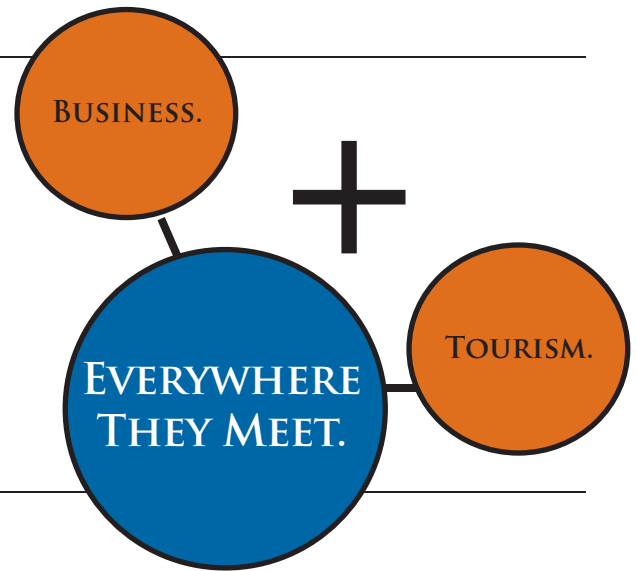


LA GRANDE

MARCH 17, 2009



Panelists:

Todd Davidson, Travel Oregon

Mark Yates, Hells Canyon Adventures

Sandy Sorrels, Ten Depot Street Restaurant

Parley Pearce, Hamley & Co.

Will Boettner, Oregon Paleo Lands Institute

John Breidenbach, Ontario Visitor & Convention Bureau

Steve McClure, Union County Commissioner

Jim Hutton, Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department

Barbara Sidway, Geiser Grand Hotel

Moderator:

Mike Nelson, Oregon Transportation Commission

The meeting room at La Grande's Blue Mountain Conference Center gradually filled up with people, as travelers from Pendleton, Baker City, Ontario, Haines and Fossil greeted each other, chatting about their early drive. The wide-open spaces of Eastern Oregon make for long commutes, but they also provide much of the attraction for visitors to the region.

And these visitors were the main topic of conversation at the Travel Oregon Town Hall, co-sponsored by the Eastern Oregon Visitors Association. The two-hour discussion addressed a variety of issues, from the strategic importance of being flexible to the increasing numbers of international visitors, to developing a customer service culture.

Introductory comments by moderator Mike Nelson, a state transportation commissioner and self-described "Baker boy," underscored tourism's importance. "It is, with no question, the greatest economic stimulator in the region," Nelson said. "Sometimes we have to convince them on the other side of the mountains that tourism is a major industry out here that creates family wage jobs."

The changing face of tourism: Deal with it

Panelists began by talking about some of the changes they are seeing in the tourism industry, and the importance of changing business practices to accommodate them. "We have guests coming here that used to fly to Reno or Paris," said Barbara Sidwell, owner of the Geiser Grand Hotel in Baker City. "They

are shifting their choices and that can be to our advantage if we are lucky and smart and strategic."

Visitors' demographics are changing as the international market discovers the Eastern Oregon region. That means more emphasis on friendliness, said John Breidenbach, executive director of the Ontario Visitor & Convention Bureau. "Last summer, international travel really became a key part of our economy," he said. "That means we really need that added friendly customer service from the local people. All you have to do is smile and say hi, and they'll be back."

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MIKE NELSON
OREGON TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

Will Boettner, executive director of the Oregon Paleolands Institute, told the story of a Danish family who stopped by his office, planning to spend an hour or so collecting fossils. "Ten days later, they were still turning up, wondering what to do next," he said. "We sent them home with a box of brochures, which have already resulted in some calls."

"It's the whole idea of being flexible," he concluded. "Opportunities abound, we just have to be aware that the obvious opportunities are not always the ones that pay off."

Workforce and the economy

The role tourism plays in the workforce was also an important topic for panelists. "There are a lot of good living wage jobs in that industry. Most of the waitresses in my steakhouse make more money than I do," said Parley Pearce, owner of Hamley & Co., to laughter from the audience.



MIKE NELSON
OREGON TRANSPORTATION
COMMISSION



SANDY SORRELS
TEN DEPOT STREET
RESTAURANT



WILL BOETTNER
OREGON PALEOLANDS
INSTITUTE

"You learn a lot of skills working in tourism that conveys very well later on in life," Boettner said. "The ones who learn how to reach out and touch someone are the ones that go on to be successful in life. These are valuable skills –we shouldn't undersell these jobs because of salary."

As far as the economic situation, Union County Commissioner Steve McClure warned against relying solely on tourism. "The economy is a real challenge," he said. "We need to diversify but we don't want to go from one single economy to another single economy."

Restaurant owner Sandy Sorrels says she has not seen a drop in customer count, but has seen a drop in spending: the average dinner check has gone from \$19 to \$16. "I think that the tourism industry contributes a great deal to business," she added. "It enables us to have a wider range of opportunities for locals to eat out."

Customer service and marketing

Customer service is even more important in light of today's economy, panelists agreed. "I can't stress from my perspective how important customer service training is," said Jim Hutton, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. "For many, it's just ingrained in the way they do business. I would like to challenge all of us in the travel industry—how do we spread that to every business in northeastern Oregon?"

Panelist Mark Yates of Hells Canyon Adventures, said effective networking is key. "Without the visitors' centers, the tourism offices, the restaurants and other businesses in four counties," he said, "we couldn't operate the way we do."

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WILL BOETTNER
OREGON PALEOLANDS INSTITUTE

As audience members listened intently, Todd Davidson thanked them all for attending, and challenged them to think of industry partnerships in a nontraditional way. "It's all about connectivity, it's all about collaboration," he said. "We as an industry need to be concerned with what travelers are concerned about. If their number one concern is the rising cost of health care—and it is—then we an industry need to be concerned about health care."

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PANEL MEMBERS (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT):

JIM HUTTON - OPRD, SANDY SORRELS - TEN DEPOT STREET RESTAURANT, STEVE MCCLURE - UNION COUNTY COMMISSIONER, JOHN BREIDENBACH - ONTARIO VCB, MIKE NELSON - OREGON TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION, TODD DAVIDSON - TRAVEL OREGON, WILL BOETTNER - OREGON PALEOLANDS INSTITUTE, BARBARA SIDWAY - GEISER GRAND HOTEL, PARLEY PEARCE - HAMLEY & CO., MARK YATES - HELLS CANYON ADVENTURES



TODD DAVIDSON
TRAVEL OREGON



MEMBERS OF THE AUDIENCE