

River Canyon Country Rural Tourism Studio

Two Year Progress Report

June 2015



RURAL TOURISM STUDIO

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A. Introduction

This report presents a progress assessment for the Rural Tourism Studio (RTS) program in River Canyon Country (RCC). The region includes Jefferson County, Crook County, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (CTWS) Reservation, and the northern part of Deschutes County (Terrebone area). It is a sub-region of Central Oregon.

Travel Oregon selected River Canyon Country through a competitive application process. The successful application was originally submitted by Crook County alone in July 2011, under the sponsorship of the Crook County Chamber of Commerce. As Travel Oregon worked with the community to refine the scope of work, the geographic boundaries and associated stakeholders were expanded to include Jefferson, the CTWS Reservation, the unincorporated Terrebone area and Smith Rock State Park in northern Deschutes County.

The RTS program workshops commenced in September 2012, and wrapped up in January 2013. In October of 2013, **eight months after completion of the RTS workshops, all participants received an electronic survey to gauge their short term impressions of what aspects of the program had proven most useful and effective as the community moved into project implementation.** The e-survey asked respondents to rate their progress on two categories of success factors for tourism development: their level of personal engagement to work effectively on tourism development, and community conditions—the broader context in which they operated. This information was summarized in a Six Month Progress Report.

The October 2013 e-survey results suggested several specific areas that were probed for this report:

- Information about regional programs, the asset inventory, and information about bicycle tourism were reported as having the greatest lasting value. How has the value of these RTS program components been apparent in your work around tourism development since the RTS?
- Given that the “capacity for implementation” was not high at the beginning of RTS, why did it not change much given the program’s focus on building such capacity?
- While trust and community involvement both increased significantly, the action teams appear to have stalled. Why? Could the program better help build community connections for implementation?
- What is the current status of progress on projects? Is there anything that could be done to renew momentum, or are the projects themselves not a good fit with current conditions?

What is normally conducted as a Twelve Month Progress Report for the Rural Tourism Studio was deferred here because there was little progress to report associated with RTS at the 12 month mark, While there has often been a lull in other RTS communities after the RTS workshops conclude, the lull was much worse here. There had been a tremendous amount of turnover in community leadership that contributed to the lack of activity. The action teams were largely inactive, and the steering committee met only once a year. Late in 2014, Travel Oregon staff provided on-site consultation in an attempt to jump start activity, but it was unsuccessful. **The region, however, has now reenergized on its own and has several projects in the pipeline that are generating positive momentum. There is visible progress.** This report draws on phone interviews with several steering committee members and other key stakeholders, as recommended by Travel Oregon. Interviews were conducted in June of 2015. The Appendix includes a summary of interviewees and key interview questions

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

The RCC region was for a while the most inactive of all the Rural Tourism Studio regions. But somehow, there is now a large volume of mutually reinforcing tourism development activity, and a renewed sense of optimism and energy. Participants do **credit RTS for helping them get to know people across the region well, to learn about each other's communities, and to show off their own, laying the groundwork for new collaborations to emerge.**

Interviewees ascribe little direct credit to the Rural Tourism Studio for many of the current projects; these preceded the workshops or were conceived of independently by individuals or organizations that did not participate. And yet, there is tremendous synergy that has been ascribed to "an alignment of moon and stars." Together, these projects are **building a bicycle tourism driven destination with a diverse range of other attractions to extend stays and entertain a wider audience.**

- Cycle Oregon included Madras as a stop in 2014, right after RTS
- This resulted in a grant for bicycle kiosks throughout the River Canyon Country region, for which matching funds are being sought from the RTS Matching Grant program.
- The Madras Mountain Views Scenic Bikeway was in the process of securing formal designation as the RTS program was being delivered. Now the region has another proposed Scenic Bikeway in Crook County, the Crooked River Scenic Bikeway.
- The [Cascade Cycling Classic](#) event, which feeds into the US Cycling Team trials, expanded into Jefferson County for the first time in 2014.
- Central Oregon Trails Alliance is actively working on mountain biking activities including a bike park including a "punk track" obstacle course adjacent on a site adjacent to a city park in Prineville
- A new entrepreneur moved to Prineville to open a bike related business, and is operating a storefront and bicycle tours, as well as itineraries featuring agritourism and culinary tourism destinations throughout the RCC region.
- He collaborates with the High Desert Farm and Food Alliance, which organized the [Crooked River Open Pasture](#) event series in the Summer of 2015. He is also a key organizer for the region's first Gravel biking event, the [Ochoco Roubaix](#), to be held on August 29, 2015.
- County and Tribal Cultural Coalitions organized production of the state's first [Cultural Byways](#) map, covering the RCC region.
- In Madras, the new "[Erickson Air Museum](#)" of vintage aircraft opened in August 2014, during the annual "Airshow of the Cascades" event opened in 2014.
- Actually there were four itineraries promoted by COVA, one of which came up during RTS as a joke- "Cowboys and Indians"! Also another tour around water/fishing/boating, and a third around cycling.

It seems clear that **bicycle tourism is a galvanizing type of activity that can tie together and drive regional collaboration around tourism, because it is very visible and backed by data about its economic impact. It also lends itself as a tool for imagining other diverse itineraries, and as a focus for community infrastructure improvements.**

But it has been an uphill battle in part because the region did not really have much track record in collaboration. The region was not self-defined, but rather suggested by outside entities after Crook County initially submitted an RTS application by itself back in 2011. Crook County, Northern Deschutes, Jefferson County and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs were united primarily in having some common topographical features and a shared sense of being underrepresented by the Bend-based Central Oregon Visitors Association. Although the region is not the largest region to date, interviewees regularly mentioned the barriers to collaboration created by the 30 miles separating the two County seats and the urban scale of Bend. Nevertheless, in the often-echoed words of one interviewee, **“everyone believes in the River Canyon Country concept”** and is working to use the label and overcome the barriers to action.

B. Perceived Value and Impact of RTS: Survey and Interview Findings

Fifty two people participated in the RCC Rural Tourism Studio: an average of 21 people attended each event and fourteen people received certificates for having participated in at least 6 of the 9 RTS events. It is interesting to note that two of the workshops with the below average participation, culinary/agritourism (19 people) and bicycle tourism (14 people) turned out to have the most influence on future tourism development.

According to e- survey respondents, **RTS had a positive impact on all variables related to the level of personal engagement in future tourism development, and on most community conditions related to tourism, albeit generally on a more modest scale than for past RTS communities.** Consistent with results from past RTS communities, all program components are seen as having significantly lasting value, which is important to acknowledge! River Canyon Country is first region to rank “information about regional tourism programs” as its top value-added.

PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT

In terms of their starting level of personal engagement, RCC respondents rated themselves slightly above average than past RTS communities. All of the indicators related to personal engagement in future tourism development improved (by between 12% and 36%) after the RTS workshops. This is, however, the lowest range of change reported by any RTS community to date, as further shown in Section C. In terms of level of personal engagement, the two indicators (of 6) that changed the most and ended the highest were:

- Knowledge of sustainable tourism development principles (+36.0% change)
- Awareness of assets and resources (+33.3% change)

In terms of which changes were most perceived to have been *caused* by the RTS program, respondent rankings were somewhat different. The two changes most caused by RTS itself were:

- Awareness of assets and resources for tourism development
- Knowledge of emerging market opportunities

COMMUNITY CONDITIONS:

In terms of their starting level of community conditions, RCC respondents rated themselves lower, on average, than past RTS communities. In particular, they rated the starting levels of trust and community involvement within the community around tourism development as lower than in any prior RTS community. Compared with other communities, they ranked their starting capacity to attract visitors as strong.

Nearly all of the indicators related to community conditions for future tourism development improved positively (by greater than 12%) after the RTS workshops. The four indicators (of 12) that changed the most were also the four community conditions ranked lowest at the start of RTS:

- Clarity of community priorities (+52.7%)
- Level of collaboration (+51.9%)
- Level of community involvement (+51.3%)
- Clarity of community vision for tourism development (+50.9% change)

Two factors, “ability of the area to attract visitors” and “capacity for implementation” were not judged to have changed at all. In the case of “ability to attract visitors”, this is understandable because it was already the community condition ranked most strong at the start of RTS. That “capacity for implementation” did not change either is less expected, as this was not an area of high capacity to begin with.

In terms of the causal effect of RTS on community conditions, respondents in general judged RTS to be a significant factor in explaining the changes they observed. Specifically, participants cited change associated with the level of political support for tourism, as well as the area’s ability to attract new visitors, draw repeat visitors and encourage longer stays, as most attributable to RTS. These are all areas where they ranked themselves as strong at the start of the program, and therefore showed little absolute change.

2015 Interviewees cited the following as evidence of an ability to attract repeat visitors

- The growth of cycling and cycling infrastructure is driving repeat business. We have done work to help business understand the value of tourism and visitors. I don’t hear negative things about bicyclists anymore.
- Cycle Oregon and the data from Travel Oregon and Ride Oregon Ride showed us there is a market for bicycle tourism here.

They cited the following as evidence of an Increase in level of political support

- I was re-elected as County Commissioner with tourism as a major priority
- The two main Chambers in the region both have tourism committees now.

QUOTES AND COMMENTS

Here are some survey and interview quotes about the **positive accomplishments**:

- *“RTS was successful, in that we got to know the other folks really well, we have allies, everyone believes in the RCC. That got us the furthest forward. Evidence of this, ongoing Chamber collaboration, and COVA more actively participating with the DMOS.”*
- *“Projects not directly connected to RTS, but spearheaded by RTS participants, have been successful, most notably bicycling”*
- *“We are seeing the impact of increased bicycling on our roads”*
- *“There were more people interested in Culinary Agritourism that was apparent during RTS, because the timing of the workshops did not work for many producers. I took the information I learned at RTS and reached out to farmers to find who wanted to get thing done. Along with many others, especially the High Desert Farm and Food Alliance, got results in the form of the Crooked River Open Pasture event series in Crook County. “*
- *“Harry is awesome- Travel Oregon put together some great products and tools for us- developed a web page for us, a style guide, how to incorporate the Seven Wonders campaign. This helps us to not reinvent the wheel. Please keep those products coming!”*
- *“James Good, owner of the new bike shop and touring company in Prineville, wasn’t yet in the area for RTS, but now is heavily involved in projects to create region-wide tours that feature agritourism and biking. He is a real asset. “*
- *“In the beginning, we in Jefferson County had a tough relationship with COVA, we didn’t want to be pushed. We have figured out that we need to ask them to help us, and they will step up. Conversations have gone well.”*
- *“Without RTS, we wouldn’t have gotten the jump start to get these things off the ground.”*
- *“RTS was the fertilizer, even if not the perfect lawn!”*

The personal interviews and the email survey also reveal some challenges. Here are some quotes about the **challenges to achieving additional progress.**

- *“Three of the four chamber directors turned over during our region, and 2 of them also had major changes in their Board composition. This instability handicapped us-- “Can’t light a fire when there is nothing to light”*
- *“With our grant application, we let it languish by depending too much on one person to create a budget. We should have been more pro-active earlier”.*
- *“Jefferson and Crook County have very different capacity, with Crook County/Prineville having far more resources. This, along with the 30 mile distance between the two county seats, made it difficult to work together easily. We ended up trying to get two leads for each project, rather than joint projects.”*
- *“Needs a paid local coordinator given the geography to help things move forward It would be great if COVA could help with this.”*
- *“We weren’t really a region to begin with. In looking back, our action plans should have been local first, then let’s get back together a year from now, now ready to work regionally. Trying to do the whole region first, even if we agree on focus, none of us had the infrastructure in place to implement. We needed to have our own local capacity and projects in place before we felt we could collaborate with other counties effectively. “*

- “Action teams didn’t take off in terms of having formal meetings- what worked better was having passionate individual “point people” who coordinated projects, calling upon team members as needed to get specific things done. Not sure if this is our local culture, or if it was just the dynamic of this region. This was how the first Scenic Bikeway actually happened.”
- “We revisited a lot of what we already know during RTS. Seems like a lot of repetition for those already in the industry.”

C. Logic Model vs. Actual Activities and Outcomes

When the initial Rural Tourism Studio program was first being designed, Travel Oregon developed a “logic model” to identify the intended benefits and results of the program as it unfolded in each host community over time. The chart below summarizes the key **logic model milestones for the first twelve months of activities after the RTS workshops are delivered, and the associated indicators of progress for River Canyon Country after 24 months.** Because of the significant difference in timeframe for this report vs other RTS communities, the results are not directly comparable across communities. **However, it is now clear that despite its slow start and non-linear path, the RCC region is on track to achieve overall RTS benchmarks.**

The rows shaded in green show milestones that have been completely met. The yellow rows show milestones where some notable progress has been made, even if incomplete. Red rows indicate milestones and activities that have stalled.

Immediate outcomes as per logic model:

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for River Canyon Country
Formation of action teams to move ideas and projects forward	Two of the action teams formed at the final RTS workshop stayed active with small participation: Marketing and Bicycling. As part of preparing the matching grant application, there are now three action teams: Marketing continues, Bicycling is now Biking/Hiking, and (new) Education.
Newer, more diverse mix of people involved with action teams	The action teams are larger than they were at the end of the RTS workshops. New people and organizations involved with specific projects but not formally members of the action teams.
New awareness and knowledge of tourism development opportunities and resources	Yes, as evidenced by the e-survey results. Increased knowledge of emerging market opportunities, sustainable development principles, and awareness of assets and resources. Travel Oregon resources cited as particularly valuable.
New connections made across diverse sectors in the community	Just beginning to take root, in terms of the relationship between the cities and counties. Bicycle tourism is a nexus for business and community partnership
Community in agreement on a vision for tourism in their area and critical next steps to move forward	Vision developed through RTS not broadly adopted, but yes, it is being advanced by action team projects as well as independent efforts (e.g. Gravel events, Farm tour events, etc). Many different projects being undertaken by a variety of individual champions and organizations that reinforce RTS goals and the regional vision.
Establish deeper relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	The connections with Travel Oregon are much stronger. The connections are stronger with COVA, but still seen as underdeveloped. Given the upheaval in Chamber leadership, those relationships are developing anew. Some (e.g. Madras Chamber) are intentionally promoting attractions in the whole RCC region, intentionally.

Short term follow up activities as per logic model (3-12 months):

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for River Canyon Country
Action teams meet, grow, make decisions on priorities, begin implementation*	Three now active according to the recent grant application: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing- 11 members • Education- 9 members • Biking and Hiking- 12 Since these teams are still ramping up, it is unclear how many participants will be regularly engaged.
Submittal of matching grant applications to Travel Oregon that reflect clear connections to goals of RTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submittal was delayed by lack of local follow through to ensure budget in place for the regional bike kiosk project. • Other projects include: marketing/web page updates, trail mapping, and a variation on the We Speak community ambassador training program. • Application finally submitted in May 2015. • Implementation just beginning
Products from RTS completed (e.g. strategic plan, vision, asset inventory, etc.)	Yes.
Follow up assistance provided from Travel Oregon, Regional Destination marketing organizations (RDMO), and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes, informal coaching, would have been more useful immediately following the RTS workshops, as this region struggled mightily to sustain its initial momentum. • COVA has uploaded RCC events to its own website, and to the Travel Oregon ORB on a monthly basis. It has also set aside space in the new regional welcome center to highlight the RCC region. • Travel Oregon created web page, offered a style guide for marketing and how to incorporate the Seven Wonders campaign.
Ongoing evaluation	None cited to date, but ongoing evaluation built into matching grant application

Short term (3-12 months) outcomes as per logic model:

Logic Model Milestone	Progress Indicator for River Canyon Country
Visible synergy and momentum of action teams	Project implementation is in early stages, so evidence will be more apparent as progress is made. Preliminary work on priority projects in the grant application show evidence of individual champions at work.
New projects underway or progress on pre-existing projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New marketing that reflects the River Canyon Country regional identity. Digital outdoor recreation map • North County Farm Tour has been organized as a result of connections made through RTS “Meet and greet” events for farmers, restaurants and chefs.
Businesses are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good Bike Company testing bike tours, bike tours with agritourism, events. • Farms and culinary product producers are collaborating on events designed to attract visitors.
Public and nonprofit support organizations are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New scenic bikeway in Crook County- application submitted • One of the grant application projects is a set of bicycle kiosks with unified design located throughout region to support bike tourism
New partnerships and new resources for tourism development, including more integrated relationships between state and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some, but still work to be done as noted above • RCC regional designation is being used to some degree already, and interviewees all expressed desire to expand its use as a relevant marketing umbrella

regional tourism development organizations and local players	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVA is producing videos for the region’s Chambers to use on their own websites • Two Chambers of Commerce have newly established Tourism Committees • Madras Chamber promoting bicycle routes and other attractions throughout the RCC region
Increased integration of tourism planning with other community and regional planning, other community and regional stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased political support, at least in Crook County, for tourism as an economic driver • Synergy between the vision of RCC and many diverse business and community initiatives • Still mostly in the talking stage.

D. Follow up Opportunities, Promising Projects, and Program Design Implications

Follow Up Opportunities

- Finalize grant approval as appropriate and actively monitor progress. Offer coaching support for local initiative.
- Work with COVA to see if there is a way to provide additional on-the-ground coordinating assistance during the project implementation phase.
- Request that at the next RTS gathering, participants bring not only their success stories but their “learning experiences”, warts and all, so that all can learn

Promising Projects

- Although it did not directly derive from RTS, the farm/culinary/bicycle tour itineraries being developed by James Good may be a great model to document.
- Similarly, the Cultural Byway project may be an interesting one to document, if not for formal RTS success stories, then for future RTS Cultural/Heritage tourism workshops
- Matching grant-funded projects are too early to judge.

Program design implications

- Work with RDMO ahead of time to be strategic about its role in the Rural Tourism Studio: develop robust menu of services/targeting to ensure that the RTS results in a stronger DMO/RDMO partnership
- Give heavy weight to evidence that suggests a region is not really a region in any practical sense. The rationale for working together must make sense and be grounded in reality. It is a huge uphill battle if there is no history of working together.
- Given the catalytic nature of bicycle tourism, consider making this a mandatory part of the RTS curriculum
- If there is interest in agritourism, ensure that stakeholders working on local food systems are invited to RTS

Appendix- Stakeholder Interview Questions

Interviewees:

Seth Crawford	Crook County Commissioner
Brenda Comini	Crook County Human Services
Maura Schwartz	Consultant and Scenic Bikeway proponent, Culver
Joe Krenowicz	Madras-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce
Stan Nowakowski	Bicycle Rides Northwest, Culver
Kristi Richter	Central Oregon Visitors Association (email)

Questions

While this looks like a long list of questions, stakeholders generally covered most as they answered Section A. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes.

A. Status

1. Tell me about what's been happening related to tourism since the RTS program workshops concluded in January 2013. (What are the projects and how are you involved?)
2. Tell me about the grant application? Any tough decisions there, or was it easy to agree?
3. How have you used your vision statement?
4. Have you experienced any breaks in momentum: tell me about that.
5. How does the current status compare with your progress a year ago?

B. Organization

6. Is your action team active? *Focused, energized, effective, # of people, new people, frequency of meeting?* Are there enough members to be productive?
7. Are you satisfied with its progress so far? How much do you know about the work of action teams that you are not personally involved with? Are you satisfied with how much information you have about what is happening across projects?
8. Is the overall steering committee active? Well connected with the work of the action teams? What is it doing that is important for your future success?
9. What support do you need, if any, to help your steering committee and/or action teams be effective going forward?
10. Do you think the tourism action teams are connected to other initiatives in the community?
11. What changes do you see in the overall level of involvement in tourism development after RTS (*who is involved, how many people are involved, new people*)? Do you see a link between RTS and that change? How connected are tourism development initiatives across the region?

C. Changes in personal commitment and community conditions (as derived from the results of the six month progress report's e-survey for this particular RTS community)

12. Participants indicate that the RTS program had a positive impact on the area's ability to attract repeat visitors. Do you agree, and what do you see as the cause and effect? What specific changes have you seen, if any?
13. Participants also indicate that the RTS program had a positive impact on local political support for tourism. Do you agree, and what do you see as the cause and effect? What specific changes have you seen, if any?

D. Outlook and Next steps

14. What are you most excited about in terms of RTS each project or tourism development in general?
15. Do you have any concerns about challenges that the projects or tourism development in general will face? *Scale, energy, etc*
16. Is there anything else that Travel Oregon could do now to help you succeed?