly so that you see the same people over and over again so that you're not just like they're familiar to you. And

then the other thing would be to invite in, you know, and that doesn't have to be again, has to be a formal event. Throw a party. Invite your neighbors. Invite all of the parents on your kid's soccer team, whatever it might be. Just bring people together. And when you're hosting that party, make sure that you're being a good host and doing the good hosting, which is say, oh, hi, Grant, have you met Justin? Justin is a professor at the business school, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, just facilitate those conversations so that, you know, people get the chance to get to know one another, you know, be a matchmaker.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. 90% of life is showing up. That's what I tell students. And, yeah, we should all put ourselves out there. I appreciate how both of you put yourselves out there with passion and eloquence. And I really appreciate joining us today.

**Bryce Ward:** Thanks for having us.

**Grant Kier:** Thank you, Justin.

**Justin Angle:** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49. A generous gift from UM alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

**Justin Angle:** A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer.

VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of All Things Sound. Thanks a lot, and see you next time.