

# **Coos Economic Action Plan Steering Committee Minutes 6 February 2008**

**Present:** Sam Stoddard, Brad Wyman, Katie Kelley, KD Paine, Bing Judd, Racheal Stuart, Jayne O'Connor, Howie Wemyss, Dave Atkinson, Brian Emerson, Paul Casey, Dave Govatski, Scott Labnon, Rick Demark, Pat Corso, Tom Wagner, Peter Powell, Cathy McDowell, Kathy Eneguess, Jim Tibbetts, Beno Lamontagne, Steve Barba, Chris Diego, Dave Auger, Barry Kelley, Rick Tillotson, Peter Riviere, Jeff Hayes, Ed Tomey

## **TRC Analysis and Next Steps**

I'm starting here because it is the focus we took away from the meeting built atop the excellent works and product of the TRCs that guides us forward. I may employ bullets to capture the remarks as, for the most part, they were quick comments that form what I took away as the analysis and next steps.

I believe we agreed we need to;

- make sure the plan works,
- that it is brutally honest about what's achievable;
- who is need to empower the vision;
- that we should not offer false hope;
- that with all the commonality in the county we should take this opportunity to "break the mold"
- establish a list of stupid laws for legislative advocacy
- Focus on village centers ( district heating, Wi-Fi, creative zones)
- Need for greater PR/Communications/collaborations/networks
- Consider worldwide influences on markets, customer base
- Look to greatest impact on largest # of Coos communities

It was suggested we structure the action steps in phases over a five-year period picking the low-hanging fruit first but intending to drill deeper (or climb higher in the tree as it were) in actions and strategies as we accomplish those steps. Recommend phased approaches.

A suggestion to establish criteria for TRCs to work by in honing their list was shelved in favor of letting the TRCs develop their own criteria now that they'd sat with the representative Steering Committee group. What was bandied about before reaching that conclusion included:

- broad inclusiveness,
- greatest impact,
- job creation;
- actions likely to spawn greatest support;
- reverse population/workforce loss trends;

- coordinate with other actions ongoing simultaneously.

Ultimately, it was agreed the TRC chairs and facilitators should meet with the Core Group of the Steering Committee **on March 21<sup>st</sup>** (Hope Springs eternal) at North Country Council, to select the top five achievable, significant action steps after similar action steps are blended (e.g. Marketing should be expanded to include all county activities, not just tourism).

The next full Steering Committee meeting would be set for mid-April for a review of the draft report and action plan. This would allow us to time public presentations in May in Berlin, Lancaster and Colebrook to share this with the elected officials and agencies and the public.

## **TRC Presentations**

Before we set out to hear from the individual TRCs our facilitator, Ed Tomey explained why we forged ahead for the day in spite of some nasty commutes rather than reschedule or move to the default date. “We didn’t want anyone who had planned to be here to miss out. This is a group, I’ve learned, that will not accept failure.”

## **Energy TRC**

Presented by Rick Demark, facilitator and Dave Auger, chair

In a powerpoint presentation Rick and Dave explained that the group was guided by 5 values or principles established at the first session:

- efficiency;
- self-sufficiency;
- renewability (of fuel sources);
- sustainability;
- dispersed production battled with centralized production for dominance throughout.

Coos County already produces most of its own power needs with most of that production (about 75 megaWatts) from green sources (hydro and biomass plants).

Once these principles were established the group brainstormed 48 different actions and then categorized those 48 into 4 buckets/silos of like activities covered by the following topical areas: Energy production; Legislative Action; Efficiency Measures; and Information/Public Education.

Under the first **Energy Production** the top action item was the development of small scale, decentralized combined heat and power (CHP) generation capacity that was capable of being operated by small businesses or local or regional municipal operators; use alternative means (such as carbon credits) to find expedient financing for needed transmission upgrades; provide qualified support for large scale (greater than 25

megaWatts) of power generation assuming issues of transmission; sustainability of wood supply; plant efficiencies and the extent of local economic benefit can be quantified as positive to the related 5 principles or values.

## **Legislative**

Promote local and state legislation that would incentivize property tax exemptions to homeowners and businesses who install energy efficient equipment or renewable fueled appliances; promote legislation which enables the energy production strategies proposed by this committee where necessary

## **Efficiency**

Catalog and promote existing and/or create new financial and technical assistance programs (such as revolving loans or grants for program to change out inefficient heating appliances like pre-1992 wood stoves or oil-fired furnaces.

Establish locally based formation of homeowner/business owner energy efficiency and awareness programs like the Plymouth Area Renewable Energy Initiative.

## **Information/Public Education**

Develop a Heat Supply Plan that would identify ways to heat the 13,000 Coos County households as well as county-wide businesses and commercial establishment using local, renewable sources of energy. Dave Auger said some \$26million in imported fuels were purchased by county residents and businesses producing a leakage of that much income out of the county. He said the Groveton District Heating program estimated an annual savings of 50% for participants.

Develop an energy curriculum including green technologies at WMCC that would develop a new workforce, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

## **Steering Committee Response:**

Creating a Stupid List of regulatory barriers to accomplishing distributed and dispersed power and heating systems. David acknowledged there is a concern over the competing demands for a finite supply of wood for fuels in all these scenarios. One view was that with large, centralized, grid feeding systems the local wealth leaves the local communities (an estimated \$26m leaves Coos for purchase of heating fuels alone and \$6 billion leaves the Northern Forest region for a similar purposes). It was suggested a local community benefits requirement be included in any siting reviews of energy generation plans. "This speaks to the need for energy production efficiency standards that would require large thermal generators (regardless of the fuel type) to co-locate their operation near other businesses that could benefit from waste heat, steam, hot water or other products. It was said that thermal generators typically operate at 30-35% efficiency meaning they chew through low-grade wood products while extracting only a third of available energy per ton, a sure way to deplete the region's forests of sustainable supplies for higher value-added products. District heating systems would help underline smart growth with residential concentrations in core area (village centers) instead of sprawling across the countryside. Such a model would be an attraction for businesses to a renewed and embraced "quality of life". Such a principle might impose higher building efficiency standards on those using a district heating source.

Others from Ed's list:

- Coordinate Energy/Timber TRCs lists
- Competition from bio-mass, pellets and other wood uses
- State aid/incentives for new energy appliance replacement program to increase efficiencies
- Increased housing standards at local level to induce energy efficiency standards

## **Timber/Wood Products TRC**

**Brad Wyman, chair; Sam Stoddard, facilitator**

Four key action areas were presented: Fiber Supply; Markets/ Products Diversity; Timbering energy; Existing Business and Labor

### **Fiber Supply**

This group recognizes the need for a DRED/No. Country Council organized Regional Wood Supply Study with a panel to discuss the same set for WMRHS on March 7<sup>th</sup> from 9:30 to 3 p.m. the study will discuss all present supply studies and methodology and attempt to fill in the blanks. There is considerable disagreement in the region about the availability and the quantity of timber to supply proposed wood product manufacturing.

### **Product and Market Diversification**

Desire to see better use of natural resources for higher value added products. To link R&D from the US Forest Service Forest products Lab in Madison Wisconsin and UMAINE Forest Products Center to a commercialization center in Coos and then link new products to possible investors.

### **Existing Business and Labor**

To develop means of retaining existing wood products, timber industry businesses and to train a new workforce to replace the graying workforce

### **Timbering Energy**

Finds ways to lower the cost of producing wood products starting with trucking and harvesting fuel costs which have tripled in four years placing many businesses in marginal areas of profitability.

Recommendations included; creating a bio-diesel plant in Coos County that was owned, possibly cooperatively by the timber industry; create a cooperative buying pool in the interim to bulk buy bio-diesel product; create a cooperative to own and operate all trucking aspects of timber industry in Coos County.

Other notions were to create a commercial timber zone with similar weight limits and laws for trucking in northern forest states.

The last notion was to create BMPs (Best Mgmt Practices) for timber operations including no idling periods, shorter skidder routes, etc.

### **Steering Committee Response:**

Looking at monetizing the forest via new carbon credits and Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiatives that would pay timberland owners to maintain a certain level of stocking on the ground to take up CO<sub>2</sub>; suggested a survey of timberland owners inclinations if timber/fiber was used for “green” purposes; methods to enhance timberland ownership and maintenance of sustainable stocking (Current Use seen as sometimes punitive to the landowner who manages his acreage); better marketing of locally produced goods (Brown St. Furniture, etc); better networking of opportunities and investors; hit or miss with certified wood presently. Suggest connecting the dots between certified products and designers/builders.

Others from Ed’s list:

- Impact of outside forces on Coos forest products industry
- Examine opportunities for foreign manufacturing investment in Coos while currency imbalances are favorable
- Need better marketing/communications strategy to add value to R&D efforts
- Video about “Why Cutting Wood is Green”
- What keeps region from having large, medium, small furniture manufacturers

## **Tourism TRC**

### **Howie Wemyss, chair; Jayne O’Connor, facilitator**

This group spent considerable time cataloguing the challenges and opportunities of the tourism industry which showed \$250million in visitor spending in the county for 2005 (the most recent year for which data was available). Spending that year included \$70.03 million in payments of NH Rooms and Meals taxes. Some 4,051 tourism-related jobs were created in the county (about 16.5% of the county’s labor pool) with a payroll of \$88.9 million. Though the Great North Woods Region produces a tiny fraction of the state’s Rooms and Meals tax, Coos reported the highest single day expenditure by visitors due, no doubt, to the distance tourist travel to the region which necessitates an overnight stay, an obvious area to build on.

Jayne and Howie’s presentation echoed that goals and objectives of the group should follow the SMART Rule in that they should be: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ewarding, and **T**ime-**B**ound.

Four key action steps were reported out of the Tourism TRC and these included;

- Tourism Attractions
- Tourism Promotion
- Tourism Infrastructure
- Tourism Hospitality
- Tourism Services

Under **Attractions** the action steps included the view that there was a lack of coordinated effort to protect and maintain cultural and natural resources which are the prime draws for visitors. Because much of the activities we presently promote are weather/seasonally dependent there is a great need to develop weather-proof activities that will still draw visitors.

Headlining under **Promotions** was the need for more promotional materials and methods (which typically rely on more high-speed bandwidth availability ubiquitously throughout the county). There also was a perceived lack of funding for promotion at the local level and a belief that the state should spend more (NH is 47<sup>th</sup> in state spending on tourism though it is the second largest revenue maker for the state). There is greater need for cooperative marketing across the board in the county whether by Chambers of Commerce or business and cultural groups.

Yet another challenge is the perceived distance from tourism markets. (there is one view that tourism spending drops off more than 2.5 hours from the home, a view undermined by the snowmobile, hunting, fishing and hiking populations which continually travel longer distances for their sport.

On the local level there is a generally negative opinion of tourists and of tourism as low-paying job provider.

Lack of widespread broadband is the chief **Infrastructure** need cited by members. Close on its heels is overcoming the perceived notion of the transportation obstacle whether distance or cost. Once travelers are in our midst an absence of informative signage is a major deficit for visitors with even our major attractions and destinations going unsigned.

To protect the golden goose-our natural resources and scenery- the major visitor amenity cited, there is need for a mature land-use plan that protects those visitor-desired values (viewsheds, free access to timberlands and waterways, hiking trails, etc.).

And lastly there is a need to address the deteriorated and transitioning industrial downtown streetscapes so visitors and businesses are more welcomed to linger, browse and spend on the authentic experiences offered in Coos County.

Building on the visitor offerings is the means of presentation and often the missing ingredient is **Hospitality**. In this realm more training in customer service for retail and tourism employees is indicated.

Lastly, in **Tourism Services** some of the more obvious basic building blocks of well-connected visitor services plan includes: more signage, more public restrooms, additional services for visitors which are seeing a decline as the native population declines along with the generational mix that made up the personnel matrix that provided those services. A lack of air service into the region and continuing lack of movement at finding collaborative and reciprocal snowmobile and ATV registration with neighboring states and the Quebec province impede more regional attraction for these enthusiasts.

Recommended action steps to address these issues include:

- Develop community theme (Brook's branding?)
- ID Cultural and Natural Resources
- Develop a "toolbox" for communities to use
- Public education about the value of Natural and Cultural resources and the need to maintain them
- Market these resources to locals and visitors alike with, at minimum, better signage
- Institute Open Space initiatives and support Current Use
- Promote and encourage artists/craft coops (See Creative Economy)
- Create an effective web presence that "closes the deal". Is all inclusive for GNWRA Chambers of Commerce
- Develop a "tool box" for Chambers to use
- Garner cooperation for region-wide website and print material
- Coordinate print and web presence with regional brand
- Train area staff and residents to "cross sell" the area and its businesses
- Encourage partnerships to look for funding/resources
- Encourage change in RMT distributions at town level to support local tourism development/marketing/materials development, etc.
- Seek Joint Program Promotional and other pools of funding
- Seek funds from local businesses for sponsorships and advertisements
- Train Chamber staff in grant writing and fundraising opportunities
- Encourage change in RMT distribution in concord

### **Steering Committee Response:**

There was animated Steering Committee input to this TRC with

- Lively discussion about the state's meager support of tourism though it represents 30% of all state revenues from the RMT. "It is the only economic sector that's taxed yet it benefits all sectors" (13% of out-of-state businesses relocating to NH developed their affinity for the region as vacationers/visitors). 60% of RMT goes to state's general fund/30% to communities. We should try to get a piece of that locally. "It would be easier outlawing firearms" said Steve Barba. The state sees a 9X return for its investment in tourism promotion which is a large increase principally because the state measures and tracks its returns from that investment. "We need broader advocacy from a broader base for increased state spending". The legislature doesn't see tourism as its business. Need to change that attitude. Tourism promotion is not an expense but an investment.
- Use Coos County as the model as a "demonstrator" for that activity
- NH is the most definitive New England state
- Must market to the separate constituencies and do well enough with each that the visitor will return
- Need to know who's coming here

- The #1 travel lure is: safety and well being of the destination. Coos offers that.
- Market the whole of the county's attributes, not just tourism. Tie the linkages together and make the case with the state's legislators
- Coos is the most homogenous for marketing as a whole
- Need to identify Champions of these efforts
- Hospitality and tourism is economic development.

## **Creative/Knowledge Economy**

### **Katie Kelley, chair; Katie D. Paine, facilitator**

Difficulty in defining the parameters of creative/knowledge economy recognizing that health care and education are components of CKE realm.

This sector relies heavily on existence of near ubiquitous broadband capacity throughout the county.

A summary of recommendations included the following six categories:

- Study the feasibility of creating one or more "Creative Zones" including potential anchor artists' centers in the county.  
Based on the findings that attracting and retaining qualified workers is enhanced by the presence of a recognized and supported creative sector. Such workers are an essential entrepreneurial component in the effort to "repopulate" and "re-animate" communities in danger of losing a critical mass of residents due to closure of traditional industries, outward generation migration, and a corresponding aging core of inhabitants. This cultural sector is necessary as social mediator for what will be a diversifying population of newcomers.
- Provide Training and Incubator space to support entrepreneurs.  
Using the WREN (Women's Rural Entrepreneurial Network in Bethlehem) supports "better lives and livelihoods" by weaving together economic empowerment, efforts to preserve and enhance the best of our quality of life, and initiatives that benefit the greatest number of people.
- Involve CKE stakeholders in Master planning process in communities.  
Cultural enterprises complement many of the region's other strengths: a strong tourism base, concentrations of higher education, high technology, medical care and finance and insurance. This sector is not only a community asset for the higher quality of life it provides but also because steady, lifetime work is what a sustainable, balanced community needs.
- Include CKE as a factor in Roger Brooks Tourism Branding efforts.  
An increasing recognition of the role played by arts, culture, and heritage. With this new awareness comes a new understanding of and interest in the role that the arts can play not only in developing heritage and cultural

tourism but also in improving the quality of daily life and in retaining residents of all ages.

- Implement strategic communications plan to raise awareness and appreciation of the region's arts, culture and heritage resources.  
In a recent survey conducted by KDPaine culture was rated the lowest of all categories. In deed 8% cited a lack of cultural offerings as the biggest disadvantage to living in Coos County.
- Provide Broadband throughout the county with Free Wi-Fi in every downtown.  
Broadband access is one of the most critical infrastructure pieces to support a modern, connected society and absolutely critical for marketing, social networking of artisans and activities.

**Steering Committee Feedback:**

- We won't have communities at all without a vibrant health care community and delivery system in the county.
- Collaboration is the thread that binds all the sectors though this is a counter-intuitive process.
- Is "free" Wi-Fi an attractant?
- What creates a vibrant "village center"?
- Apply "ball of yarn" metaphor to entire Coos EAP projects. Need to build networks in all spheres and sectors
- How to use technology to accomplish this?